

NO.112

Saturday Night Live:
Al DiMeola talks to us
about the *second* night!



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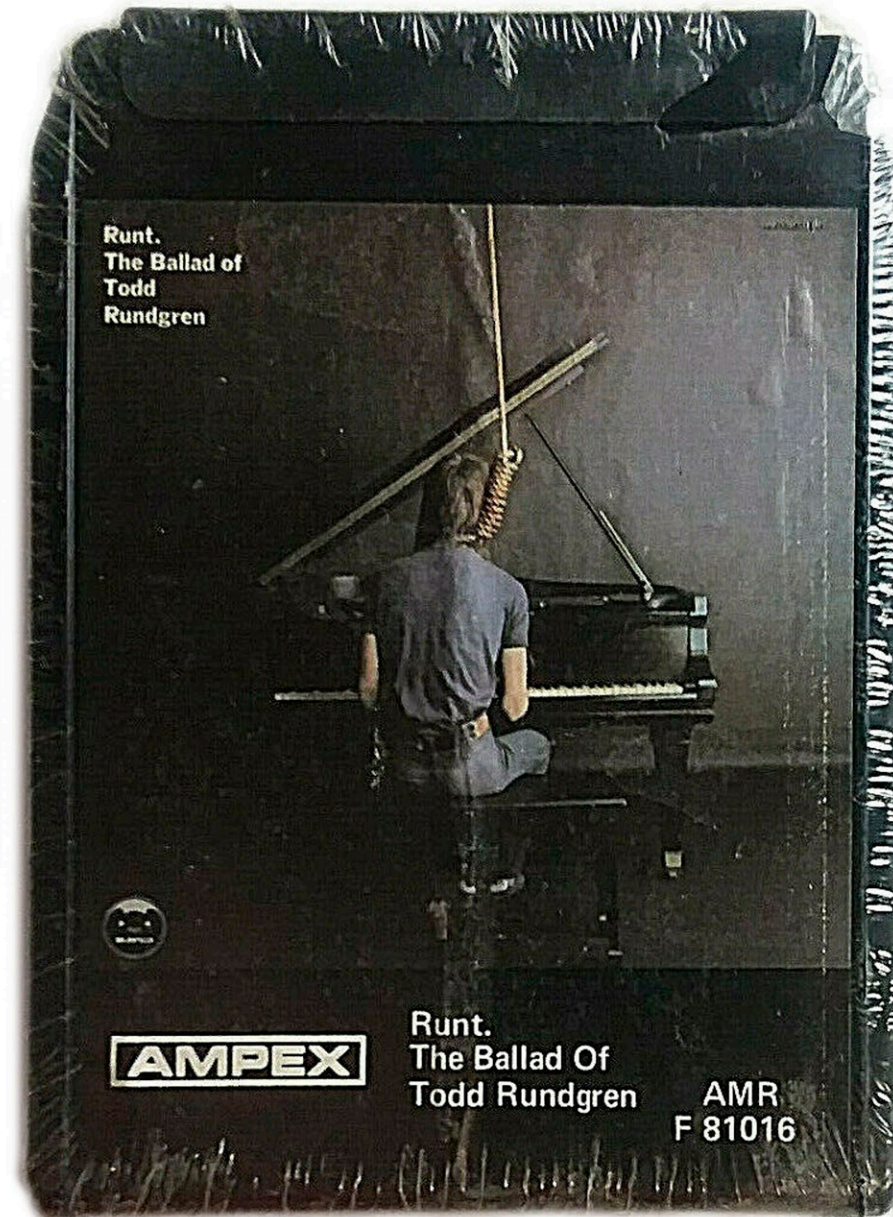


SVSound.com

When someone mentioned that it was the 50th anniversary of this classic album, it just felt time to pull the shrinkwrap off this one.

Even in it's warbly, continuous loop splendor, Rundgren's genius still shines through.

So, be nice to me and indulge this trip to yesteryear. PS: it sounds a lot better just streaming on Qobuz, yet there is something wonderful about this format.



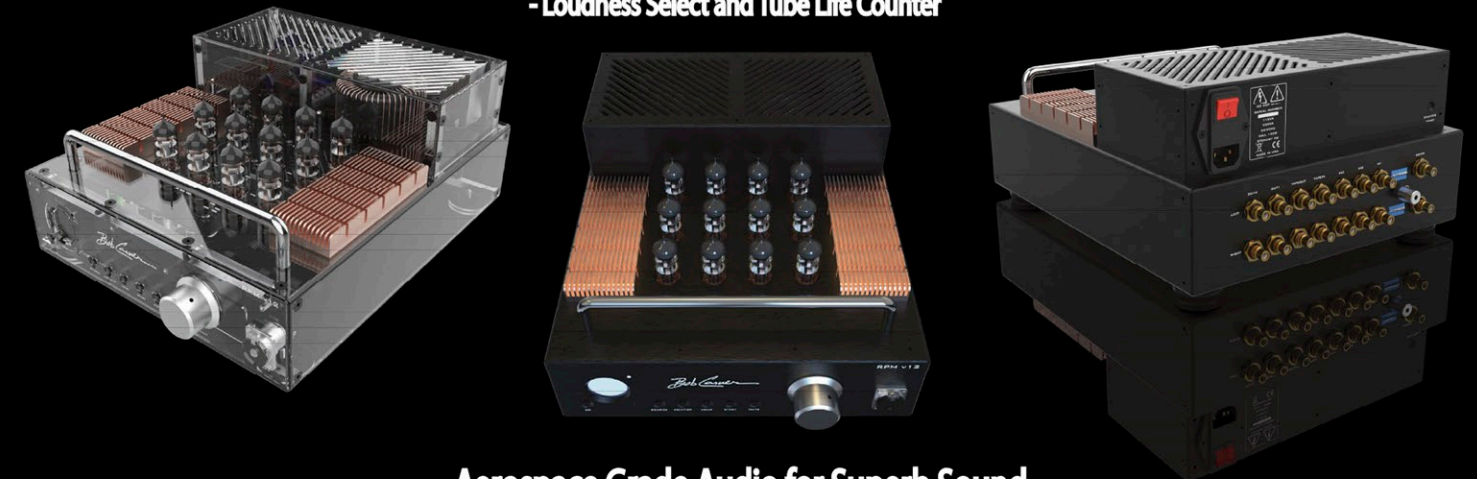
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When John Atkinson came to measure, I insisted he listen...
He let out an involuntary "Wow!" The presence of the images
and the absence of reproductive artifacts were remarkable.
It's what this hobby/pursuit is all about.

Michael Fremer, Stereophile, May 2020



When Music Matters



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Our readers, staff, and industry friends **share** what they are listening to with you.
Sponsored By Qobuz

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The 1500C turntable from **Technics** adds the ability to walk away from your turntable at your next party! So you can concentrate on the snacks!



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We've got a killer
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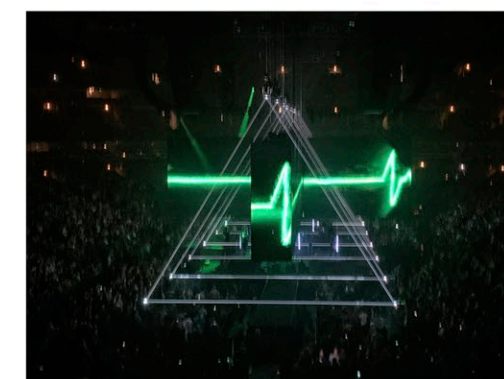
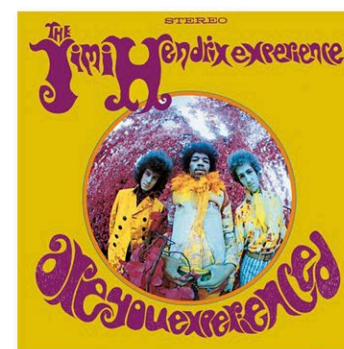
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Products in for **review** and on our
near horizon.



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Harbeth XD

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Jeff Dorgay *Tone Audio* on the C7 XD

"...Alan Shaw's Masterpiece"

Tone Audio
on the 40.3 XD

Audiophilia
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

WINNER | 2021
Harbeth M30.2 XD



C7ES-3 XD



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Cartridge Dude...

We've got a new contender from China, with Skyanalog.

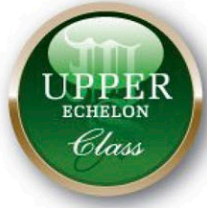
Their new G-2 delivers impressive performance.



TONE is published 6 times yearly in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. And except for that one print issue, we've been online only, [Saving the trees since 2005.](#)



— Formula xHD rev. 2 —



“MAGICAL EXPERIENCE”

“It’s simply magnificent. It is revealing without being trying, lush but not bloomy, and above all capable of captivating musical sound.”

Review: Andrew Everard
Lab: Paul Miller

[aquahifi.com](#)

aqua
acoustic quality

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Old School...

What better way to evaluate new entry-level phones from Stax, than to shake the dust off of a 35 year old pair of the same?

Interesting...



TOTEM 
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NEW
eXperience

Fire V2





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simple, yet high-end way. The Phono Box DS2 USB is the
perfect solution.

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negative feedback and low distortion - voiced for a clean
musical performance.

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new arrivals...

Mario Dolinar hailes from Zagreb, Croatia, and as a long time
TONE reader was kind enough to send us some photos and copy
from this year's Munich High End show.

We are indebted to our fellow music, audio, and auto lover for
pitching in and helping out!





mise-en-scene



Cover Shot:

A big thanks to Al DiMeola's wife Stephanie for saving the day with a great shot of Al for our cover....

It was a real pleasure to chat with such a legend.

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no.112

P u b l i s h e r s L e t t e r

In this ongoing effort to be more organized, I've been trying to get this note done a little bit in advance. Somehow things keep happening. Like people dying. This time it's closer to home, as we've lost one of ours again.

As many of you may remember Chrissie Dickenson covered country and Americana music for us, and she was a fantastic writer. She was a wonderful person with a tremendous amount of insight into music and life. She was a great photographer and musician as well. Back in the 80s, she was an indie rock pioneer, playing in the band Sally's Dream. We've attached a picture here (thanks to her good friend Cynthia Hammond – also pictured)

She's done so many different things, with such a wide range of creativity, a book could be written about her adventures and accomplishments. For someone with her long list of accomplishments, it was truly a pleasure and a privilege to have her on our masthead as a TONE contributor. We had just spoken a few weeks before she passed, and she was enthusiastic about jumping back in to cover Country and Americana for us. If you read her reviews, you know how passionate and thorough she was. I will miss her tremendously.

So, my apologies for this issue not having as much of an album feel, and more of a singles feel. It's been pretty disjointed. Nonetheless, we've got a great group of gear for you, and an interview with guitar virtuoso Al DiMeola, who's recent release of *Saturday Night in San Francisco* is a continuation of the Friday night disc so many of us audiophiles cherish.

Many say don't meet your heroes, because it will disappoint you, but DiMeola couldn't have been more affable in our nearly 90 minute zoom conversation. We chatted about a wide range of topics, as I felt most music publications would ask him the same 20 standard music geek questions. He did not disappoint in the least.

As always, thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading, and please stay out of harm's way!



I asked Ozan Turan of High End By OZ what he likes to play at shows when demonstrating his gear. He had an interesting combination things, to show off a system's power and finesse. No Patricia Barber, woo hoo!



Anouar Brahem – Astounding Eyes of Rita

Shostakovich Symphony no.8 – Op.65 Allegro Non Troppo in C Minor

Rage Against the Machine – Bullet in the Head

Metallica – Wherever I May Roam

Chick Corea – Spain

Benjamin Britten – Concerto For Violin And Orchestra

The Act Jubilee Concert – Pasodoble

Ginger Baker – Jesus, I Want to go to Sleep

Charles Lloyd – Tales of Rumi

Dead Can Dance – The Ubiquitous Mr. Lovegrove

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Stax SR-34 System

My Second Set of Premium Phones.

\$300-\$600 (current market price)

I had a pair of Koss Pro4AAs since high school. Still have that same pair, and you've probably seen them used as props in more than one TONE photoshoot over the years. Still work great. The audiophile bug bit early and I soon stepped up to a pair of Koss ESP-9 electrostatic phones - they were incredible. And inspired by listening to a good friend's fathers ESL speakers - Jantzen to be exact. (not the goofy ones made today, the real ones.)

What could go wrong? They had a lifetime warranty. When Koss stopped returning phone calls sometime back in the 90s, I moved on. Stax phones from Japan were the shiznit, but even then they were thousands of dollars and nearly impossible to find. By now I was listening to a pair of Martin Logan Aeries ESLs and still hooked on the ESL sound, so when said dealer had a demo pair of Stax SR-30s for sale, I jumped.

Again, the sound was fantastic (it was the 90s...) but my late, great friend Al needed some phones, so they went to his place. I had always meant to ask for them back, as he said he never listened to headphones anymore, but it wasn't meant to be.

So, when the Stax people sent us a pair of their new SRS-3100 phones for review (see page xx) it made sense to revisit the SR-30s again. Praise whatever it is you praise for EBay. A clean set was procured for \$290 and we were rolling!



Enjoy the Experience

Just like the Koss ESP-9s, the SR-34s use a speaker level “energizer” to plug your phones into, so you will have to be tethered to a power amplifier, of some sort to make these work. The system consists of the SR-30 “earspeaker,” and the SRB-4 interface, which is essentially a step-up transformer.

I try not to profile anyone, however Japanese audiophiles and photography enthusiasts really take great care of their stuff. In 25 years of buying from Japan, I have never been surprised in a bad way. Even though the box you see here looks slightly tattered, the phones and energizer inside are in like-new condition. And oddly, I usually get shipments from Tokyo more rapidly than I do Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Go figure.

Unlike a true electrostatic driver that requires a high-voltage bias supply, the electret driver makes use of a very thin diaphragm, but has a permanent charge applied, so these phones will degrade over time.

I would not suggest buying a pair that don't look in pristine condition. These can not be repaired, so think of them more like a consumable.

This day the vintage audio gods smile upon me and this treasure works flawlessly.

When compared to modern planar phones, the vintage Stax are still very good.

A direct shootout with our reference Focal Stellia phones shows the Stax to be slightly cloudy through the mids, and lacking the ultimate punch of current day offerings. But again, more than liveable, especially for the price.



TONE112.015



PASS

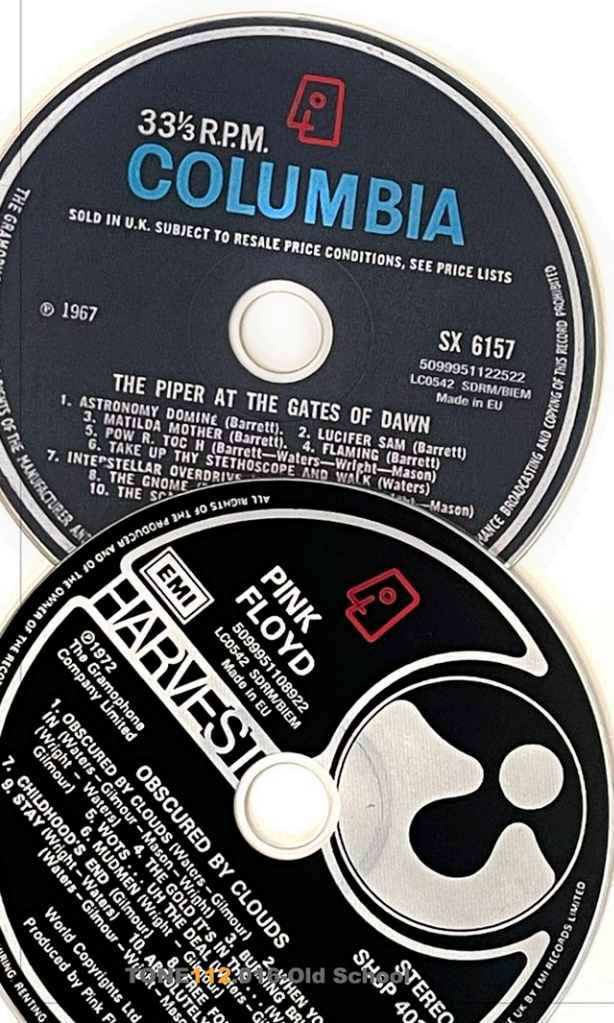
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Tracking through a lot of classic rock proves infinitely rewarding. Going all the way back to the Pink Floyd catalog - where my headphone journey began all those years ago is incredibly fun.

Because what's more fun with a pair of headphones on than hearing things bounce around inside your head?

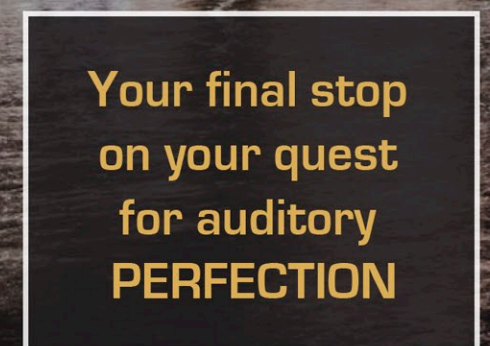
Once the Stax phones had a few days worth of listening behind them, they opened up a bit more, delivering a very balanced overall presentation.

All things considered, a worthwhile addition to the headphone collection and a great trip down memory lane.



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The first thing you probably think of when party guests descend on your listening space is: “Don’t touch the turntable!”

Am I right?

Decades ago, before streaming, many of us either, A: took our chances (usually with regret) B: made some mix tapes the day or so before the party, or C: had a semi-automatic turntable that allowed the tonearm to lift at the end of the record.

But hey, back then a replacement stylus for a Shure V-15 was twenty bucks. Fear not, we’ve got a great solution for you. The Technics SL-1500C. \$1,199 gets you legendary Technics direct-drive performance, with a pre-mounted Ortofon 2M Red. Pro-Tip: go completely DJ and get an Ortofon Concorde. Just sayin’.



Technics

In that same distant past, there was the Technics SL-1600, which was slightly more semi-automatic. It would actually start the record playing cycle automatically, then lift at the end. It featured the same tonearm as the 1200s of the day, but with a lot more mechanical mumbo-jumbo. I.e. a lot more to break. You can still find 1600s in good shape for about \$400, but woe be it onto you if it croaks. You'll never get it fixed. Until just recently, you could buy these for \$100 all day long, but now with everyone collecting vinyls like Pokemon cards, every POS Technics out there has a much higher price tag. The one pictured below is a perfect example of a recent \$400 purchase.

Yes, I am a pack rat, of course I have a perfect one, and no you can't have it. For the rest of you non-hoarding types, the SL-1500C is an excellent solution.



Kinda sad that this is what 400 bucks gets you on EBay these days...

Believe it or not with a bit of TLC, we brought this table back to respectability.

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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The SL-1500C is also a great place to start if you don't have a phono preamplifier, or an amplifier with one onboard. Giving the one built in to the plinth of the 1500 won't win any major awards for sonics, but it will get you started, and it doesn't totally suck. When your record collection grows and you start thinking about an upgrade – especially if you decide to move up to a slightly better cartridge, the onboard phono stage can be bypassed.

Just flick a switch, and the feed from the cartridge is direct. The 1500, like the 1200 series, has a pair of RCA jacks on the back, so you can use a better tonearm cable at some point as well. As mentioned earlier, one of Ortofon's Concorde cartridges look super cool (and retro all at the same time) or jumping up to something like a 2M Bronze or Black isn't a bad way to roll. Setting one of these up has always been straightforward, and with a few basic tools, you should be able to use any cartridge you desire.

Settling in on an Ortofon Quintet Red MC cartridge (\$449), and a Nordost Blue Heaven tonearm cable (\$549) and switching the onboard phonostage out of the way delivers a magnificent jump in performance, even though we've just practically doubled the price of the table.

The good news is you've got plenty of room to grow with the 1500 and not lose party functionality. Even if you don't think you need it, the day will come. Trust me. Auto return aside for a moment, the 1500 delivers mighty sonics, whether stock or with upgrades.



Enjoy the Experience

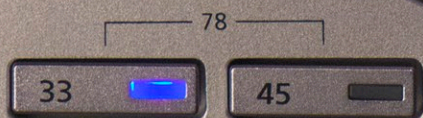


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The massive base and spongy feet do a great job isolating the table from your environment, resulting in solid bass response. Comparing this one to a Rega P3 and the newer SL-1200 retailing for about \$1,700 is an easy task. The Rega does not have the massive, locked in bottom end that the direct drive tables possess, however the Brit table is still the master of low-level detail retrieval. But neither will save your cartridge from your drunken friends.

Regardless of how you use your SL-1500C, This is a perfect choice for any vinyl enthusiast wanting to step up from the \$300 - \$500 entry-level tables, have a defined upgrade path, and not be so "turntable-broke" that there isn't enough dough left to keep buying records. As someone who's been using Technics tables since high school (back when we walked 20 miles in a blizzard to get to school), this one is a keeper.



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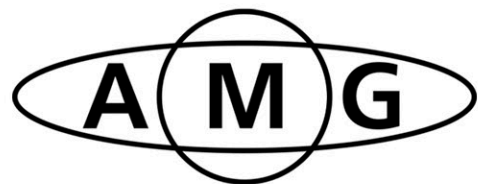
I'm stretching the boundaries just a bit (with our publisher's approval, of course) to include something slightly beyond the price point of this column's official title. But what's \$100 between friends, right?

Regardless of where you are on your audio journey, if you happen to be slightly curmudgy like me - not really caring about streaming (or social media, but that's another argument) enough to buy in, the A3 is pure genius. Its variable output is perfect for a power amp and speakers, or perhaps a pair of powered speakers.

For those not familiar, Music Hall has always been famous for delivering gear with an innate simplicity, uncluttered style, and of course, top value. The \$1,195 Analogue A3 is a perfect example, shown here in its mini road case.

With separate MM and MC inputs, switchable on the rear panel, the A3 is in theory, a two-input phono stage - which is how I used it with a pair of Technics 1200 tables. Table one sports a Shure V15MxVr MM, and the other an Ortofon Quintet Red MC. Both great cartridges for a modestly priced, high-performance system. A pair of Totem Kin Play speakers rounded out the system. Even though the Totems have a built-in phono stage, it's pretty basic. The A3 is a massive step up.





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Hand made in Germany by master machinist Julian Lorenzi, the Forte Turbo is AMG's reference-level flagship turntable. The Forte is machined from a solid aluminum billet and incorporates AMG's celebrated oil-damped bearing, decoupled spindle, 24v DC brushless motor, upgraded linear power supply, and reflex clamp.



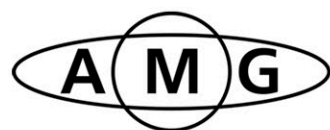
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1095

The A3 is quiet, first and foremost – owing in part to mostly solid-state design. The 12AU7 tubes sprouting from the top provide the last 6db of overall gain and mellow out the sound as well. Psvane tubes are supplied, and of course, if you want to get kooky with tube rolling, you can change the overall sound a bit if you like. Most of you will be more than happy with how the A3 arrives from the factory, but NOS/Vintage 12AU7s aren't crazy money yet, like 12AX7s, so roll away if you must.

When choosing cartridges, keep in mind that the standard MM input features 47k loading, and the MC is optimized for 100-ohm loading. The A3 is compatible with a wide range of cartridges, but just in case you have something that works better somewhat higher or lower, you'll have to move on.

Thanks to the power supply being on board, you won't have to deal with (and eventually misplace) a pesky AC adaptor. Straight in the back with a standard IEC plug. Straight from cold the A3 sounds inviting; after about 30 minutes, when the tubes stabilize thermally, a more expansive presentation is at your disposal. Those new to tubes will find the A3 easy to get used to, as low-level signal tubes tend to last a very long time.

Sonically, the A3 has a slightly warm presentation, and for nearly everyone, that's a great thing. Its sound helps contribute to the analog "magic" part of vinyl playback, and embellishes a little bit in the right direction. Even the mediocre pressings in your collection will spring to life via the A3.



Thanks to dual inputs, it was easy to connect two tables right up. The only complaint would be the input switch on the rear face of the A3. More than likely, topology demanded putting it there, but this would be an oh-so-nice update to the next version of the A3.

If you've been living with the built-in phono pre in your turntable, or perhaps a budget phono stage, the A3 will be an incredible step up in every way. The A3 delivers a lot of music at an approachable price indeed. Using it with both a stack of vintage Nakamichi 600-series wedge components and a current Cambridge integrated, the A3 is a smack on the side of the head in a great way. Everything gets much more exciting – in the context of both amplification chains driving a current and vintage pair of the JBL L-100s, it's night and day. When using one of my older OPPO CD players as a digital reference, the onboard phonostages were not always a match. More often than not, streaming digital, especially 24/96 digital was revealing more music.

Merely making the swap to the A3 is a whole new experience. All those fun characteristics that influencers like to talk about are here in spades. The A3 pulls a lot of the information from your favorite analog discs, with a quiet background (claimed -80dB/MM, -78dB MC) and a serious three-dimensional window into the music.

To its credit the A3 expands your horizons in all three dimensions yet does not over accentuate one over the other. Very nice.

Headed back to some favorites to illustrate the ping-pong stereo effect, The Doors, The Iron Butterfly, and Carlos Santana were in heavy rotation. Utilizing the MoFi pressing of the self-titled *Santana* record, and Iron Butterfly's *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* prove exceptionally psychedelic, with really wide stereo going on. Switching it up to the Doors' *LA Woman* shows just how great the A3 is with low-level detail retrieval. In the final cut "Riders on the Storm," Morrisons' hushed, breathy, background vocal stands out on its own. And instead of the waves being one volume (as they are on lesser performing phono preamplifiers) the water rises and falls in audible intensity.

Acoustic and electric music engage equally through the A3, and the MC stage is just as compelling as the MM. This level of balance is tough to find at this price. Whether you have a cherished MM or MC, you will be well served. Auditioning MM cartridges from Ortofon, Grado (technically MI, but still 47k loading) that push the thousand-dollar price range, versus a few MC carts at the same price proves, that one has not been sacrificed for the other.

You're not going to get everything for 1,200 bucks, but what the A3 does deliver is excellent, engaging, and user friendly. Definitely Exceptional Value Award worthy.

1095



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Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio

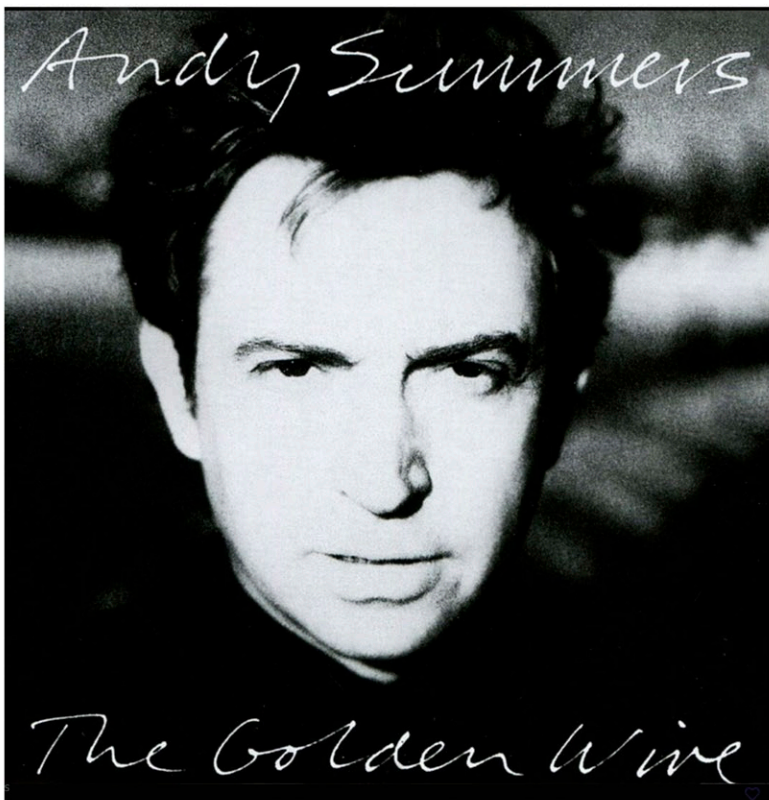
NAGRA

SWISS INNOVATION SINCE 1951

Late Night Garage Playlist
-Jeff Dorgay

The sometimes seemingly endless cycle of polishing, wax on - wax off requires concentration to really get it right. I love the relaxing instrumentals of Andy Summers, former guitarist for the Police.

If you're going to be stuck in one spot all day, consider streaming seven of these albums. They all work together.



The Golden Wire - A Piece of time
The Golden Wire
Rain Forest in Manhattan

Synaesthesia- Cubano Rebop
Monk Hangs Ten
Invisible Cities

The Last Dance of Mr. X - The Last Dance of Mr.X

Earth + Sky - The Diva Station
Circus

Triboluminescence - Gigantopithecus

Fundamental (with Fernada Takai) - I Don't Love You

Bewitched (with Robert Fripp) - Bewitched

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The Focal 936K2 Speakers

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If our headline doesn't make sense, and you aren't really familiar with French speaker manufacturer Focal, you need to know that they make some pretty incredible speakers in their top Utopia range, with equally incredible price tags. More than likely you don't have an extra \$200k plus lying idly about to buy a pair of Grande Utopia EMs. Neither do I.

What makes Focal such an interesting company is that they do all of their design and nearly all of their manufacturing in-house. Ditto for their drivers and crossover networks. Very few manufacturers have an operation this size, and this gives Focal tremendous advantage, at all price points.

Thanks to highly evolved cabinet making and driver design, Focal can build a lot more quality into a \$6,000 pair of speakers like the Aria 936K2 than a manufacturer that must job out the cabinet making, and work with an outside driver manufacturer. Even companies that claim they have drivers "custom made to their specs," outside engineering only goes so far, and you have to pay for every small change made. As a designer, it's too hard to hit a specific price target, even if you know that your speaker really could use one or two more rounds of revision to implement your vision.



Comparing the cabinets of the Aria K2 936 to one of the higher up models, you'll notice a similar level of construction fit and finish, but the shapes and materials have been simplified somewhat. It's much easier to do a leather covered front finish on a flat baffle, than it is to sand, fill, prime, and paint with multiple coats of automotive finish. As it is with doing a veneer on the cabinet sides. Internally, the Arias take everything Focal has learned in the Utopia, Sopra, and Kanta ranges, to build much more resonant-free enclosures than most of their competitors.

Instead of the beryllium tweeter used in the upper range speakers, the Aria uses Focal's TNF tweeter with an aluminum/magnesium dome and a Poron suspension, that they claim is derived from the Utopia tweeters. Woofer and midrange drivers now use Focal's K2 Power Cone material.

Utilizing different levels of the same materials and technology, also gives Focal speakers a family sound, if you will. If you get hooked on the Arias, and one day decide to move upscale, you will merely notice more dynamic range, extension on both HF and LF ends of the music spectrum, and more low-level detail. You won't shake your head wondering what happened to the sound you started out enjoying.

Proof in listening

It only seems right to begin listening to these French masterpieces with some French house music. Starting with St. Germain's *Tourist*, the solid bass that the trio of 6-inch K2 Power cone woofers provide rocks. The front panel looks like four woofers at first glance, but the 6-inch driver just beneath the tweeter is a midrange driver, crossed over at 260Hz, from the woofers. The tweeter takes over at 3.1kHz.



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Thousands of hours in the lab refining drivers, cabinet dimensions and crossover components shows instantly. The K2s sound like far more costly speakers. Eyes closed, you might even suspect that they could command \$15k - \$20k/pair. They are that good. Again, this is what the economies of scale from a large manufacturer bring to the table.

Trying more difficult acoustic piano and violin selections usually reveals anomalies in crossover design and driver matching, but hours of piano and violin tracks are nothing but satisfying and fatigue free.

Dynamic effort is another parameter that has trickled down from the larger Focal speakers to the Arias. While they do an excellent job with acoustic and small-scale recordings, asking them to play loud without distortion is just as easy. Running through classic rock and the heaviest of metal tracks prove the Arias deliver the goods. I couldn't drive these speakers to distortion with the Pass XA200.8s, my ears gave up long before the speakers did!

Focal makes a point to mention that the Aria K2 is a special edition of the original high-performance Aria 900 range, first launched in 2013. A big part of this is the new K2 Power Cone, offering an aramid fiber cone, evolved from the Polykevlar cone featured in classic 1980s JM Lab speakers. This is achieved with a light foam center layer sandwiched between a layer of aramid fibers and a layer of fiberglass. The proof is in the listening, these speakers are very free of coloration and very impressive indeed.



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– Jon Myles, HiFi World

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– Ian Ringstead, Hifipig.com

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– Chris Kelly, The Ear

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Setup and associated components

Because the Aria K2 936s have such a big, smooth sound, nothing comes across as harsh. That being said, these are very revealing speakers without being harsh. The key to perfect sound with the Arias as it has been with every pair of floorstanding Focal speakers I've owned or reviewed is care in setup. If someone tells you Focal speakers are bright and harsh, they've set them up incorrectly. I'm not kidding.

Much like setting the VTA on a turntable, there's a sweet spot. Because the Focal tweeter is fairly resolving, you need to pay careful attention to the rake angle and toe in. First, set your Arias up in the room for the best balance of bass and midrange transition. Once you get that right, work on toe in small amounts, moving back and forth on an arc until you get the smoothest, most natural treble response. A downward facing port, along with a pair of front facing ports, makes it easy to achieve solid bass response in nearly any room.

Finally, use some music that a fair amount of high frequency content (cymbals, etc) and move your head up and down very slowly from the listening position. You'll find a spot where the sound gets smoother, yet more resolving. Then all that's left is to angle the speakers with their convenient stands and spikes. All told, this should take about 15-30 minutes for initial setup and an hour or so for final tuning.

Thanks to a 92dB/1-watt sensitivity rating, the Arias don't need a ton of power. Whether using tube or solid-state electronics will determine the ultimate speaker setup. Focal claims a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, and a minimum impedance of 2.8 ohms, suggesting high current solid-state amplification. However, there were no issues driving the Aria K2 936s with anything from the 30 Wpc PrimaLuna ProLogue One, all the way up to the 200 Wpc Pass XA200.8 monoblocks.



ACCURACY IS ESSENTIAL TO BEAUTY

– Ralph Waldo Emerson



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Trying to put these speakers in context, listening begins with our reference Naim Uniti Atom, which produces 40 Watts per channel in a compact chassis. And this is something you can head over to a Naim/Focal dealer and take it all home today for about ten thousand dollars. If you don't need a turntable, add speaker cables and call it a day. (Those adding a turntable and phono stage can do so via the one analog RCA input)

These two items work incredibly well together, and again, thanks to fairly high sensitivity, the Arias will play plenty loud, even with 40 Watts per channel. Because these speakers have such a robust low end, somehow, we kept spinning more house/ambient/techno tracks to great result. Thanks to the Utopia DNA in these speakers, acoustic instruments and vocals are rendered with equal levels of engagement.

From the wispy vocals in Tosca's "Oscar," to Lucinda Williams grit in nearly any of her tracks, to Yoko Ono – the Arias create a large sonic field. Thanks to their natural sound, the Arias do a fantastic job disappearing in the room like a much smaller pair of speakers would. This is another aspect of speaker design that Focal is the master of. Even when we had the enormous Stella Utopia EMs, they still managed to vanish in the room. Which lead me to a favorite demo track – Lou Reed's "Vanishing Act." This spooky track is beguiling through the Arias, feeling like Reed is right there in the room. Good as this is with the Uniti Atom, it gets better moving up the line with more resolving components.

The Arias are right at home with some pretty major components. Swapping the Naim Atom for the Aqua LaScala DAC and the Nagra Classic combination is stunning. Putting these speakers front and center, anchoring a system worth over ten times that much, the Arias still produce top quality sound.

For the most part, tube amplifiers (as expected) will produce a warmer, but not offensive softer presentation with the Arias, and the bigger, more powerful, more controlled solid-state amplifiers will provide more drive and ultimate dynamics. Your final sonic preferences will be up to you.

Minor details

The Arias take up a relatively small footprint – only 11 9/16" wide, by 14 5/8" deep and just over 45" tall, making them a good fit for nearly any room. Should you have to place them in a smallish room, consider moving them out a bit from the room walls/corners if possible, as they do have significant bass output. The size of your room will determine how large of a stereo image you can achieve. If you have a larger room at your disposal and can spread the Arias about 10 feet apart, with some major distance between the speakers and your side walls, you'll be rewarded with a huge stereo image. Another Focal hallmark.

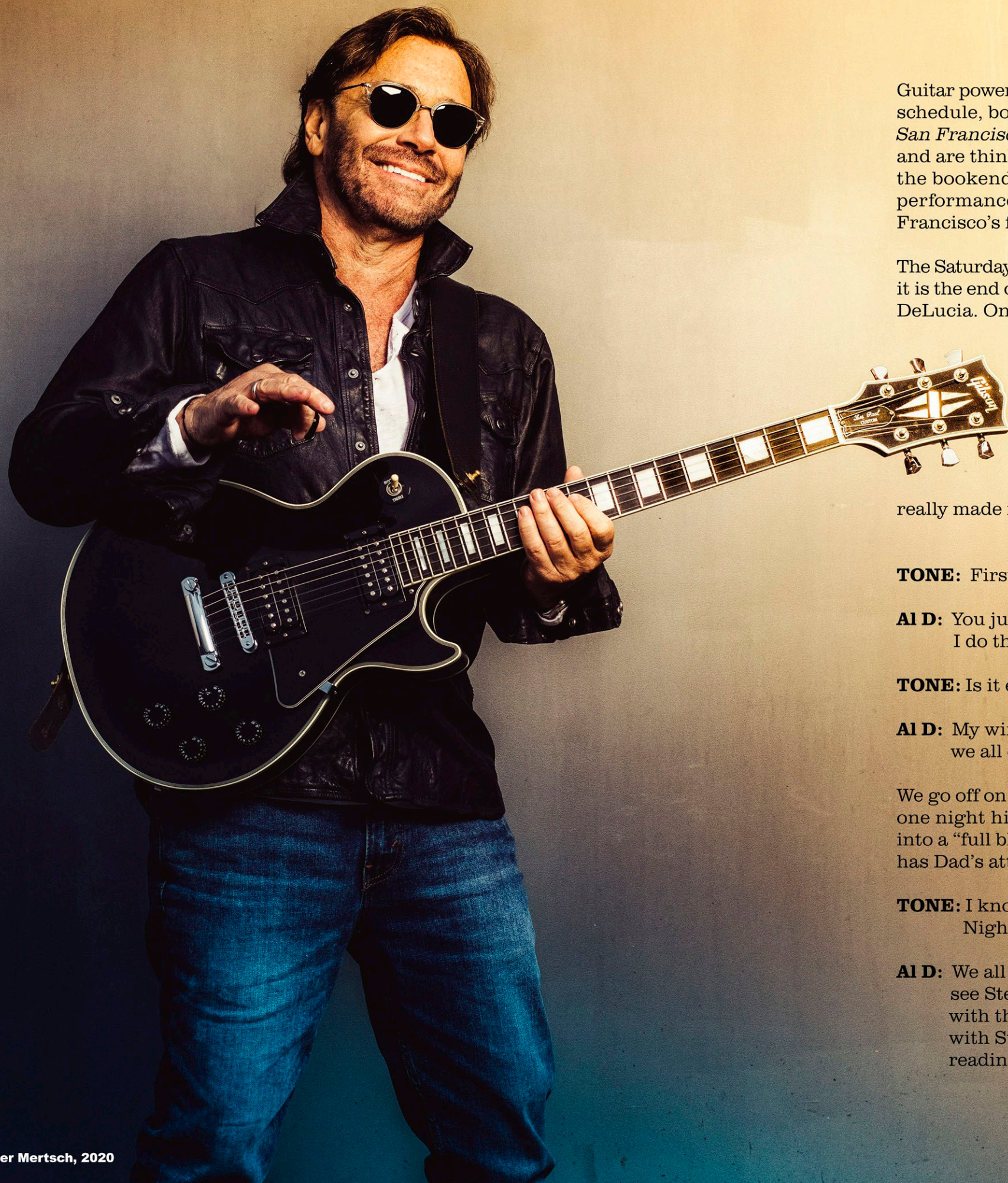
The Aria K2 936s only weigh 64 pounds each (unpacked) so they will be easy to move around and achieve final position. All speakers in the Aria K2 line come in a high-end Ash Grey finish exclusive to Focal. This premium finish, also seen on the company's flagship Utopia III EVO range, combines with a leather-effect front panel for added elegance.

In the end, we're happy to give the Focal Aria K2 936s an Exceptional Value Award for 2022. These are fantastic speakers indeed, and they prove you don't have to spend six-figures to get the excellence that is Focal.



Catching up With Al DiMeola

By Jeff Dorgay



Guitar powerhouse Al DiMeola is an incredibly busy man. In the midst of a very hectic tour schedule, both here in the US and around the world, he's just released *Saturday Night in San Francisco*, on Impex Records. (Vinyl and SACD) In case you think that's a misprint, and are thinking about the famous release *Friday Night in San Francisco*, this record is the bookend. While music lovers and audiophiles have been playing the Friday night performance for decades now, it was originally recorded on December 5, 1980 at San Francisco's famous Warfield Theater.

The Saturday evening show, now just released, is not only the following night's performance, it is the end of a long tour with guitar greats DiMeola, John McLaughlin, and the late Paco DeLucia. On the day we spoke, DiMeola was just winding up four straight night back to back nights at the Blue Note, where he was doing two shows a day! He was kind enough to give me about 90 minutes of his time, just before heading back to the club, and then was off to Israel for a few shows with only a week for a breather.

Even though the new record was just about to drop, I figured everyone would ask him the same 20 questions about the night, his influences, etc., etc., so we went off track a bit. His kind and candid answers really made for a memorable time. Here's the highlights of the Zoom call.

TONE: First question, how do you do it all? Two shows in the same day?

Al D: You just do it. I give so much energy to the first show, sit down and think, "how can I do this again," but I do. I go back out there and do it again.

TONE: Is it even tougher with a young daughter in tow when you go on tour?

Al D: My wife and daughter will join me over in Europe for about half the tour, and then we all come home in August.

We go off on a bit of a tangent here, trading daughter stories, and DiMeola mentions how one night his daughter's innocent interaction with her doll sparks a tune that morphs into a "full blown orchestral piece – Eva's Dance in the Moonlight." This little girl clearly has Dad's attention.

TONE: I know it's tough to go back in time, but when you got done with the Saturday Night tour, did you just collapse, or take off on yet another thing right away?

Al D: We all headed home. I went to the hotel the next day and that night we all went to see Stevie Wonder. Backstage I was talking with Stevie, holding the copy of *Playboy* with the John Lennon interview, and the following night, there I was on the news with Stevie! Holding that copy of *Playboy*, there I am on the TV with the caption reading "John Lennon shot." All at the same time.

TONE: That was really a huge marker in time for our generation. A hard day for everyone, especially those of us that were fans.

Al D: More people I know were affected by his death than anyone else I knew at the time. What the Beatles did in those 8 years was amazing – Mind blowing. I still listen to those records every day.

Back when Return to Forever received a lifetime achievement award from Sir George Martin, I got to spend some time talking to him, and it was one of the most treasured moments of my life.

TONE: What did you take away from that?

Al D: He didn't believe how incredibly influential the Beatles were to all of us. I remember saying "are you kidding? We all got into music because of the Beatles." Probably because of the way I play, he didn't put the two together.

TONE: Influence is a strange and complicated thing, right?

Al D: Definitely.

After the beatles I branched out into jazz, into fusion. But I was a teenager and today it comes full circle

(DiMeola's current record, *Strawberry Fields Forever*, is a collection of his take on the Beatles' work.).

TONE: Do you think that so much of that music was imprinted on our souls back when we were young because we didn't have as many distractions as in today's world?



Al D: I've been saying this very thing lately. Back then we didn't have computers and cell phones to distract us. Eight to ten years ago, I was in the studio with my band to record as a band, and as soon as the tune was recorded, no one came into the control room (but me) to listen to the track. They were all out in the lobby on their phones. There's a loss of focus. Years ago when we were recording, we'd tell the receptionist no calls in the control room during a session.

It's really hard to make a record today because we don't have the focus or the budgets. The glory period of the recoding industry is shot.

TONE: What about playlists? And how they have changed our record buying habits? It's not likewhen we were young, and couldn't wait to get that new Bowie record. Or that new Al DiMeola record...

Al D: Yeah, when I was a kid, I was at that record store every day after school. It was my hangout. I studied those records. It was an exciting time.

TONE: It's not the same today. Even if you enjoy a new piece of music, you might only listen to it once or twice and you're done. Like a movie.

Al D: We have way too much variety today. Too many choices. So many things to check out, you almost forget where you started.

TONE: So the streaming thing is good and evil! (Di Meola nods)



Al D: I loved my record collection, the way they were filed. I had big shelves my dad built. I loved my stereo, I was speaker crazy.

TONE: Which leads us to the big TONE question, what do you listen to today?

Al D: I don't have a big stereo anymore. I have these tiny little speakers, it's terrible. I don't enjoy headphones unless I'm walking. I need a great setup again. I'd love to get back into it again, get my records out again. With all the touring, I couldn't keep up with it all.

TONE: People need to slow down and listen again.

Al D: I recall sitting with a friend in Germany, just listening to music. My host played music that I hadn't heard before, it was a wonderful expeience. Which lead to the home events.

TONE: That was the next question, how did the dinner events come about?

Al D: At the beginning of COVID, a friend of mine and his wife were over, and I did the cooking that evening. Stephanie laughed, and while we were in the middle of it, she went live on her phone, streaming it all. In the middle I was joking with the audience, telling people I'd cook for them.



AI D: People all over the world said, “what’s it going to take, are you serious?” We looked at each other and said it could be really cool – something that no other artist has done.

TONE: So walk me through an evening with Al and Stephanie

AI D: We do it big, great wine, champagne, and a lot of great appetizers, all Italian. We both cook, the main courses and of course desserts – Italian pastries. It’s at least a two hour three course full dinner. Then, I take them downstairs to my studio for an hour, hour and fifteen-ish, for a private concert, and even some jamming or guitar lessons – it depends on the package.

TONE: What’s your next cool thing?

AI D: I started this thing with John Petrucci from Dream Theater where we hang out and play each other five tracks that we think the other one hasn’t heard, and really get into it. I’ve done it with Steve Vai too, really turned him on to some music he’d never heard. Sharing music with your friends is the best.

TONE: So what’s your favorite Beatles song?

AI D: I am the Walrus and Strawberry Fields Forever, what’s yours?

TONE: Day Tripper. That riff always grabs me

AI D: The million dollar riff! That was one of the first songs I learned, it was so cool to play that song.

TONE: So was it always the guitar?

AI D: Love at first touch.

TONE: What about your parents? Did they think playing the guitar was super cool, or did they want you to get a real job?

AI D: I got so much joy from music, I was determined. I did a lot of caddying to pay for music stuff, and at 15 I started giving lessons at a music store. I don’t remember them trying to steer me away from music. I wanted to make it when I was young

TONE: How do you keep such texturally dense music all in your head?

AI D: Sometimes it’s tough. I’ve grown as a composer and have written about fifteen new things in the last few years. It’s a shitload to remember. Most of it I do remember, and I keep the sheet music there just in case!



TONE: So when you started out with Chick Corea was that a mind blowing experience?

AI D: God handed me the football. It was a great opportunity, it was my favorite band, I was going to make it work. That set me up for later in life. Fusion was starting to become extremely cerebral.

TONE: What was the next major phase?

AI D: When Astor Piazzolla came along, it moved me to tears, it was also technically challenging, and I thought this was what it was about. It came from the heart. Astor and Chick were both composers that played really well.

TONE: Do you have a point where you might just stop and hang out, or keep playing till no one wants to buy tickets?

AI D: Well, the first year of COVID I thought, this is what retirement is like. I spent a lot of time walking the property making landscape decisions and such. I got familiar with my home again and used my studio like I’ve never used it before. I went into a heavy two and a half years of composing that felt great. I think the new record is going to surprise people.

TONE: So you’re not running out of new ideas?

AI D: The new album is a killer record. It was meant to be solo acoustic, I got the urge on half of it to do more production, maybe a little orchestral. Another evolutionary step because I had the time to go deeper. Good family life and good focus.

TONE: You said a while back that you’re finally writing music from a happy place

TONE: Elvis Costello said once he couldn’t write great songs anymore because he was happy.

AI D: (Cracks up) Im in a different place, so so that theory is blown out of the water now.

TONE: Where do you your best creative ideas materialize?

AI D: These days, it’s popping in my head all the time, but over the last 20 years there’s this great room in our place in Miami with hard surfaces and marble – it sounds so good. I open the doors and hear the ocean.... It’s very quiet, you can hear the waves. It’s very relaxing, the white noise. I feel a calm and the sound of the guitar is there. I just use an old school Roland 8 track machine that is so perfect for writing. I write everything out in longhand.

TONE: How much time do you still spend playing?

AI D: I’m not the guy that just shows up. I rehearse every day. I hone things. I’ll play three hours today before the show. It’s not a waste of time. I like to play a lot, Chick Corea liked that about me.

TONE: When you are recording, when do you know it’s done?

AI D: That little person inside me lets me know It’s done. With no record stores and no pre orders, when you’re done you’re done. My label lets me move the goalpost.

We spend a little time wrapping up, and discussing the Saturday Night Record further, and why Friday Night is still such a massive classic from a music, jazz, and audiophile point of view. DiMeola is truly amazed at the success and how the time has gone by.

“It was a magic moment in time. It won’t happen again because that level of playing, that velocity doesn’t exist 20, 30, 40 years later. But that’s not what’s important now. I’ve changed from being a guitar player and composer, to being a composer first.”

Setlist

United Center - Chicago, Illinois July 26, 2022 Photo by Sean Zloch

Controversy and ego aside, staffer Sean Zloch says that Pink Floyd co-founder Roger Waters put on a fantastic show in Chicago as part of this This is Not a Drill tour. As you can see from the setlist, he leaned on the Floyd catalog extensively.

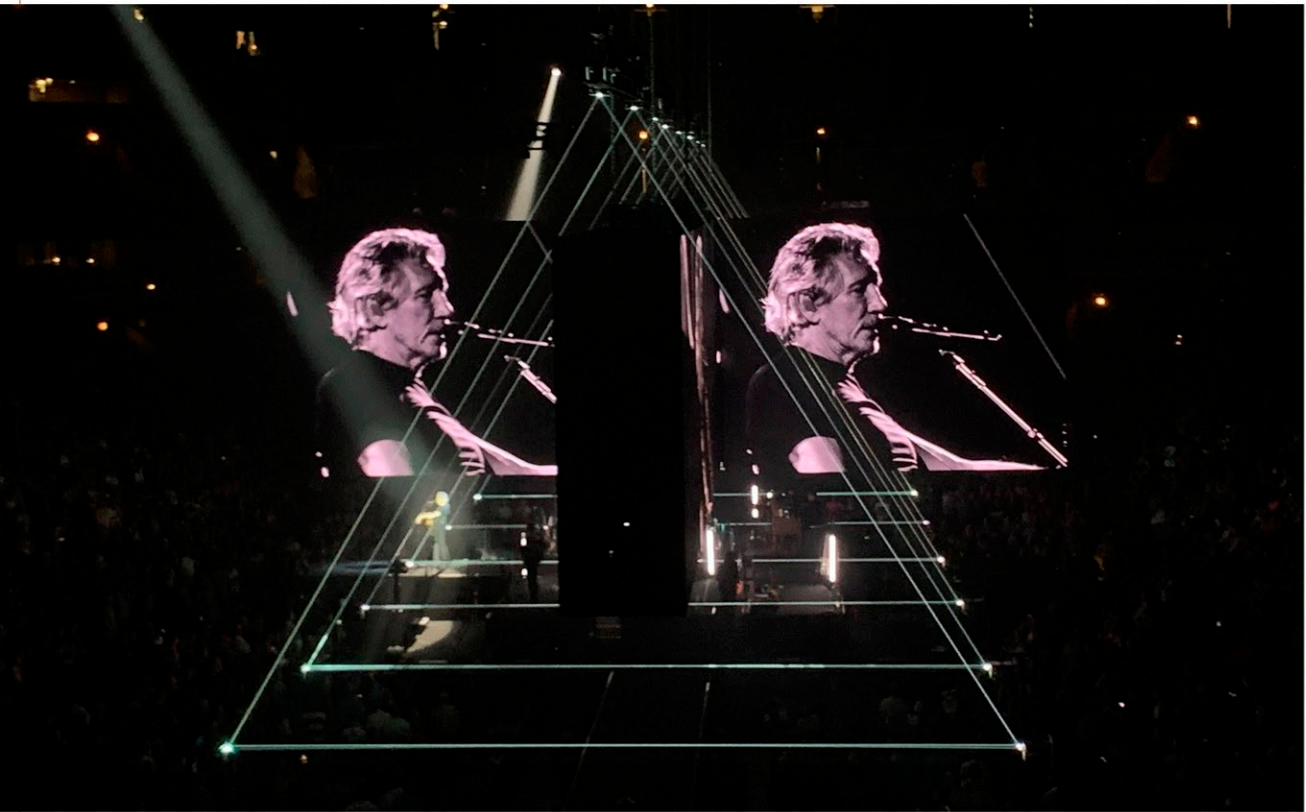
Not necessarily a bad thing.

Set 1:

- Comfortably Numb (New subdued arrangement)
- The Happiest Days of Our Lives
- Another Brick in the Wall, Part 2
- Another Brick in the Wall, Part 3
- The Powers That Be
- The Bravery of Being Out of Range
- The Bar
- Have a Cigar
- Wish You Were Here
- Shine On You Crazy Diamond (Parts VI-IX)
- Sheep

Set 2:

- In the Flesh
- Run Like Hell
- Is This the Life We Really Want?
- Money
- Us and Them
- Any Colour You Like
- Brain Damage
- Eclipse
- Two Suns in the Sunset
- The Bar (Reprise)
- Outside the Wall



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Neil Gader
The Absolute Sound Magazine, Issue 325
reviewing the **Audience frontRow cables**.

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The Skyanalog G-2 Cartridge

An excellent newcomer.

\$1,995
skyanalog.com (manufacturer)
gramophone.ca (distributor)

Even though Skyanalog suggests 30 hours for break-in (and a subsequent optimization of setup parameters), this cartridge impresses straight out of the gate. First impressions often stick, and in this case, the C-2 delivers a spacious presentation and an incredibly neutral midband. Queuing a time worn favorite, the Mobile Fidelity pressing of Hall and Oates' *Abandoned Luncheonette* feels good. Really good.

The interplay of Hall and Oates voices is such that too often, on an under-performing cartridge, Oates voice gets buried deep in the mix. Oates is right there on every track of this classic. This is a major feat for any cartridge, but at \$1,995, this Chinese MC cartridge only shines brighter as the hours rack up.

We'd also like to thank Bryan Taylor from The Gramophone in Canada for putting the G-2 in our hands. Skyanalog does not have US distribution yet, so feel free to give Bryan a call at 800-231-7594. He'll take good care of you.

The setup

As this is a moderate compliance cartridge with a claimed spec of 10uM/mN, it seemed a good fit for the Technics SL-1200 GAE, with its tonearm having an effective mass of about 15 grams (depending on what source you consult). After a thorough setup with the Analog Magik suite, and replacing the Technics headshell for an Ortofon LH-8000 wood model, the C2 is ready. Ultimately, the tracking force was set to 1.65 grams, and loading through the Nagra Classic Phono and Power Supply combo worked best at 200 ohms. (Suggested loading is 200-470 ohms)



While most listening was done through the Nagra, a few other phono stages were used with great result. The Pass XP-27 solid-state phono is an excellent match, providing a more analytical perspective than the Nagra, and the Manley Chinook more romantic, but very approachable in price at \$2,900. Rounding out the entry level is the iFi Phono 3 Black Label. This is an outstanding choice for the high-performance vinyl lover on a budget, and a great mate for this cartridge.

The sound

Overall the sound of this MC is natural, to ever so slightly organic/warm. After using Al DiMeola and company's *Friday Night in San Francisco*, we've moved ahead a day. To his new Impex release, *Saturday Night in San Francisco*. The three guitar virtuosos are still at it, but as Mr. D told us in the interview on page 30, this performance is the last one of the tour. Good as Friday Night is, these guys were absolutely on fire this night. Immediately, it's easy to hear the differences in the strings of the guitars – the C2 unravels this perfectly. It also does a fantastic job when they slow it down, really slow. The smallest finger movements are easily discernable, and the level of hall ambiance recreated fantastic.

Tired of hearing "Keith Don't Go" for the ten-zillionth time? Try Ani DiFranco's *Living in Clip*. Just released on red vinyl for its 25th anniversary, this record is further off the beaten path, and I beg to submit much more interesting. It's a great live rock recording with a lot of soul, plucky acoustic guitars, and a punchy presentation. True to the title's name, this one's recorded pretty hot, Showing off what a great tracker the G-2 is. Live records are always great to get a feel for a cartridge's sense of low-level detail retrieval and separation. Does the audience sound like you're standing in the 20th row, with people screaming and clapping all around you, or does it sound flat like you're in the nosebleed seats?



TONE 112.034



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Impressive and expressive, the Aria K2 loudspeaker line offers convincing stereo and home cinema listening. These three special edition models stand out for their loudspeakers fitted with Focal's iconic K2 cone and their exclusive, high-end Ash Grey finish. Aria K2 signals the return to high emotion shared by French loudspeakers with a unique design.

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ARIA K2 926 \$2,495(ea)

ARIA K2 CENTER \$1,190

ARIA 906 K2 \$995(ea)

Moving on to some more standard selections, the C2 renders the human voice, male or female beautifully. Again, just a touch on the warm side, you won't mistake this one for a Koetsu, but it's not voiced like a Lyra Delos or Clearaudio Stradivari either. Think of it more like a solid-state amplifier that's heavily biased in class AB, but not a full class A amplifier or a tube amplifier. There is some tonal saturation going on, but not overly much.

With all the other boxes ticked to satisfaction, running through bass heavy tracks is a delight with the G-2. Going way, way back to the 80s for some rock-solid synth bass seems the right move. However, this time we're going to ratchet it up a notch, and break out the 45 r.p.m. 12" maxi singles with Thomas Dolby, Paul Young, ABC, and RUN-DMC..

First up, Paul Young's "I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down." This goes deep enough to get the six pack of REL subwoofers rattling things that aren't secure. This, Thomas Dolby's "Pulp Culture," and RUN-DMC's "It's Tricky" prove that the C2 can deliver the speed and extension – no doubt partially because of this cartridges' tracking ability.

Anja Garbarek's Smiling and Waving illustrates the high level of low-frequency texture this cartridge is able to resolve as well. Shaking the dust off some Deutsche Grammophon classical LPs drives this point home. Nothing like the stringed section of an orchestra to serve up plenty of texture and detail.

What you don't get with the G-2 that you do get with the five-figure cartridges is a sense of depth and "reach out and touch it" palpability, but you don't get that with any of the \$2,000 cartridges. The true strength of the G-2 is its overall balance. It paints a more nuanced picture than anything you'll find in the world of MM cartridges, and will make you feel like you've made a solid investment if you are stepping up from this part of your analog journey.

Because it is so balanced, this is a cartridge that you may find yourself making a turntable upgrade (or two) without feeling the need to swap cartridges. The C-2 is a worthy Exceptional Value Award winner for 2022. We look forward to following Skyanalog more closely in the years to come.



On With The Show!

By Mario Dolinar
(photos by Mario D, and Angela Cardas

The Munich High End Show (with a twist)

Still jumpy about travel, I passed on Axpona and Munich this year - but I promise to be back roaming the aisles next year to be sure. Staff member Sean Sloch did a great job posting pics and impressions of Axpona, so you get the idea.

Taking a leap of faith on an unknown writer to cover Munich, the copy recieved was dreadful and the photos even worse. Now what?

Fortunately FB friend, longtime TONE reader, and car buddy Mario Dolinar stepped in. The general vibe of the show was very good.

The always effervescent Angela Cardas of Cardas Audio said, "Munich High End has always had an amazing energy. So positive and uplifting. Like an annual reminder that our industry is real and vibrant. It's the show where you see the widest range of ages of attendees. And families - mom, dad, kids, babies in strollers. It's one of the shows that gives us confidence that there's a future for high end audio.

And this year was even more so. All of our fellow exhibitors were clearly elated to be back, but that wouldn't amount to much if the people didn't come. Thankfully, they did. We were so pleased with the attendance numbers, and the enthusiasm of the people who came to the show."



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On With The Show!

By Mario Dolinar
(photos by Mario D, and Angela Cardas

Looking through the Cardas's Facebook feed, and Mario's, I noticed one thing in common, the MotorWorld hotel that is now across the street from the MOC. Yea, I know where I'm staying next year. Here's Mario's take on the hotel...

<https://ameroncollection.com/en/muenchen-motorworld>

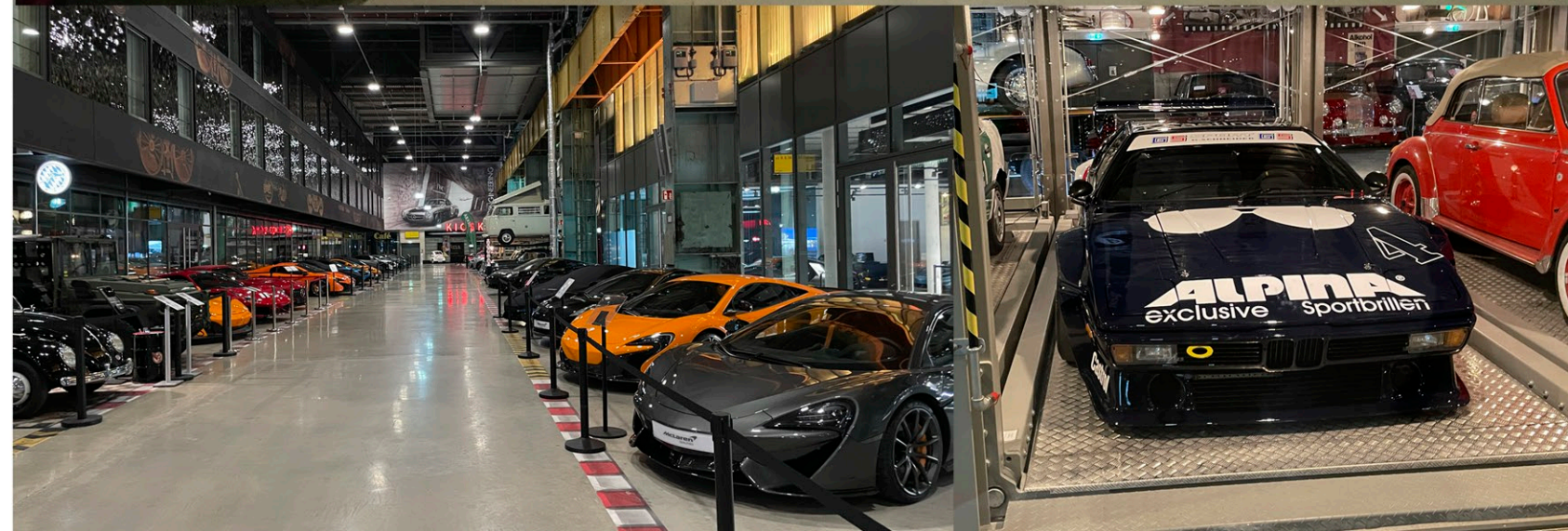
Touring the HighEnd show for the first time after lockdown, my friend and I got an invite for lunch at nearby restaurant. After a short stroll across the street from the HighEnd venue we were greeted with a big carpark and elongated industrial-like building with Motorworld sign across the middle.

Little did I know what the innards were hiding. There were a couple of giveaways parked on the pavement next to the one of the six restaurants, the giveaway was a silver 991 Porsche 911 speedster bathing in the afternoon sun.

A long lunch turned into dinner and the parking lot was filling up with cars that looked like a site from a car show. Our host said that this is nothing compared to what we'd experience next. He then took us inside the big industrial estate converted from the old factory. After the long haul to Munich from Zagreb, avoiding congestion, and trying to beat traffic and road works, rushing through many an exhibit at High End Munich, we were greeted with a fabulous view.

The super cars, hyper cars, classic cars and so much more. Our senses were overwhelmed - it was big boys haven with named streets and dealerships like Alpine, BMW, Brabus Marine, Bugatti, McLaren, Morgan, Rolls Royce, with tuner cars and race cars even a Benetton F1 car. The MotorWorld is comprised of five buildings, sporting museum, tune up shops, members only club, exhibition hall, six restaurants, a 4 star hotel and many shops and motorsport themed cafes, meeting halls and conference rooms.

Next year pilgrimage to High End show will start with booking the Motorworld 4 star hotel to enjoy all that it offers and will offer because the owners are ever expanding the site!



Ella Fitzgerald *Live At The Hollywood Bowl: The Irving Berlin Songbook*

Verve - streaming, CD, and LP

A couple of years ago it was a German recording. Lost tapes of a 1962 show that caught Ella in some kind of prime (yes, she had several, as committed Fitzgerald fans know) were found and released, and from the crazed swing of “Jersey Bounce” to the sublime diction of “Mr. Paganini,” it was a jewel. So is this new find, a Bowl/Berlin confluence from the summer of ‘58 that finds the singer’s voice limber, playful, commanding, fiery and thrilling...to say the least. I guess a case could be made that those adjectives could correctly be used during much of the icon’s career, but here listening on the back porch on a 2022 summer night, the blend of craft and esprit she brought to the Hollywood Bowl is euphoric.

Her famed songbook series was on its fourth installment, and it had just earned her a Grammy for Best Female Vocal Performance. Irving Berlin’s “Blue Skies,” “Isn’t This a Lovely Day” and “Remember” were probably pinging through the heads of ticket-buyers when the First Lady of Song, backed by a contingent of brass, reeds and strings helmed by the album’s conductor Paul Weston, stepped up to the mic to sweep everyone away. “As you listen to the band, don’t cha get a bubble? As you listen to them play, don’t cha get a glow?” The opening of “Let Yourself Go” is a good place to point your ears. Team Weston is taking the advice of the song’s lyrics, bouncing the beat like transcendence could be part of every bar.

Ella grabs the vibe and doubles down through many of these performances. Dash and drive fight it out with zing and zip as she conveys the anticipation of a night on the town in “Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails.” And the brass section’s brio meshes nicely with the singer’s vocal acrobatics on “Heat Wave.” The

occasional indictment that Fitzgerald lacked sufficient dramatic skills to convincingly convey despair is swept to the side here, too. Her quaver sets a forlorn tone on “Russian Lullaby” (a duet with the harpist) and the poignancy is palpable when she speaks from behind a broken heart in “You’re Laughing At Me.” But the ballads are in the minority here. By the time the giddy swag of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” closes the deal, we’ve all been reminded that Ella set the bar high when it came to dispensing exuberance. Artistry abounds on this must-hear find.



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Shabaka *Afrikan Culture* Verve

One of the last decade's key jazz figures, saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings commandeered a new wave of British improvisers into a larger conversation with genuine global reach. The 38-year-old bandleader helmed the pulse-driven Sons of Kemet and guided the explosive electronica of The Comet Is Coming. During the pandemic he burrowed into a private life like the rest of us, and fell in love with the shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute with a decidedly earthy resonance. *Afrikan Culture* shares the fruits of this discovery, signaling a change in Hutchings' trajectory.

He now goes by his first name only, and Sons of Kemet, beloved by audiences around the world, perform their final gigs this summer. This 28-minute EP is a stop by the wayside of sorts, an examination of an inner life and a portrait of all things ethereal. The blending of flutes, koras, and African thumb pianos present fans with the most pastoral music of Shabaka's career.

The titles explain the esthetic shift: "The Dimension of Subtle Awareness," "Ritual Awakening," "Ital Is Vital," "Explore Inner Space" - each harks to the meditative moods of the other, creating a pacific flow. By the time "Rebirth" closes out the set, a big dose of serenity has seeped from the speakers. *Afrikan Culture* is a sharp move, an example of an artist recalibrating his approach to show listeners that more surprises just might be in store.



Miles Okazaki *Thisness* Pi Recordings

If the goal for Miles Okasaki's Trickster ensemble is to deliver funk and swing simultaneously, consider it accomplished.

This is the guitarist's third album with the group, comprised of bassist Anthony Tidd, keyboardist Matt Mitchell, and drummer Sean Rickman. During their five-year trajectory, they've tweaked their rhythmic process to a point where each move is a nod to nuance - overt stylistic ploys are banished for fear of them upsetting the band's rather magical equilibrium. A chunk of that balance comes from the playbook of Steve Coleman, the saxophonist/bandleader whobrokered the slippery M-BASE lingo a quarter of a century ago. Save Mitchell, each Trickster member has done time in Coleman's camp, and here each shares their own perspective on those lessons.

Their work parallels what *Thisness* liner notes scribe Robin D.G. Kelly deems their affinity for surrealism, especially the quartet's shared responsibilities in shaping these four discrete tunes.

Because Okazaki's tack is determined to dodge genre references, its result is a flurry of perspectives drawn from a wide palette. The wily guitarist calls this zip code "the borderlands," and from his mother's visual art that helps define the aesthetic to the Sun Ra poem that provides the track titles, their mischief continuously morphs with an infectious sense of joy.



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JAZZ

By Jim Macnie

Ches Smith *Interpret it Well*

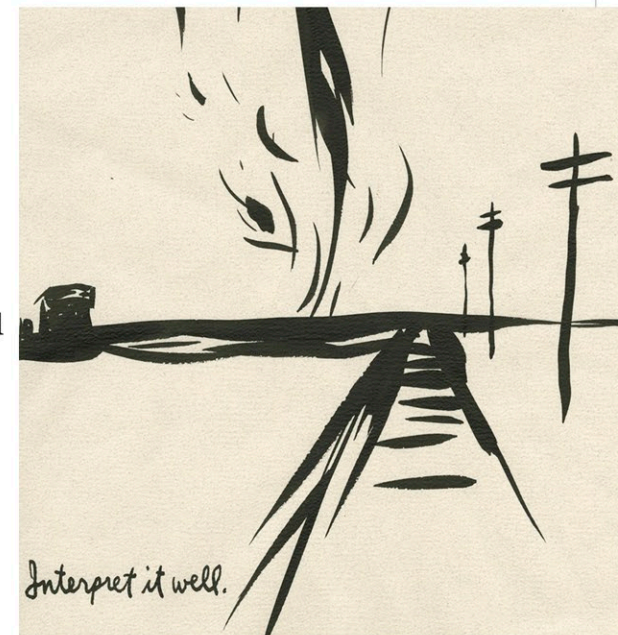
Bandcamp, streaming

Events arise. The atmospheric kerfuffle that leaps from the landscape of the Raymond Pettibon sketch gracing *Interpret It Well's* cover hints at Ches Smith's vision for how this music unfolds. Though the seven pieces acknowledge the percussionist/bandleader's compositional sketches, the impact of collective creation is at the music's center - it very well may be the album's message.

Keyboardist Craig Taborn and violist Mat Maneri revealed their chemistry with Smith on 2016's relatively pastelish *The Bell*, creating a program of abstraction that impressed both improv fans and classical devotees. This follow-up bolsters the string section, inviting Bill Frisell along for the ride. It's a move that occasionally balances Maneri's bittersweet tones with the fanciful shimmer of his mate's guitar.

Smith the orchestrator is wise to broaden his palette. As pieces wax and wane via written motifs and unscripted extrapolations, the textures are quadrupled. Ditto for the rhythmic options. "Mixed Metaphor" is a 16-minute trip that starts with plaintive plucking and shadowy bowing, a fantasia with the breeze at its back.

By the time it's done, however, punches are being thrown and the action arrives in fits and starts - maybe that cover art kerfuffle is a malicious tornado? Smith's process depends on details but allows room for storms, and this foursome - let's call it *The Bell* with Bill - works in a sea of subtleties until it's time to make a cataclysmic splash.



JAZZ

By Jim Macnie

Tyshawn Sorey *Mesmerism*

Yeros 7 Music

In the last decade and a half, the ever-inquisitive percussionist-composer has proven himself to be a 360 guy. His insights into the contours of stasis and the luxuriance of minimalism have been revelatory, and his work behind the trap set illustrates his talent to be an orchestral thinker whose respect for particulars gets as much welcome input from Baby Dodds as it does Elvin Jones. Experimentation is in Sorey's bones, and though he's made a mark as a swinging ensemble player with trios led by Vijay Iyer and Mario Pavone, he's been profiled as one of the most astute and compelling exponents of modern classicism. This date purposefully unites some of his favorite "straight-ahead" tunes into a program that reminds how the language of the jazz mainstream has expanded in the last half century. Stretching from Horace Silver's "Enchantment" to Muhal Richard Abrams' "Two Over One," *Mesmerism* finds a way to update the definition of freebop while delivering the glorious verities of old school everything.

With pianist Aaron Diehl and bassist Matt Brewer forming a graceful team, Sorey's spin on "Autumn Leaves" is drizzled with nuance after nuance - drum accents challenging the pianist's gambits with counter point maneuvers by the bassist simmering along below. Its pace is pleasant, but its deportment is peculiar. That's a compliment, of course. Personalizing these standards is at the top of *Mesmerism*'s agenda, and as the foreign reignites the familiar, the drummer fashions yet another unique statement. Paul Motian's "From Time To Time" is gauzy and dramatic; Duke Ellington's "REM Blues" is urbane and buoyant. Because of the casual exactitude the musicians bring to the table, each performance boasts a nonchalance that's beholding to refinement.

Joel Ross *The Parable of the Poet* Blue Note

The celebrated vibraphonist, a guy who can quickly start a bandstand fire by striking tone bar with mallet, made a wise move on his third album as a leader. He chose introspection over declaration, coming up with a prayerful program designed to cast a circum-spect mood rather than generate momentary sparks. In doing so, he broadens his artistic character. The drawn-out pieces that glow with a devotional aura are valuable because they reveal Ross's spirit with more clarity than his previous work.

The program is built on gentle melodies that form arc after arc while giving plenty of room to horns, vibes, and rhythm section (the band stretches from the reeds of Immanuel Wilkins and Maria Grand to the brass of Marquis Hill and Kalia Vandever). The music on *Parable* dodges flash and paints a portrait of an ensemble exhaling together, hands clasped in the kind of optimistic stance that makes you start to feel like there's a way out of these corners we're painting ourselves into these days. Long story short, he dodged blowing tunes in search of a suite that banks on the larger unit to deliver democratic eloquence.

And it does.



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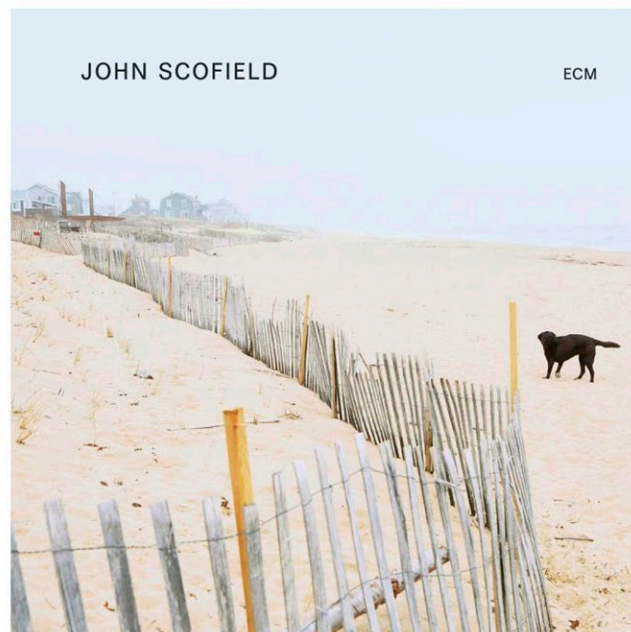
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JAZZ

By Jim Macnie

John Scofield *John Scofield* ECM, all formats

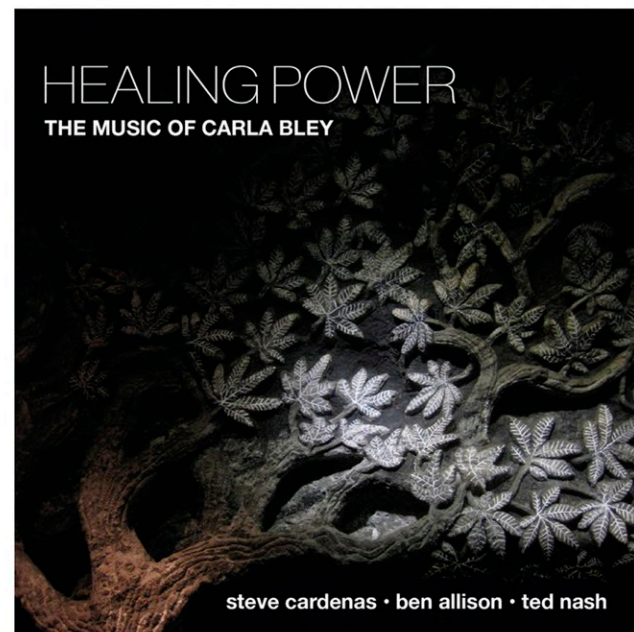
“Hide your heart from sight, lock your dreams at night, it could happen to you. Keep an eye on spring, run when church bells ring, it could happen to you.” When John Scofield plays the 1943 Burke/Van Heusen gem about being wary of love on his first solo album, his lyricism is so enthralling you can’t help but sing along. Yep, like many, the resourceful improviser spent his recent down-time playing with the only musician under his roof: himself. The recital is fetching because the 70-year-old master used a looper device to generate phrases to bounce ideas off. So “Elder Dance” feels like a duet, and literally is, with all the counterpoint needed to shoot off sparks. Throughout, his sound teems with depth and allure. A short flip of phrases here, an isolated note resounding in its humble glory there - listening to Sco work through “Junco Partner” and “My Old Flame” elicits a pleasure that’s not available when he plays with ensembles at a louder volume.



Steve Cardenas, Ben Allison, Ted Nash *Healing Power* Sunnyside

Carla Bley’s music is covered with infrequent regularity, and each time an artist tries their hand at one of the many tunes the 86-year-old composer has created in the last half century, a new perspective emerges regarding her vision. A cagey pianist, she’s written for a variety of ensembles during her career, from big bands to keyboard and bass duos. In the large, this trio of guitarist Steve Cardenas, bassist Ben Allison and reed player Ted Nash chooses a handful of Bley pieces rarely interpreted by others, such as the tender “Olhos De Gato” or the molten “And Now, The Queen.”

Unearthing gorgeous works that don’t see enough daylight is a hero’s job, but the trio’s efforts are even more valuable, because the polish they bring to the performances underscores how insightfully refined the composer made them in the first place. Agility is always an asset when addressing Bley. Allison’s nimble phrases offer wise support to the supple maneuvers of his mates. Whether it’s the frisky bop of “King Korn” or “Wrong Key Donkey,” or the more wistful moods of “Lawns” and “Ida Lupino,” this is a unit that knows how important it is to give each note the proper weight, the proper temperament. In their hands, Bley’s music blossoms anew.



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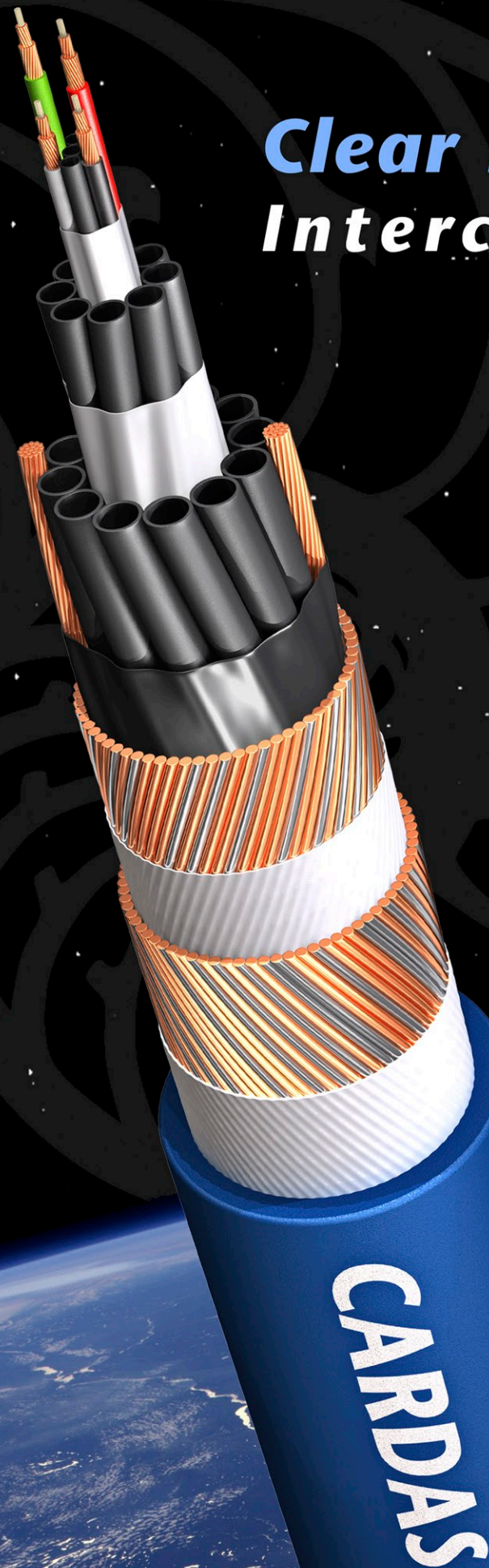
Naim audio believes that a component's power supply has a lot to do with its final sound, and we tend to agree. Dynamics, noise floor, and resolution are all affected by a quality power supply. Isolation, regulation, and sheer capacity make a major difference in the way a component can render dynamic passages. Not to mention everything else that makes up the delicate mixture of the musical signal.

All Naim components feature tremendous attention to power supply design, but we can always have more, right? Thanks to their additional, outboard power supplies, you can upgrade your Naim system incrementally if you wish, getting even more performance as your budget allows.

The sheer brilliance of this approach is multi-faceted. However, one aspect often overlooked, is you are buying a Naim component with the performance level of the largest power supply already built in. This is why so many Naim components perform at or even above the top of their respective price points. Think about that for a second.



Clear Beyond Interconnect



cardas.com

Enter the HiCap DR

The “DR” designation stands for discrete regulator, referring to the meticulous way Naim approaches the function of voltage regulation in their power supplies. Instead of using an off the shelf module as many brands do, they use all discrete components that have been hand-picked and optimized.

The result is a lower noise floor, with more dynamic range – i.e., better sound. However, the new HiCap goes beyond this exciting circuit. As with all their components, Naim views this as a system, and much like an F1 team, refines all aspects of the power supply design, with modest increases everywhere add up to achieve big results in the end. Power transformer design, where and how it is mounted in the case – even the choice of wire and how it is routed all add something to the outcome.

Having visited the Naim factory in Salisbury more than once, I assure you everything they do is under constant scrutiny when it comes to circuit design. With all of their components, regardless of price.

Understated box, dramatic results

We have the same results every time an external supply is added to one of our Naim components – more music is revealed. Naim suggests the HiCap DR is meant for their preamplifiers and crossovers; this \$2,859 upgrade is stunning.

When you consider there are plenty of people out there charging 2-5 times this amount for a mains cable or a rack with “anti-vibration properties,” the HiCap DR has valid engineering and build behind it.

In the case of our reference Supernait 3, it only powers the preamplifier section, and while it’s a little crazy, I did connect it to our Stageline phono preamplifier with awesome results. Though I’m assuming not many of you would connect a power supply of this cost to your Stageline!

This is a fun upgrade, because you don’t have to wait to break it in, blah, blah, blah. This one gives you a big boost right now. You’ll hear the effect most quickly by investigating tracks with a lot of silence, or those having incredible dynamics. It feels like the Supernait, though now making no more power plays louder. And it does. Volume is the difference between loud and quiet, not just how loud things are. Why can’t recording engineers get this, but I digress.

Running through a list of favorite solo vocal tracks reveals a darker, quieter backdrop, and more texture everywhere. The HiCap DR will take your Naim component to another level of resolution, regardless of the music you love. Led Zeppelin will push you into the listening chair more deeply, and your favorite hip hop tracks will have more bounce. Additionally, the overall presentation becomes less electronic and more natural.

Passing the five-minute test

Adding a HiCap DR to your Naim system will take it to the next level. You’ll hear the results immediately. Hifi upgrades don’t get better than this. Of course, it is tastefully designed to match all things Naim and blend right in. While I could easily spend hours dissecting this bit of this track and that, five minutes in you’ll know what I mean anyway.

Very highly recommended



Our publisher is a confessed power pop nut.

Here are a few of his go-to tracks, for getting up and bouncing around:



- Cheap Trick - Taxman, Mr. Thief
- Elvis Costello - Clubland
- The Knaack - Good Girls Don't
- Pezband - Cover to Cover
- The Connection - It's All Right
- Graham Parker - Stick to Me
- Nick Lowe - Cruel to be Kind
- Jordan Zevon - The Joke's on Me
- Rusty Anderson - Hurt Myself
- The Beatles - I Saw Her Standing There
- Big Star - In The Street
- Cheap Trick - Day Tripper



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REL, like so many other high-end manufacturers, often get tagged on social media and mentioned in other platforms for their massive six-pack arrays, which are unquestionably awesome. Much like Porsche or Range Rover, potential buyers are sometimes frightened by what these premium models cost, not realizing that their engineering expertise goes all the way back to their entry and medium range models as well.

I'm happy to say I use a six-pack of their top, no.25 subs in my main system, yet to put things in perspective, I use their \$449 TZero III sub in my desktop system and a six-pack of the S/510s in my living room. What this has given me is an opportunity to experience most of the lineup and see just how much quality and performance has been brought to bear on their T/x series. A while back, we did a comparison review of the entire T/x series, the T/5x, T/7x, and T/9x.

This is a more in-depth review of the T9/x, which is the top of this series. Not everyone has the room, the budget, or the system to support \$50k worth of subwoofers, but a hifi system is just that, a system, and it's important to keep a handle on trying to achieve synergy between the components to achieve the maximum result within what you have to work with.



Much has been said about this elusive concept of synergy, about magical systems that deliver well beyond what one might expect for the amount of cash spent. I look at each building block in an audio system in terms of just how much music said component can reveal. Often, we see proud pictures of systems on Facebook and Instagram featuring a “jewel” component, that is well beyond the capability of the rest of the components featured. More often than not, the owner has found an incredible deal on a used piece, or a demo piece priced so much lower than they expected, so it makes perfect sense.

Machine like

I’m often asked why I compare audio systems to automobiles, and the main reason is because the most successful automobiles, if you truly enjoy the tactile pleasure of driving, are not necessarily the fastest ones, but the ones that provide the best balance. The number of people that have called the first-generation Mazda Miata a “chick car” are often flabbergasted by how fast that little car can hustle down a twisty country road, providing an engaging driving experience that many, much more expensive cars cannot.

The same thing goes for a great hifi system, no matter what the cost. If you can choose components that will work in concert with your room, and the other components, it’s possible to achieve results you may never have dreamed possible on even a limited budget. Another big part of this equation is the ability to set your system up to the absolute limit of its ability, but that’s another article.

Setup and such

We agree with REL that if you can, consider a pair of subwoofers rather than a single, because it makes it easier to optimize the bass response in your room. Of course, if you need to start with one, by all means. While you will get more ultimate output with a pair, the major gain with two comes with the way they couple to your main speakers, providing a more effortless, more transparent blend.

Starting with our pair of Eggleston Nicos (\$5,495/pair, review [HERE](#)) and the Luxman L-550AXII (\$5,995, review [HERE](#)), a solitary T/9x makes an excellent match in our 13 x 15-foot room. RELs comprehensive setup guide suggests corner placement, yet in this particular room, a single subwoofer works well slightly off center. Setting up in this configuration will require slightly different settings because the room gain achieved from corner placement is diminished in the middle of the room.

Moving out to the 13 x 18-foot living room (which opens into the rest of the house) makes for a perfect dual woofer setup. As the Nicos go down fairly low, setting the T9/x crossover down fairly low works perfectly. If you are new to the REL way of doing things, they use a high-level connection, from your speaker outputs. This lets the subwoofer follow the same signal that is going to your speakers in terms of sound character, but more importantly, makes it much easier to get a seamless blend with your main speakers.



When the main speakers run full range, letting their low frequency output roll off naturally makes for subwoofers that will blend perfectly with your mains, and providing more sonic cohesion – provided you take the care to set them up correctly. And blend seamlessly they did. In the slightly bigger room, the extra T/9x adds more upper bass and lower midrange body to the Nico’s presentation. The extra grunt provided on bass-heavy tracks is equally enjoyed, but again, the presence provided by these subwoofers is unmistakably good.

As with every REL-based system I’ve set up over the years, when properly set up the RELs are undetectable, until you turn them off. In addition to the lowest bass fundamentals diminishing, the front to back imaging component of the system nearly disappears. Even when listening to music that doesn’t have a ton of heavy bass. The level of depth that the REL subwoofers provide never ceases to amaze me.

In case you are wondering, the T/9x tips the scale at a mere 45.5 pounds (20.6kg), so these are subs you can move by yourself. They are available in high gloss black and high gloss white. That’s no marketing speak – when REL says “high gloss,” they mean it. There isn’t a new automobile on the market at any price that has as deep a finish as what comes standard on a REL. Cabinet size is a compact 14.5” wide, 13.4” high, and 15.5” deep. You should be able to install them nearly anywhere without issue.

That the T/9x can take advantage of REL’s Arrow wireless system, makes system integration and installation even easier. \$199 gets you a transmitter and receiver, allowing you to place your T/9x’s up to 50 feet away. Setup is painless and takes less than 90 seconds to implement. We did not use the Arrow system in the context of this review, but our past experience with REL wireless options on other subwoofers is fantastic.



Further listening

Tracking through the title of Carole King’s classic, Tapestry – an album not known for its LF content, reveals much more body and saturation in her voice and piano with the RELs active. Moving on to Duran Duran’s latest record, Future Past begins with some amazing bass grooves, right from the start. Those loving bass will really enjoy this, because that’s what you add subwoofers for, right? To feel that bass.

Mating the T/9x’s up with a few different speakers delivers equally good results. In addition to their power and extension, these subs are fast, dynamic, and articulate. Swapping the Eggleston out for a pair of Magnepans and some vintage Acoustat ESLs, prove they can keep up with the pace of the delicate ESL panels. I wish I would have had a pair of these 30 years ago, when my main system used Acoustat 1+1s! The Luxman amp has two pairs of speaker outputs, making it incredibly easy to hear the difference between subs in and out of the system. There’s no turning back.

Final thoughts

As mentioned, each of the three models in the /x series provide a similar voice and level of resolution. The one (or pair) you choose will depend heavily on how low your main speakers can extend, the volume of your listening room, and ultimately how loud you play music.

Moving up to the Serie S subs brings more refinement in every aspect, though at a higher cost. If you are looking for a high performance, yet compact and cost-effective way to add low frequency extension, the REL T/9x is fantastic. The T/x subwoofers are meant to be used as single subwoofers or in pairs, they can’t be expanded to six-pack array service. This may be your ultimate decision when trying to decide between a pair of T/9x’s and a single S510. If you want bang for the buck, and a minimal box compliment, the T/9x will serve you well. Higher audiophile ambitions? Maybe the S/510. Or, just put the T/9xs in another system. I can spend your money all day.

Either way, the REL T/9x is highly recommended and worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards.



HiFi Rose RS 150B

Triple threat.

\$4,999
mofidistribution.com

A dozen years ago, I bought a Sooloos Control 10 network streamer that still resides in my second sound system. I was stunned by how easily it found and played (and still does) thousands of CDs downloaded from my disc library. Today, the HiFi Rose RS150B Network Streamer clearly demonstrates how much farther its newer DAC, circuit boards and power supplies have advanced the state-of-the-art in digital playback. But like the Sooloos that TONE reviewed nearly 15 years go, the HiFi Rose RS 150B makes another massive jump in performance and functionality.

Time Has Come Today!

Last fall when the Rose RS150B Network Streamer came to my attention, it was only a matter of time until, this spring, it entered my reference audio system. At the heart of this remarkable component is the ES9038PRO, ESS Technology’s flagship two-channel DAC, a high-precision femto clock oscillator, a dual-core CortexA77 up to 1.8GHz and a dual-core Cortex A53 up to 1.4 GHz. You want higher sampling rates? How about PCM up to 768kHz/32-bit or DSD up to 512 (22.4MHz)? All commonly used high-resolution codecs are recognized, including AIFF, Apple Lossless, FLAC, WAV, DFF, and DSF. Can it fully decode MQA sources? You betcha!

The RS150B can accommodate a 10 TB external hard drive, a 400 GB micro SD card, and a 4TB internal SATA drive. The rear panel offers a wider variety of digital and analogue inputs and outputs than I have ever seen in a DAC, preamplifier, network streamer or music server, all of which the RS150B is. The level of each source can be adjusted to match the others whether using the volume control of the RS150B or that of your own preamplifier.



In addition to the black or silver aluminum chassis, users will surely focus on the 14.9-inch-wide touch screen that displays cover art and track title and is clearly legible from my 12-foot viewing distance. This screen can be switched off but why would you ever want to do that? The screen apps include an international radio tuner, analogue sound level meters, FM Radio, podcasts, and an input/output selector. Apps you might not use like Bugs, a Qobuz-like Korean music library, can be turned off to make screen navigation easier. The Video app delivers online 4K high-resolution sources like the one I watched on my television with composer/conductor John Williams treating a Viennese audience to excerpts from some of his film scores.

The RS150B's only shortcoming is its small non-backlit Bluetooth remote control. Fortunately, the RoseConnect Premium app provides the essential remote operation functions for iOS and Android devices.

A Rose is a Rose

While the RS150B inhabits an A/V multiverse, this review focuses on its performance as a digital music server and network streamer. After the unit initially powered up, I was prompted to download a firmware update which I quickly did. The RS150B readily finds all the music in my TIDAL and Qobuz accounts. As a Roon renderer, it identifies all the files stored on my laptop and two NAS drives.

After hooking up the Rose RS 150B in balanced mode to my Pass Labs XS preamplifier, I heard a natural-sounding warmth in Madeleine Peyroux's voice as she sang "Dance Me to the End of Love" from *Careless Love* (44.1kHz/16-bit). The soundstage was deep, the solo instruments precisely placed and there are gobs of clean bass.

96kHz/24-bit MQA recordings like Peter Gabriel's impassioned duet with Kate Bush, "Don't Give Up" simply floats out of my MartinLogan CLX speakers with extraordinary detail and airiness.

Simply amazing.



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MY SONIC LAB-NAIM-NORDOST-ORTOFON-PASS LABS-QUADRASPIRE-REGA-SHUNYATA RESEARCH-SOUND ANCHORS-STEIN MUSIC-STILLPOINTS-TAIKO AUDIO-TONTRAGER-TRINNOV
VAC AUDIO-VAN DEN HUL-VICOUSTIC-VIVA-VIVID AUDIO-VPI INDUSTRIES-WIREWORLD

PREMIERE FLORIDA DEALER

Stravinsky's The Firebird Suite as rendered by Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra (176.4kHz/24-bit) offered a huge dynamic range from very quiet but well-articulated winds and low strings at the beginning to the sonic gut punch of the full instrumental forces at the 9:21 mark. What really knocks the sound out of the park for me is the first DSD256 track that I had ever been able to play in its native format—"Elegy" from the Blue Coast Music album *Heavenly Voices*—a soulful duet by pianist Fiona Joy Hawkins and violinist Rebecca Daniel that rendered the most life-like reproduction of these two instruments I have ever heard.

A Rose by any other name

Regardless of source, the RS150B brought out the best in every selection—spacious soundstages, natural-sounding vocals, spot-on imaging, well-defined bass, and utter lack of digital glare. While dropping \$5K for any audio component is certainly not chump-change, getting the functionality of several components in a single chassis with a deluxe fit and finish makes this a real bargain. Simply put, this network streamer was the most analogue-sounding digital component I have yet encountered and it is fun to fiddle with!

Highest recommendation.

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

It's always lovely when more than one reviewer agrees on a products greatness. Flattered as I am that Mr. Devoe agrees with me on the Rose RS150B, but so many others around the world have been equally enthusiastic about this brand. What that hopefully gives you as a consumer is confidence, should you be thinking about one. What Lawrence didn't mention is that he and I both bought the review samples.

There isn't a ton I can add to the overall sonic picture, but after auditioning a lot of DACs in the \$5k-\$10k range over the years, the Rose is worth the price as a DAC alone.

Running ROON in the studio, the garage and three rooms in the house makes the RS150B an easy choice for our musical environment.

With so many people moving away from massive racks full of gear, whether down-sizing, living in the constraints of a more compact space, or just craving simplicity, the RS150B delivers world-class sound, it is a little spendy for merely a streamer, but the on-board DAC is so good, you'll be spending twice that for markedly better elsewhere. However, combining that level of performance with the RS150Bs ability as a line stage makes it an out of this world value. Which is why it was our product of the year overall last December.

While Lawrence uses his more as a DAC/Streamer, I use my Rose RS150 as a full functioning analog/digital front end in my living room system. I put it through its paces with a number of different solid-state and vacuum tube power amplifiers from BAT, ARC, PrimaLuna, Pass Labs, Nagra and Parasound. Whether using the single ended RCA outputs or the balanced XLRs, the RS150B provides dynamic, transparent, nuanced sound.

Sure, the remote isn't super awesome, but in our app driven world, this is not a deal breaker. The beautiful touch screen on the front panel begs human interaction, or you can control it with the app. If just listening digital, merely with Roon. Easy. At this price point, I'd rather have a kids meal remote and a great product, than a mega remote, (which I'll never use anyway) and a few less great parts under the hood because of cost constraints.

There are so few components at any price that have this level of thought paid to every aspect from packaging to functionality. The fit and finish of the RS150B would not be the least bit out of place on a \$30k component. I truly can't think of another \$5k product executed to this level.

To Pre or not to Pre

At the end of all the listening, as good as the DAC/streamer is, the quality of the linestage makes this a top tier component. Even if you never need it, the RS150B is still an exceptional value as a DAC/Streamer. However, the value proposition of a great linestage as part of the mix is just too good to ignore. Selfishly speaking, the level of resolution and neutral voice that the RS150B provides makes it a fantastic front end for evaluating power amplifiers in the \$3k-\$20k range. As I like things on the slightly warm side of the tonal spectrum, the RS150B proved most enjoyable with the PrimaLuna EVO 400 and the ARC REF80S. Regardless of what you choose, I suspect you will have fantastic results.

It’s nice to see a manufacturer addressing all of these concerns in a single component. And, I’ve said it before, but having all three components on one chassis, means one power cord and one set of interconnects, two, if you add a phono preamplifier. That’s more money for records, speakers, or maybe even a vacation. Hmmmm. The only other decision is whether to get yours in silver or black.

Getting Crazy With the B-Word

If you’ve been reading TONE for any length of time, you know we’re not big on using, then revising the b-word (i.e. the “best.”). The only other product I’ve had the pleasure to use that offers this level of functionality and performance, albeit one click down is the \$3,500 Naim Unity Headphone amplifier. While it offers better headphone performance than the RS150B, it’s DAC and linestage are less dynamic and resolving. I own and love both, but they offer different levels of performance. Kind of like the difference between an Audi S3 and an RS3.

If you are looking for a great anchor to a minimal box count, high performance 2-channel system, I truly can’t think of a component offering more sound, performance, and functionality than the Rose RS150B. It’s a keeper. #toneaudioapproved. Times two.

www.mofidistribution.com



Rega Elicit Mk.5

Distilled performance.

\$2,699
rega.co.uk (manufacturer)
soundorg.com (NA Distributor)

If you've read our reviews on the past Brio amplifiers, (or by chance have one) you know how much musical information this little, half-width chassis design brings to the table. It's a great amp for about a thousand bucks and has a cracking phono stage built in too. Like every Rega amplifier we've used, the Elicit Mk.5 feels heavier than its 27.5-pound weight. I can't ever explain how they do this.

Those requiring more power and more refinement can step up to the Elicit Mk.5 at \$3,495. This full width chassis component offers 105 Watts into 8 ohms (162 Watts into 4 ohms) which should be more than enough to drive any speaker you have to reasonable levels. In addition to a MM phono stage, there is a 24/192 DAC based on the Wolfson chipset, so this amplifier can truly be a hub for all things analog and digital. Perfect for anyone wanting to tie all their sources together with a minimum box compliment.

There's an efficiency about Rega that never fails the true music lover. The Elicit Mk.5 offers sonics that you'd probably pay a lot more for elsewhere, and just enough functionality to get the job done. The DAC doesn't decode DSD or MQA, but honestly, most people really aren't listening to that much of either. If you really need MC capability, theoretically you could add an external MC preamplifier to one of the five line-level inputs or use a high-quality step-up transformer. We did this with excellent result, but that is out of the context of this review.



For the person looking to build a \$5,000 - \$20,000 music system delivering top sound, the Elicit Mk.5 is as good as it gets to anchor things.. Choosing a pair of Rega speakers and turntable will assure perfect system synergy yet the Elicit Mk.5 works equally well with other brands. We had excellent luck pairing it with speakers from Eggleston, Fink Team, Harbeth, and Sonus faber. Just to torture test this amplifier, a pair of Quad 57s were dragged from Jerold O'Brien's closet. All with fantastic results – this is a very robust amplifier.

After running a range of speaker tests, the Mk.5 was brought in the house for some extended listening with the Acora Acoustics SRC-1 floor-standers. Playing “Seamus” from Pink Floyd’s *Meddle* album put my Bull Terriers into a fit, trying to find the barking dog in the room.

So we can say that voicing is spot on. And, for the more pedantic readers, we never had a problem with the 4-ohm speakers at our disposal. Even playing music louder than comfortable, this amplifier never gets more than mildly warm.

Pace, clarity, and control

Many great British amplifiers are known for their ability to capture the musical pace and keep timing cues sorted, which leads to a very natural sound. The Mk.5 excels here, adding a level of clarity, combined with its ability to deliver extended bass response. Both the Acoras and the Harbeth Monitor 40.3 XDs on hand go fairly deep. The Mk.5 can play music with complex low frequency information without losing its way.

A long-time favorite for this kind of thing is the self-titled debut from Jaco Pastorius. Starting at the beginning, with “Donna Lee,” the Mk.5 coaxes a stunning performance out of the big Harbeths, a speaker that truly requires a high current, solid-state amplifier. Pastorius’ ability to tear up the neck of his bass, generating random harmonics along the way is a breeze with this combination. The Mk.5 captures the speed and texture of this legendary bass player as it should be.

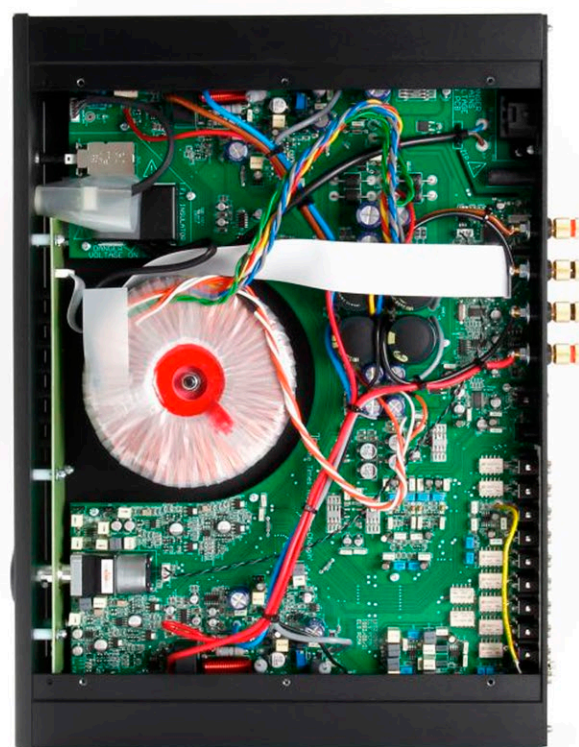
Going totally 80s for a while, Tears for Fears *Sowing the Seeds of Love* is a finely crafted studio production, full of depth, layered vocals, and sparse instrumental bits.

It’s an excellent example of a recording with plenty of “pinpoint imaging.” Again, the Mk. 5 keeps things locked down. The massive soundstage that this record offers, if reproduced faithfully, with vocals and various instruments all having their own spot, with the drums and bass firmly planted is a joy to listen to through the Mk 5.

The high end of the Mk.5 is not as delicate as a Luxman or Pass class-A amplifier, or maybe your favorite tube amplifier, but it isn’t harsh, strident, or over-exaggerated either. Cymbals, pianos, and violins sound correct. Nor is the Mk.5 fatiguing at all. Remember, this is a \$3,500 amplifier, not a five-figure box. It’s all about balance and the Mk.5 succeeds brilliantly.

Digital you can use

While it’s always the rage to chat about DSD, MQA, and ultra high-resolution audio, there are still many music lovers that don’t go beyond standard 16/44 files. The Rega will decode up to 24/192 files and that’s going to be just fine for most of us. Where so many other manufacturers have built their products around the ESS/Sabre chipsets, Rega has always gone with the Wolfson chips, with good result. Digital nerds may remember that some of the best sounding iPods used the Wolfson chipset, and again, much of this is about power supplies and analog stage development.



Rega keeps it simple, with an RCA SPDIF and Toslink inputs. Also remember, this is the company that was one of the last to the game with a CD player, so don’t expect Rega to be implementing an onboard, Bluetooth streamer anytime soon. (There *are* tape deck inputs and outputs...just saying) Besides, it just adds to cost, and diminishes sound quality. However, if there is one complaint, it would be nice to see a USB input here, to accommodate a laptop or streamer.

Using a vintage Sony ES 10-disc changer sporting a Toslink output works well, and is a significant upgrade sonically. A Cambridge CXC transport via SPDIF is also a great combination, and well within what I’d expect someone building a system around this amplifier to spend (about \$695 MSRP) on a digital, disc playing source.

Proceeding thusly, comparing digital and analog through the Mk.5 still gives a slight nod to the analog side of the equation, (with analog sounding more organic and natural) but not enough to where you won’t be able to enjoy the digital part of your music collection.

Getting personal

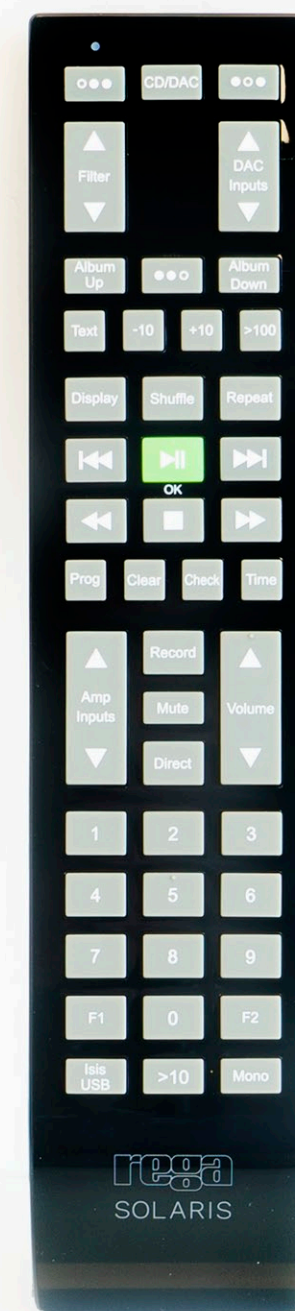
The on-board headphone amplifier, with standard 1/4” jack on the front panel is excellent. Rega claims an output of 2.4V into 32 ohms, 3.6V into 54 ohms, and 8.1V into 300 ohms, so whatever is at your disposal will work well. Considering the amplifier’s performance envelope, you can expect great results with phones in the \$100 - \$1,000 range. We used phones from Audeze, Focal, Grado, HiFi Man, and Sennheiser. Even the mighty Focal Stellias deliver a decent performance with the Mk.5.

All the general characteristics of the Mk.5 with speakers apply here. Stereo imaging is wide, but not mind altering. Mids and highs are well defined and not the least bit harsh or grainy – this is an amplifier that you can do a lot of personal listening with and not get bored. Finally, the bass response is well controlled and powerful. A long playlist of Aphex Twin, and Kruder & Dorfmeister proves the Mk.5 delivers head-fi bliss, where most on-board headphone amps usually fall flat.

Cracking the top

Taking inventory of the Mk.5s densely populated interior, eyes go immediately to the large toroidal transformer powering everything. Quality parts are used throughout, but because there are no huge Teflon capacitors anywhere, the Mk.5 requires minimal “break-in.” It sounds fantastic out of the box, and after 30 minutes, fully stabilizes thermally.

As the power amplifier is a class-AB design, power draw is minimal. I just left it on constantly, so it was always ready to roll.





As mentioned, the DAC section is built around a Wolfson DAC and SPDIF receiver. A coaxial and Toslink input are provided, but again, at this price point, it's the perfect companion to your favorite transport. No USB means no connecting up to a tablet or laptop, but this is a relatively simple work around, should that be the way you have to send your digital bitstream. Resolution is 16/44 up to 24/192, which accommodates 96% of the music you'll be streaming anyway – maybe more.

Volume level is controlled by a premium grade Alps potentiometer, and great (but not boutique) parts populate the circuit board. This is the magic of Rega electronics – they always pick excellent yet cost effective parts to create components that sound way better than most of their competitors.

Don't forget the phono

We can't talk about a Rega amplifier and not pay attention to the phono stage. Record players are what they built their reputation on. Most likely, if you were going all Rega, you might add a P3 or P6 with a decent MM cartridge to round out the package. The \$675 Rega Exact is a favorite around here, so the Apheta 2 was dismounted from our P9 and the Exact put in its place.

The other table used for the review was the Technics SL-1200 with an Ortofon Concorde Century (\$700), swapping out for a vintage Shure V15III with Jelco stylus.

I'm guessing that this phono stage is based on the highly successful Fono MM MK5, and within the context of most MM cartridges, delivers excellent results. With either of the three test cartridges, the internal phono is very quiet and dynamic. Equally capable with Slayer or the symphony, transient attack and decay are well rendered. Finally, the sonic picture painted is spacious in all three dimensions. If you happen to have a decent table/cartridge combination, analog will sound fabulous through the Mk.5, should you be comparing analog versus streaming digital through the internal DAC.

Looking at the internal phono as something you'd have to invest \$500-\$1,000 in, were the Mk. 5 not having one, makes this amplifier an even better value.

In the end, it's about balance

Like everything else Rega, the MK.5 does what it does extremely well. Even the lighted Solaris remote control is a step above what is normally supplied at this price. The true strength of the Rega Elicit Mk.5 is its ability to do everything well. Though we are happily awarding the Elicit MK.5 an Exceptional Value Award, it goes beyond that. If we did a Really Exceptional Value Award, it would have received that.

In a world of six-figure audio components, the Rega Elicit MK.5 delivers a high level of sonic performance. Unless you're swimming in \$100 bills, you might find it hard to justify spending more. It's a perfect anchor for a \$5k-\$20k system. Money saved on the cables not needed to connect a DAC, phonostage, headphone amplifier, preamplifier and power amplifier together will buy some more records! (Maybe a holiday...)

Very enthusiastically suggested.

LAB12 Melto 2

Three-input Phono Stage

\$4,495
fidelisdistribution.com

The presentation of Edgar Winter’s “Frankenstein” (a long-standing fave) via the Technics 1200GR and an Ortofon Concorde instantly establishes the Lab12 Melto2 phono stage as one of the great ones. It’s got everything you need in terms of sonics: big soundstage, excellent dynamics, and most of all, very quiet. This is not the world’s greatest recording, and music like this is often a better torture test than a pristine first stamper this or that. The Lab12s ability to decode moderately dense, less than stellar recordings is top shelf. This means the best records in your collection will only be that much more engaging.

There are a lot of vinyl enthusiasts out there that may not have a Tech Das table with three tonearms and a trio of 20k phono cartridges. Still, a lot of you have a level of passion for analog that indeed demands more options than a single tone arm/cartridge combination can provide. The more diverse your music collection becomes, the more you need more than one setup. The Lab12 Melto2 gets the job done, with three inputs, for \$4,495. Finally, the Melto2 is available in silver or black finish.

While this is not an entry-level phono stage, it is not a megabucks phono stage either. For the analog enthusiast with a couple of turntables wanting a single box solution, it’s a major contender for so many reasons. Don’t let the reasonable price tag fool you; this is a serious high-end product.



Efkolia

Efkolia is a Greek word for convenience. In addition to the great remote, and a highly legible front panel display, one of the most excellent features of the Melto2 is the ability to set gain and loading from the convenience of your chair. You might pooh-pooh this at first but think about it. How many times have you been on the fence between loading settings? To listen intently and increase or decrease cartridge loading a click or two right from your listening position is fantastic when fine-tuning an MC cartridge. Those of you leaning towards the more finicky side will love this feature. Or it will drive you crazy. But let's be positive.

All three Melto2 inputs can be configured as MM or MC, with MM gain fixed at 38dB and MC gain variable between 58 and 64dB. This is important if you have a Rega MM or one of the other MM carts that have somewhat high (i.e., in the 6-8mV range) output because it avoids the overload situation that higher output MM cartridges can cause. Just as not enough gain can rob an MC cartridge of dynamics, too much gain brings distortion and compression with MM cartridges.

Even with the low output (.25mV) Denon 103r, the 64db MC setting proves high enough to keep dynamic contrasts exciting and noise at bay. The Melto2 is an all-tube design, featuring a pair of ECC88 (6922) tubes and a pair of 6N2P, with a pair of Lundahl Transformers instead of a solid-state (or worse, an op amp) amplification stage to achieve the required gain.

Those of you with MC carts that only have about an inch of coil wiring will appreciate the 25-ohm loading setting. All too often, the lowest loading setting on many phono stages is 100 ohms, leaving many potential choices out in the cold. The Melto2 is adjustable from 25 ohms to 47k and input capacitance from 0-300pF. It also offers EQ curves for RIAA, DECCA, and Columbia recordings, making this one of the most versatile phono stages you can find for the price. Efkolia

Again, chances are you don't have a massive collection of records requiring alternate EQ settings, but the Melto2 lets you take advantage of everything. It makes a major difference, and now you won't shy away from those records when crate digging.

Torture testing the Lab12 with a 35-foot pair of Cardas Clear Reflection RCA and XLR cables, proves the Lab12 has a very robust output stage, unaffected by cable length. Out back, all three turntable inputs are single-ended RCA, with a single pair of RCA outputs and a pair of XLR connections. If you need to get your turntable(s) away from your system somewhat, the Lab12 can drive any cables you need to use with ease.

Removing the cover reveals high-quality parts, and careful assembly. The front panel has a glass bead blasted anodized finish, and when the cover is unscrewed, the chassis does not go out of alignment, making re-assembly difficult. Hand built in Greece, it's easy to see that the employees that produce the Lab12 components have a genuine commitment to quality.

Further listening

The Melto2 adheres to the same ethos we've experienced with the LAB12 products we've sampled so far. Their ability to do so much well, especially in the context of the modest price asked, is what makes them jewels.

Lab12 skips bling-y casework for understated functionality, concentrating on sound quality instead, which certainly wins over the heart of this analog enthusiast. The overall tonal balance of the Melto2 is ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral. Most vacuum tube preamplifiers are built around a specific tube, (in this case, the ECC88/6922) and are usually more similar than different. Many great preamplifiers have been built with this tube front and center, so for those that love tube rolling, you can probably fine tune the sound if you just have to tinker.





With the current spike in tube pricing due to world events, unless you have a major cache of tubes lying about, I'd suggest leaving the Lab12 as is and just enjoying it. (I'd recommend that anyway, but I'm somewhat tinkering adverse...). In addition to the few drops of warmth, what really stands out with the Melto2 is how quiet it is. If you have a good collection of solo vocal and acoustic records – especially classical music records, you'll enjoy this phono stage. Even using the Lab12 Mighty and the 97dB sensitive Heretic speakers reveals no hiss and noise, when listening to the quietest passages in your records.

Bass performance is firm, but you won't mistake this for a solid-state phono stage. But that's not why you went for tubes in the first place, right?

Listening to some of the deepest notes in electronica tracks or fast, finger slaps from Stanley Clarke, you can hear the way the Lab12 gently addresses the more dynamic bass lines – but it's not a bad thing.

As with most excellent vacuum tube gear, the magic is in the midrange and on to the highs, along with some serious three-dimensionality. The Melto2 creates a soundfield that is wide and deep. Whether you like acoustic music or studio creations, this preamplifier creates an epic sense of scale yet does not render a one size fits all large perspective. An acoustic guitar sounds like an acoustic guitar, texturally and spatially.

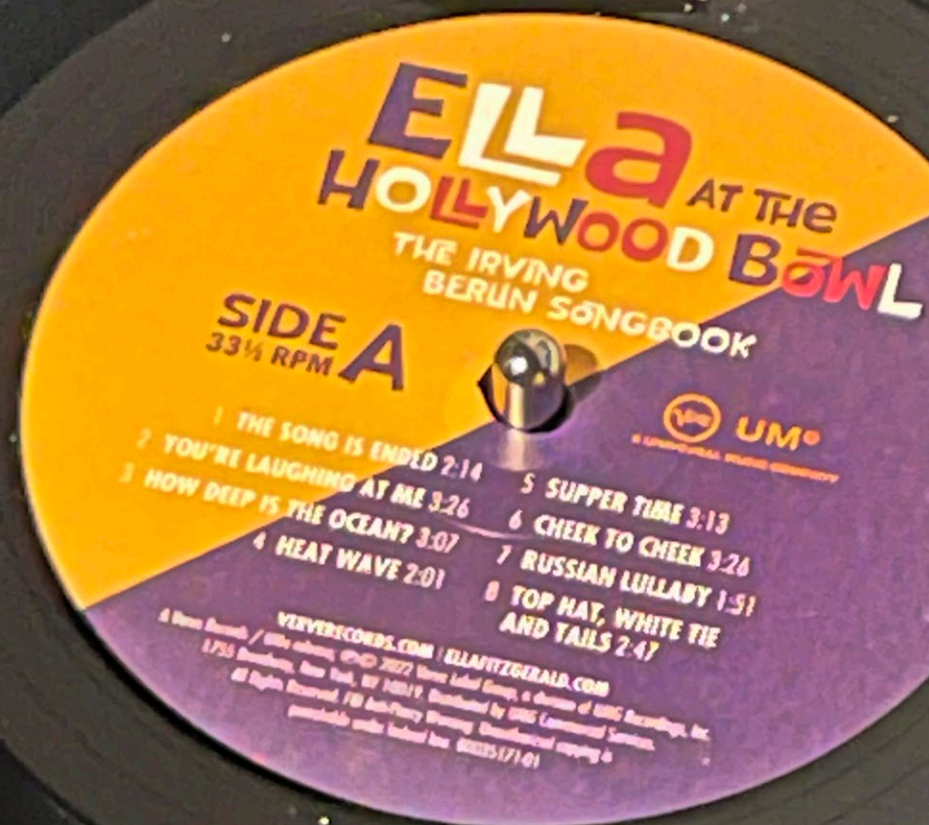
A choice product

When the Melto2 arrived at the end of 2021, we did manage to get a lot of listening time in, and though this review is a bit longer in coming than I'd prefer, it was more than worthy of a Publishers Choice Award last year.

In today's world, \$4,495 is not huge money for a phono preamplifier, but it is serious money indeed. If you only need a single input, the Melto2 still offers more than enough raw performance to justify the price tag. However, there are so few phono stages at this price offering the functionality of the Melto2. None that have come through our listening rooms offering this level of sonic refinement and functionality at this price.

Multiple turntable
/tonearm analog
aficionados, rejoice.
This is one you will
really enjoy.





**Ella Fitzgerald -
*Ella at the Hollywood Bowl***

This recently uncovered concert proves you can never get enough Ella.

And, if you're not a vinyl enthusiast, this one is also available to stream. Check out Jim Macnie's review, this issue.

LAB 12

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**PU
2021
BC**

TONE Publisher's Choice Award

melto2 Remote Controlled
Tube Phono Preamplifier

The country that brought us Democracy and
The Olympics now brings us award-winning
electronics from Lab12.

The experts agree.





CABASSE
Java MC40
Loudspeaker
\$2,798 (pair)

A three-way, coaxial mid-tweeter passive speaker with two 7" woofers, offering Cabasse's signature dynamic, highly realistic sound.



DR. FEICKERT
Volare
w/ Kuzma Stogi 9"
\$6,395

An Upscale employee favorite! Neutral and dynamic with huge bass retrieval capabilities. Dead quiet, and comes with a legendary tonearm. We offer free expert setup!



CABASSE
The Pearl Akoya
Active Loudspeaker
\$1,899 (each)

A connected tri-coaxial speaker that looks good in any room. Add a second to create a knock-your-socks-off high-fidelity stereo system without the rack and unsightly cables!



JBL
SA750
Streaming Integrated Amplifier
\$3,000

1970 on the outside, 2022 on the inside! This 120 W class-G high-res music player has DIRAC room correction and is Roon Ready. With an MM/MC phono stage.



SPL
Phonitor xe
Headphone Amplifier
\$2,199

A top-tier solid-state head amp, with a reference neutral tuning that is liquid smooth and open sounding. Combine pro-audio build quality and features with hifi sound!



FOCAL
Clear Mg
Headphones
\$1,499

Made in France! These open-backs with magnesium dome drivers deliver a dynamic sound that's neutral but airy and detailed. Built with aluminum, leather, and microfiber.



SOUNDSMITH
Otello ES
Moving Iron Cartridge
\$399

An affordable pathway into the world of high-performance moving iron, offering speed and dynamic range like no other. Warm and rich, and completely rebuildable.



Free Expert Setup

Just check a box and have a leading analog expert set up and test your turntable! We will install and align the cartridge, set up and align the tonearm, test and adjust speed, top up bearing oil, and more. Our experts use high-tech tools, but always do final testing by ear. All settings are documented and labeled to make it easy to unpack your table and get you rocking.

SCAN
TO WATCH OUR PROCESS!

<https://bit.ly/premount>



FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

REL 212 SX

\$4,999
rel.net

A few of us have used the REL 212 SE subs to excellent effect. This fairly massive subwoofer (and of course, we think you need a pair) features a pair of 12" woofers on the front panel, with a 12" passive driver on the rear and bottom panels to deliver the goods.

Though the new SX might look similar to the naked eye, REL never changes things merely for the sake of change.

This is a completely new movie.

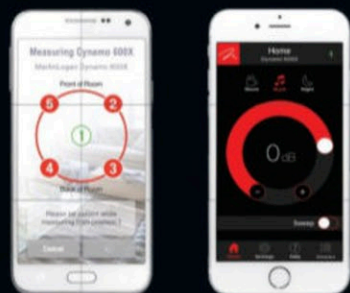




Elegant. With a side of Muscle.

MartinLogan's latest generation of Dynamo™ subwoofers. Five models engineered to deliver an intensely tactile bass experience. They feature new technology, bold construction, and the power to reveal the *Truth in Sound*: fast response, accurate detail and realistic impact. New smartphone App control, and ARC Room Correction, give you the ultimate control, and optimal bass in any listening space. For music or cinema, Dynamo brings the performance home. Visit martinlogan.com for more information, and to find an authorized dealer near you.

- Five sizes
- NEW! App control via smartphone
- Anthem Room Correction (ARC®) for PC, iOS and Android
- Flexible front-firing or down-firing design
- Optional wireless system



GET IT ON
Google Play

Download on the
App Store



FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

HiFi Rose RA 180 Integrated Amplifier

\$6,995
mofidistribution.com

There's so much innovation inside this 400 watt per channel integrated, it's a revolutionary product to be sure.

It's just as exciting inside as outside, sporting a look that's part sci-fi classic, part luxury timepiece, and part retro.

With an onboard MM/MC phonostage, this one begs to be combined with one of the Rose streamers, and a great pair of speakers.



Tone Imports

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EMT
J.C. VERDIER
LEBEN HI-FI
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MURASAKINO
RIVIERA LABS
SENTEC
SHINDO LABORATORY
SPEC CORPORATION
SUGDEN AUDIO
TELLURIUM Q
TONAPPARATE

TONEIMPORTS.COM



FUTURE

TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...



Top Shelf...

Price -length/termination dep.
audience-av.com

The latest Top Shelf range of Audience cables are show an equal level of care in their build quality, as the sonic benefits they deliver.

We'll have a full review very soon.

Everyone is an Audiophile



I/50
integrated

www.audioresearch.com

FUTURE

TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...

Add a Second Arm With Ease...

\$4,400
sierrasound.net/viv

The ViV Lab Rigid Float tonearm is just what the doctor ordered for those of you that love your present table, but would love to add another tonearm and cartridge to the mix.

These arms are available in 7, 9, and 13-inch lengths, with a choice of aluminum or carbon fiber wands.

They also feature a special head shell, designed to provide additional rigidity to the cartridge/arm interface than traditional designs.

Spoiler alert: #toneaudioapproved



QUTEST SYSTEM

DESKTOP AUDIO
REDEFINED



The Qutest range distils more than 30 years of award-winning British design, engineering and craftsmanship into a compact home audio system for the modern age.

FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

Mytek Audio Liberty THX™ HPA

\$1,495
mytekaudio.com

The Mytek DAC/Headphone amps have always been a favorite around here. Compact, high performance, and four analog inputs make this one a great two-channel preamp too! Review to follow very soon.



A New Classic.

The new Mini, A612, and A614 speakers from Heretic will take you back to a friendlier day.

Modern re-imagining of a classic design takes these compact monitors to a place that will make you smile.

Read the full story here.

www.thehereticspeaker.com



FUTURE

TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...

Audio Research LS28SE Preamplifier

\$10,000
audioresearch.com

Audio Research is on a path of engineering excellence that now spans more than half a century. These handmade components always deliver mega resolution without being, harsh, strident, or offensive. Yet in the same way, they do not have many of the euphonic traits one might associate with vacuum tubes.

Just as a few of the world's most astute solid-state designers are able to deliver components that feel neither tube nor solid-state, merely letting the music come through, ARC has done the same thing with tubes.

Always building on the knowledge of previous Reference models, the current LS28SE sounds a lot like REF components past. A true triumph.





FATHOM® v2

f110v2 IN-ROOM POWERED SUBWOOFER

“Replacing the excellent low end of the (main speakers) with the tautly controlled f110v2 more completely disambiguated the sound of the guitar’s lowest strings from that of the wood, without diminishing the warmth and weight of either.”

– Kal Robinson, [Stereophile](#)

“Every Impact was realistic, with a visceral quality that I felt in my chest.”

– David Vaughn, [Sound & Vision](#)

“The JL f110v2 is a mighty-mite of a sub, conceding little to its larger brothers.”

– Kal Robinson, [Stereophile](#)

“But do they ROCK?
The answer to that question is YES!”

– Jeff Dorgay, [TONEAudio](#)



JL AUDIO® | How we play.®

© 2020 JL AUDIO, Inc. For more information on our complete line of subwoofers, please visit your local authorized dealer or www.jlaudio.com.
Authorized JL Audio Dealers do not sell via the Internet. Subwoofers pictured with grilles removed.

FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

dCS Vivaldi Master Clock

\$19,500

dcsaudio.com.

dCS has always taken a modular approach to their digital playback systems, allowing you to grow as budget permits.

Every time we’ve added one of their digital master clocks to our reference player, it takes the music playback to another level of resolution and realism. The Vivaldi clock is no different.

We will soon have a full report, along with upgrading our Vivaldi One to full Apex functionality.



Somehow the Beatles always seem to make it into our musical discussions, but how about the “pre-fab four,” i.e. The Monkees?

As a band that grew into their shoes (and instruments) these four guys had some top talent to collaborate with. Just like the Beatles, these songs still bring a lot of joy.



The Monkees - (Theme From) The Monkees
Last Train to Clarksville

More of the Monkees - She
Mary, Mary
EXTRA CREDIT: RUN-DMC version
I'm a Believer
(I'm Not Your) Steppin' Stone

Pices, Aquarius, Capricorn & Jones Ltd. - Words
Pleasant Valley Sunday

The Birds, The Bees and The Monkees - Valleri
Daydream Believer

Head - Porpoise Song

VINNIE § ROSSI



300B, OR NOT TO BE...

Brama Integrated Amplifier's lineage is Vinnie Rossi's realization of the audiophile dream — having it both ways, each at the highest possible level of performance:

Whether you are seeking the tonally rich and holographic presentation of 300B directly-heated triodes, or the absolute purity of solid-state, the Brama lineage is the only one in the world that lets you enjoy both sonic presentations with the press of a button.

With 350 Watts RMS of power per channel into 4-ohms (2-ohm stable), Brama Integrated Amplifier's high-current, class AB lateral MOSFET output stage drives the most demanding loudspeakers with absolute conviction.

For a demonstration, visit our state of the art showroom. Brama Integrated, Preamp and Power Amp are on display.

*"No reason to mince words: this is the best
headphone amplifier I have ever used..."*

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News

*"It's rare that you come
across something that
is so totally different.
It's a beautiful design,
flush with fun options
that make it an
absolute joy to play
with, and it sounds
absolutely fantastic to
boot!"*

Dave Hanson,
EnjoyTheMusic.com



*"...the Absolute is probably the
most flexible headphone amplifier
I've ever encountered..."*

Grover Neville, InnerFidelity

*"Fit and finish is impeccable,
as I have come to expect
from Manley..."*

Al Chieng, Positive Feedback

"An absolute joy to use."

Steven Stone, HiFi+

*"It does what an audiophile amplifier is
supposed to do...to say it is musical is to
barely scratch the surface."*

Gary Alan Barker, Headphone.guru

MANLEY
LABORATORIES, INC.

absolute
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER



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Handcrafted in Chino, California

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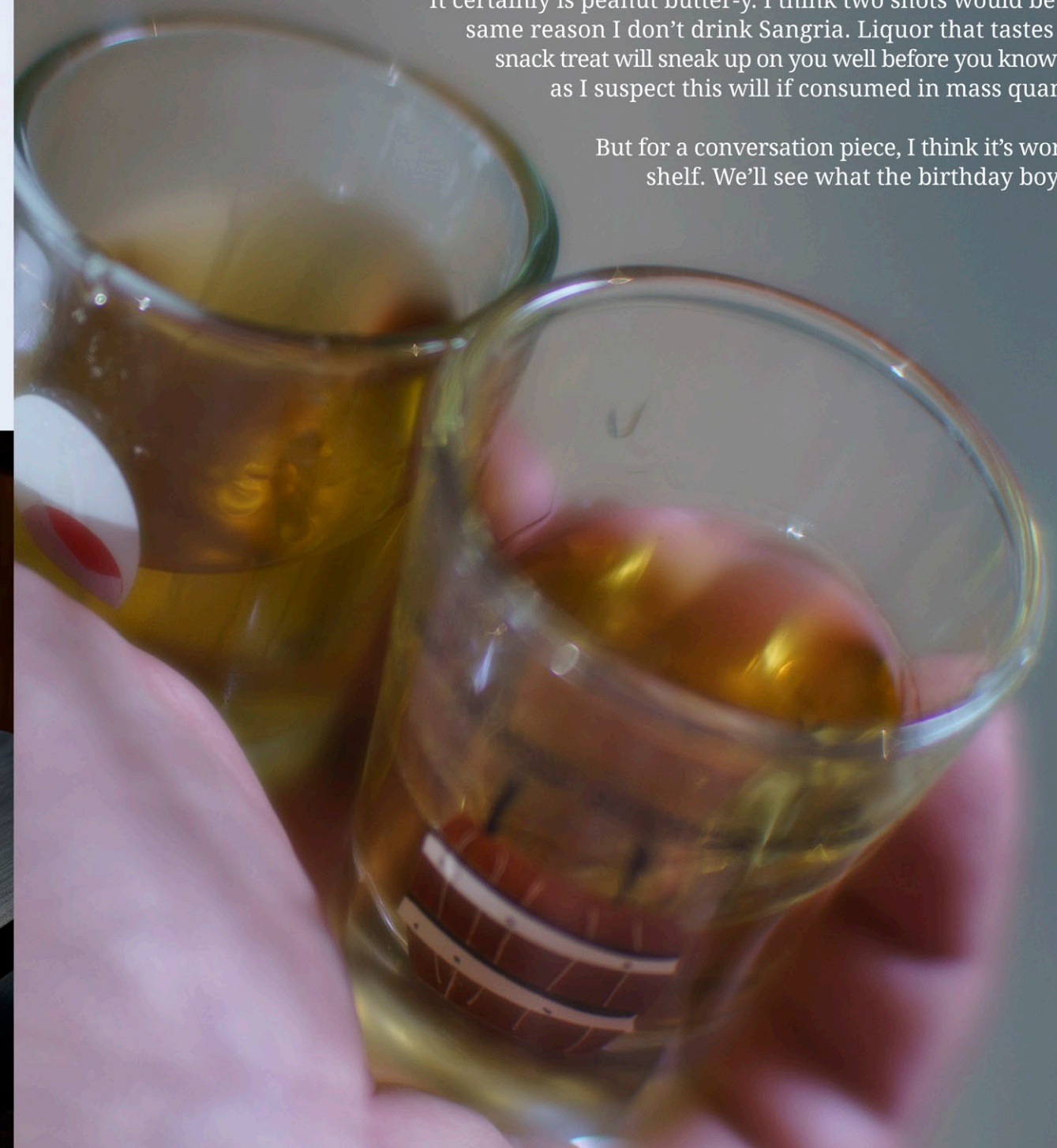
Sponsored by Cardas Audio

Legal Stuff: While we all enjoy consuming adult
beverages, (if you're of legal age, of course) TONE
and Cardas Audio ask you to be responsible...

Time for the shotglasses. My lovely wife, who's not much of a whiskey (or whisky) drinker despite her Irish heritage took a sip and begrudgingly said it was "ok." Headed back across the street, the birthday boy was already in the shower, but his lovely wife took a sip and was pleasantly surprised. "You know I don't like whiskey, but this is good – I'd drink this."

It certainly is peanut butter-y. I think two shots would be my limit, for the same reason I don't drink Sangria. Liquor that tastes this much like a snack treat will sneak up on you well before you know what's happened, as I suspect this will if consumed in mass quantities.

But for a conversation piece, I think it's worth having on the shelf. We'll see what the birthday boy says tonight.



TONE 112.066

Swill

Sponsored by Cardas Audio

TEXT and photos by Jeff Dorgay



If you've ever bought an album because you thought the cover art was cool, knowing nothing about the music, you know where I'm going here. In the liquor store, picking up a present for a friend, the pyramid of this whiskey was staring me down. Being smack in the middle of Dr. Daniel Levitin's *The Organized Mind*, how could I resist a bottle of whiskey, peanut butter whiskey no less, called Skatter Brain?

Fun as Reeses' Peanut Butter Cups are, we all know that some great tastes don't taste great together. Finally braking through Pam's firewall of text messages, she said it "sounded like fun." That was all I needed to grab a bottle on the way out. Of course the snobby checkout person looked at me like Squidward when I handed him a bottle of Skatter Brain with my bottle of Macallans.

Feeling like the guy in the record store in that famous scene from *High Fidelity*, the more fun checker from an aisle over quipped, "that stuff is awesome!" Validation, it's what we want, right?

Heading across the street to hand Bob said bottle of Macallans before the birthday party guests arrived (one always doesn't want to share the good stuff with random party guests) I sheepishly asked if he'd ever tried peanut butter whiskey.

"I was just looking at this in the store yesterday, but chickened out at the last minute. You know how those checkout people are." Ha. He perked up when I mentioned I took the plunge, and we all had a good laugh.

TONE 112.065

Paradigm[®]
Founder
S E R I E S

When Art Embraces Science, Anything is Possible

Founder is no ordinary loudspeaker. We've treated every part, large and small, as if it were the most crucial piece of the whole. Every component has been thoroughly researched, designed, engineered, and tested. Not only are the drivers completely new, so is their mounting hardware, the cabinet's internal structure and shape, and even the feet. By leaving no element unaddressed, we've created something that is much greater than the sum of its parts.



Shown in Paradigm's
exclusive **Midnight
Cherry Finish.**



**Designed, engineered, and fully
Crafted in Canada,** by people
who love great audio (*just like you*).



Shown: Founder 120H

paradigm.com/findmydealer

MINE
it should be YOURS

Welcome to MINE:

We're not just crazy about music and hi-fi here at TONE. While we can put many labels on our ethos, claiming to be music lovers, audiophiles, or perhaps even qualityphiles, that doesn't even cover it. Having met so many of our readers from all over the globe, our readers are playful and inquisitive to say the least.

You've told us you like automobiles, motorcycles, fine art, bicycles, toys, cameras...Well, you get the picture. Lumping this all under a banner labeled "Style" seems too limiting. Let's face it, we're all a little selfish when it comes to our stuff.

Let's call it what it is - MINE! We'll be sharing more of our favorites as we go.



Low Light Adventure...

\$229.00
7artisans.store

Leica owner or not, you might have always been intrigued by the incredible low-light performance of their f0.95 Noctilux lens.

If you're a photography enthusiast, you also know these run about fifteen THOUSAND dollars these days.

7Artisans has developed a 50mm/f0.95 lens for most APS-C cameras that is quite stunning and at \$229, an incredibly fun wrench to have in your photo toolbox.

TONE112.067

THE COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE: LASTING VALUE

Before you buy a new audio component, consider why some people would rather own a used McIntosh than a new anything else.



Made in the USA

"The best source I know 'for all things McIntosh' is Audio Classics in Vestal, New York. They do a lot of restoration work on McIntosh products and are an authorized McIntosh dealer and service center."

Jim Hannon, VP/Group Publisher & Senior Writer, *The Absolute Sound*

Timeless design. Legendary construction.
Sound investment.

WWW.AUDIOCLASSICS.COM
AUDIO • HOME THEATER • STEREO

3501 Vestal Road • Vestal, New York 13850 Call 607-766-3501 or 800-321-2834
Hours: Monday-Friday 8-5:30 EST - Other Hours by Appointment

MINE
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Show your enthusiasm for the Marque...

\$2195.00
tagheuer.com

Much like the debate between digital and analog audio, many analog watch owners are NOT fond of digital timepieces. Sure, a lot of people sport the nearly ubiquitous Apple watch as an egalitarian, yet hip and techie middle finger to the timepiece cognoscenti, but smartwatches are here to stay.

That major watchmaker TAG Heuer has truly embraced this trend speaks volumes. Chances are you missed out on the limited (to 2500 pieces) Super Mario Version - they sold out in less than a day. The standard issue Connected Calibre E4 is still available, in 42 or 45mm bezel size.

There are numerous digital watch faces available, but if you happen to be a Porscheophile, this one's fun.



TONE112 068

Start your journey by scanning the QR code or contact your T+A concierge at:
concierge@ta-hifi.com



T+A
Engineering Emotion

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Keep your pups amused...

\$149.00
amazon.com

The Pet Safe automatic ball launcher is just the thing for dogs that need a lot of exercise. Much fun as it is to play fetch, there are days when one tires of tennis balls encrusted with dog slime.

In no time at all, your dog will get the hang of this little device that's a lot like the tennis ball launchers they use for tennis lessons. Fido grabs the balls, puts them back in the top hopper, and it keeps going till it runs out of charge.

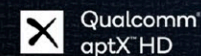
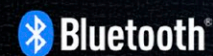
Ask me how I know...arf arf!

TONE112.069

We Are
Young.

We Are
Fun.

We Are
 **KIN Play**



TOTEM 

Discover yours

totemacoustic.com

Meet the wicked sounding Totem KIN Play all-in-one music system. Stream tunes from your phone, kick it old school with a turntable, connect your gaming console and a whole lot more!

MINE
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Get a unique view of
your city...

\$92 and up (size dependant)
cityframes.de

These exquisitely rendered three
dimensional maps of the world's
major cities are a fantastic way to
celebrate your travels, or perhaps
plan future excursions.

Available in a wide range of sizes,
they offer unique decorating
options.

Boulder

866 Integrated



200 Watts Per Channel

Roon Endpoint

3 Analog Inputs

Digital Inputs and
Streaming Capabilities

App Control

Designed & Built In
U.S.A.

Renowned and Awarded
Throughout the World



"This integrated amplifier
DAC/streamer is a triumph
of audio design and
engineering."
-Greg Petan
(Positive Feedback)

"When it comes to sound
quality, the main reason we
are all into this wonderful
hobby, the 866 Integrated is
fantastic."
-The Computer Audiophile

"This is an amplifier you
will keep... and enjoy!...
for the rest of your life."
-What Hi-Fi

MINE
it should be YOURS

We love custom...

\$1,295 and up
highaltitudeengineer.com

We've known Al Moccia - High Altitude Engineer's principal for years, and he's always built fabulous things from wood. As a fellow audiophile, the discussion came up a while back about his starting a line of custom audio racks and stands for components that aren't always quite the "standard" form factor.

PrimaLuna and Nagra came up immediately, with others out there that are usually too large or too small for a standard audio rack.

Finish and construction are first rate, as you can see here. This rack is a standard finish with wheels instead of spikes (to make things slightly more mobile in the TONE studio.

Need a rack? Give al a call and tell him we sent you. You'll be glad you did.

PS: Standard sized components are ok too!



SCULPTURE A



LE PHONO SE

Working strictly as a class A single ended device with no feedback, our phono stage uses only solid state components (no op-amps) with the shortest signal path circuit possible.



Tailor built for your cartridge with carefully selected and matched high end components, it works with any MC cartridge from 0.1mV (74dB of gain) up to 2.5mV.

Le Phono SE, a solid-state design without the usual issues of tube electronics.

info@
anamightysound.com

A.4 Silver



A.3



A.4 Copper



made by Ana Mighty Sound

A.3 & A.4 SCULPTURE A PHONO CARTRIDGES

Already awarded by French press with a « Remarquable » award, the A.3 and A.4 phono cartridges display a minimum tracking of 90 micron @300Hz lateral that will allow you to get the full definition of your records. For this we have developed a specific damper and use only boron cantilevers with dedicated geometry diamond tips.

With outputs from 0.1mV to 0.3mV with either silver or copper coils and impedances between 3 to 40 ohms.

It is the perfect companion of our Le Phono Single Ended phono stage and others.

With a compliance of 12 @100hz and three bodies, mixing impregnated wood with pure brass, copper, silver or gold, we are able to fine tune the weight and fine tune the sound of your cartridge to match perfectly the mechanics of your tonearm.

The A.3 is a fixed characteristic design, the A.4 is a tailor made cartridge up to your requests.



retip

Our insights on cartridge "repairs"

What if each cartridge was restored as unique artefact ? We do not believe that glueing a cantilever and diamond tip is enough. Aging has an effect on your cartridge as well as usage wear, dust, hygrometry and UV.

Cartridge service : your cartridge does not sound as good as you remember ? The damper might have been tampered with, the azimuth of your diamond tip is starting to be off or maybe the piano wire is getting loose ?

We can check it out and get back the original parameters without altering the parts of your cartridge.

Fine-repair : we are able to completely rebuild Neumann DST (or Lumière), Clément cartridges and most MC cartridges available. Open coils ? Stiff damper ? Broken cantilever ? We know how to deal with these issues and will do our best to get your cartridge as close to its original status, even though we can certainly alter your cartridge up to your requests.

Ana
MIGHTY SOUND



MINE
YOURS

it should be



Roadie Style

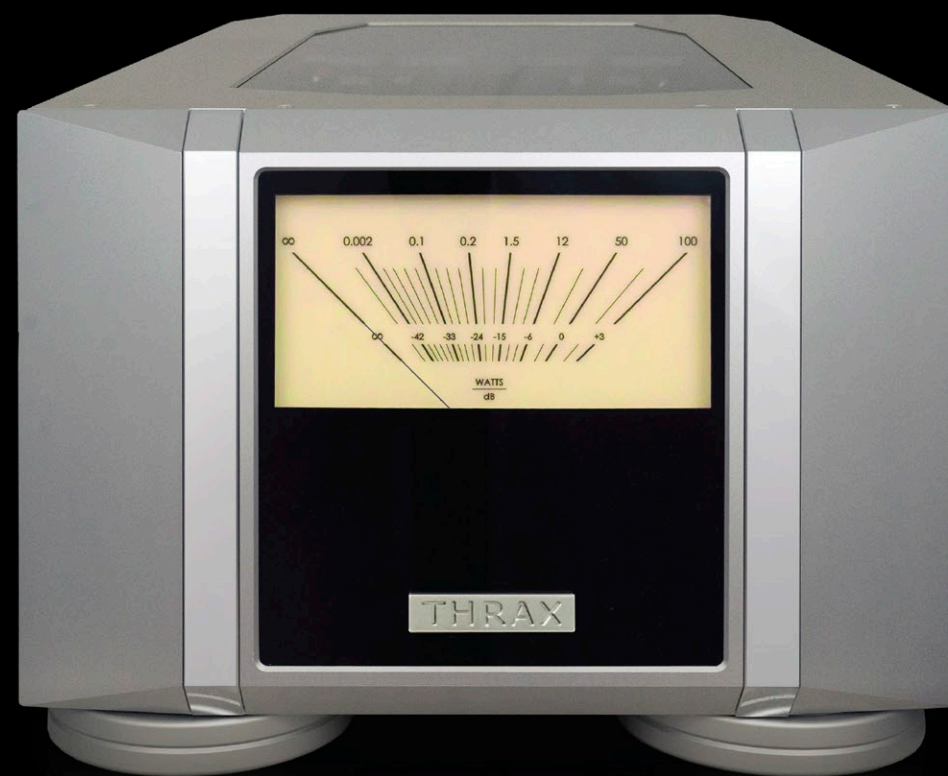
\$189
amazon.com

Just in case the beauty of natural wood isn't really your thing, these Sampson racks for pro gear are really versatile, and if you happen to have some old-school, rack mount gear, all the better.

Shelves to hold your contemporary gear are also available.





A LEGEND REBORN!
"I AM SPARTACUS!"



Spartacus 300
Pure 300B Power Amplifier



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audiolimits.com

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stellarhomeaudio.com

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unitedhomeaudio.com

Audio Den
Bailey, CO
audioden.net

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YOURS



Travel in Style...

The Jordan Bespoke Motorsport Heritage Bag
€1,200
<https://shop.classicdriver.com>

You could grab a Louis Vuitton bag (or any other favorite duffle) but these Jordan Bespoke bags pay homage to racing history in a spectacular way.

Completely hand made in Italy with the finest materials, any one of these will be a welcome addition to your collection. And if you're flying, carry this one on!

TONE112.073

W WHARFEDALE

The reviews are in.



EV04



ELYSIAN



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North American Distributor
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Move Past Mini...

The Apple Mac Studio
Starting at \$1999
apple.com

If the Mac Mini has always seemed like a great fit, but always needed a bit more capacity - this is the Mac you want.

Though many claim the desktop to be dead, add one of Apple's fantastic large monitors, and this makes for an incredibly capable, yet compact workstation.

Want.

EVERY COMPONENT OF THIS
**AUDIOPHILE-WORTHY HIGH-FIDELITY
STEREO SOUND SYSTEM**
IS ON DISPLAY IN THIS PHOTO



THE PEARL
\$3499 EACH

MAXIMUM SOUND LEVEL
118 DB MONO, 124 DB STEREO

BANDWIDTH
14 – 27,000 HZ

DESIGN
3 DRIVERS, 3 AMPS

POWER
1600 W RMS / 3200 W PEAK

DIMENSIONS / WEIGHT
12.6" DIAMETER / 40 LBS EACH



THE PEARL AKOYA
(PICTURED) \$1899 EACH

MAXIMUM SOUND LEVEL
115 DB MONO, 121 DB STEREO

BANDWIDTH
30 – 27,000 HZ

DESIGN
3 DRIVERS, 3 AMPS

POWER
1050 W RMS / 2100 W PEAK

DIMENSIONS / WEIGHT
8.7" DIAMETER / 18 LBS EACH



AUTOMATIC ROOM CORRECTION. ETHERNET/WIFI – BLUETOOTH – SPDIF – OPTICAL – RCA ANALOG – USB FOR MUSIC ON EXTERNAL HARD DRIVES
CONNECT YOUR FAVORITE STREAMING SERVICE VIA THE **CABASSE STREAMCONTROL APP**

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In Case The Hole is Too Small...

\$49.99
elusivedisc.com

For the times that you've had a record with a center hole that's too snug, Clearaudio has an extremely sharp hand drill that will solve this problem.

Supposedly the exact size of a record spindle, the buzz on the net' is that this thing works like a charm.

We're still too scared to try it. Maybe not on your Beatle's Butcher pressing for the first go...

TONE112.075



European Superstars
turning heads, delighting hearts, igniting passion

Distributor in North America:
matterhornaudio.com
+1 617-494-1400
info@matterhornaudio.com



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Pump it up...

\$19.95 (w/o battery)
homedepot.com

We know there are a lot of auto, motorcycle, and bicycle enthusiasts among you, so we love gadgets that make your life easier.

The portable Ryobi air pump works well, doesn't make a ton of noise, and is lime green. Plus it uses the same 18 Volt batteries as the rest of their tool ensemble.

Should you need a couple of new batteries for your existing collection of Ryobi tools, Home Depot is giving these away with the purchase of two batteries for \$99.95.

TONE112.077



-HEAR THE TRUTH-

The speakers with the all granite enclosure. Visit an Acora Acoustics dealer soon to audition any of the Acora Acoustics loudspeakers and....

-HEAR THE TRUTH-



Like us on Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/acoraacoustics>

Find out more about the benefits of granite enclosures,
and the other advantages of Acora Acoustics
Visit <http://www.acoraacoustics.com>

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Keep Those Cassettes Ready...

\$10
preservationequipment.com

These archival boxes will keep your records and tapes, regardless of format, safe.

Not terribly spiffy, but not terribly expensive either. This English company has a wide range of containers to suit all of your archival needs.



TONE112.078

Some of us never quit....

Now available on 7 and 10-inch reels!

Reel to reel isn't the only revolution.

If you've always enjoyed making a mix tape, but are tired of the crazy prices for NOS cassettes, now there's an answer.

Try the new Capture C-60 cassettes, from Splicit.

It's a Type 1 tape, with plenty of range, to capture the nuance on your favorite LPs or CDs.

Hence the name.

www.splicit.com



But you can't have it...

One of the most collectible and controversial record covers has always been the Beatle's *Yesterday and Today* - Butcher Block version. Much has been documented over the years about the story behind this one, so no need to bore you re-hashing it now. A quick Google search will fill you in on the back story if you're new to the vinyl thing.

Quickly perusing Discogs shows some pretty beat versions of this for about \$2,000-\$3,000, with clean ones easily fetching five figures.

One of John Lennon's recently sold at auction for nearly \$250,000. That's love. Wish I would have bought the one on the shelf at Tracks in Wax in Phoenix back in 1990 for \$500.

Who knew?



aqua
acoustic quality



Dominio Digitale

TIMELESS

www.aquahifi.com
info@aquahifi.com

INHouse
The soundtrack
of the issue.

Al DiMeola -
Friday and Saturday Night...

As this issue is coming to a close,
we just have to give both of these
a back to back spin. Again.

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Dealers That Mean Business

We've had this section at the back of TONE for some time now, and actually before we got hit with COVID, and it was easier to just pop in your favorite hifi store for a cursory visit, I was planning on an extended road trip to seek out great audio salons. I'm sorry to say that quest has been on hold for a while.

A few years later, times have changed, the landscape has changed somewhat, but the best dealers have adapted and are still thriving. Innovate or perish, as the saying goes. Most have gone to appointments only, which hasn't been all that much of a stretch, because many hifi shops had adopted this model, or at least a semi-appointment model before the current situation. Of course, stricter anti-cooties protocols have been engaged, and for the most part, customers have stayed in the game.

We've swapped a few people out here, but most of the dealers we were featuring are still doing well – we are truly glad for this. As it becomes easier and easier to travel again, I'll be back on the road seeking out more great dealers and attending events.

In the issues to come, we're also going to be featuring commentary from these dealers, telling their stories on how they've adjusted, and what, if anything they've learned and changed.

As we move into the year 2022 (which still feels weird saying) I still firmly believe the support from a great hifi dealer is essential to help you wade through the ever increasing complexity of audio, whether it be two channel, theater, or something in-between.

To recap what I've said here before: Nearly every audio system that has failed to achieve the greatness expected of it can be traced back to poor component choice and setup. I've heard a lot of systems all over the world, and it always falls back to these two factors.

The top retailers need our support now more than ever.



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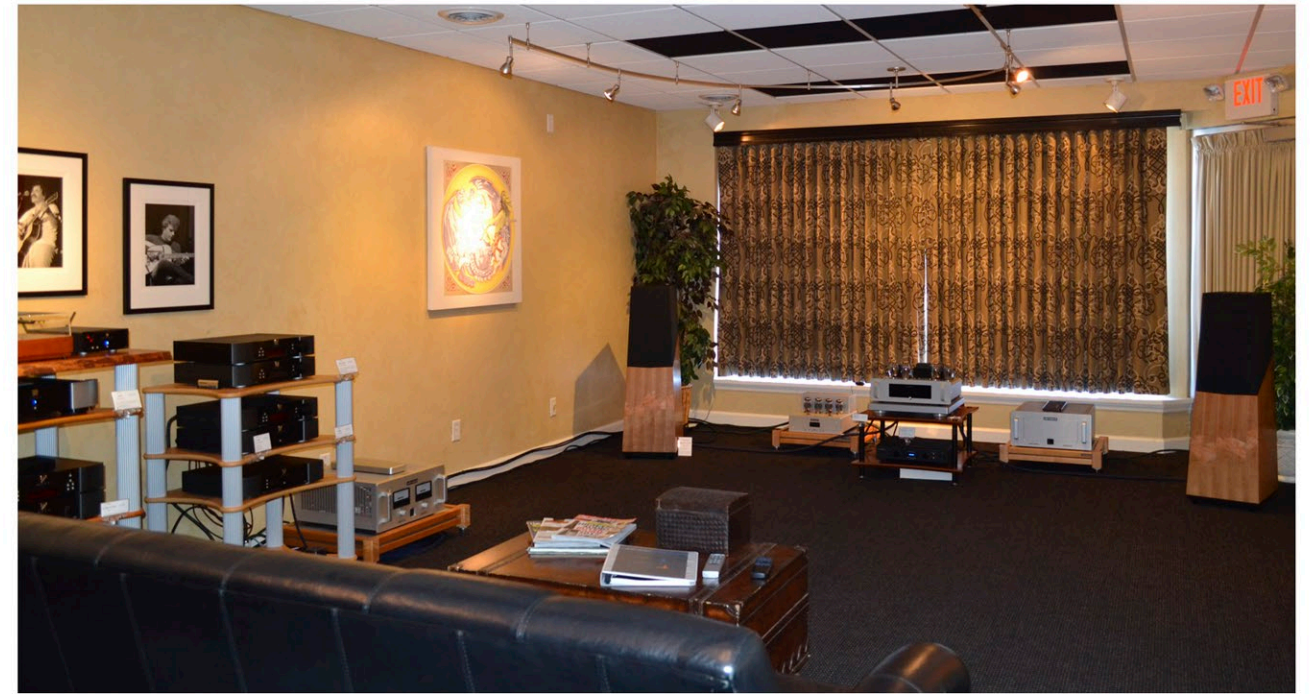
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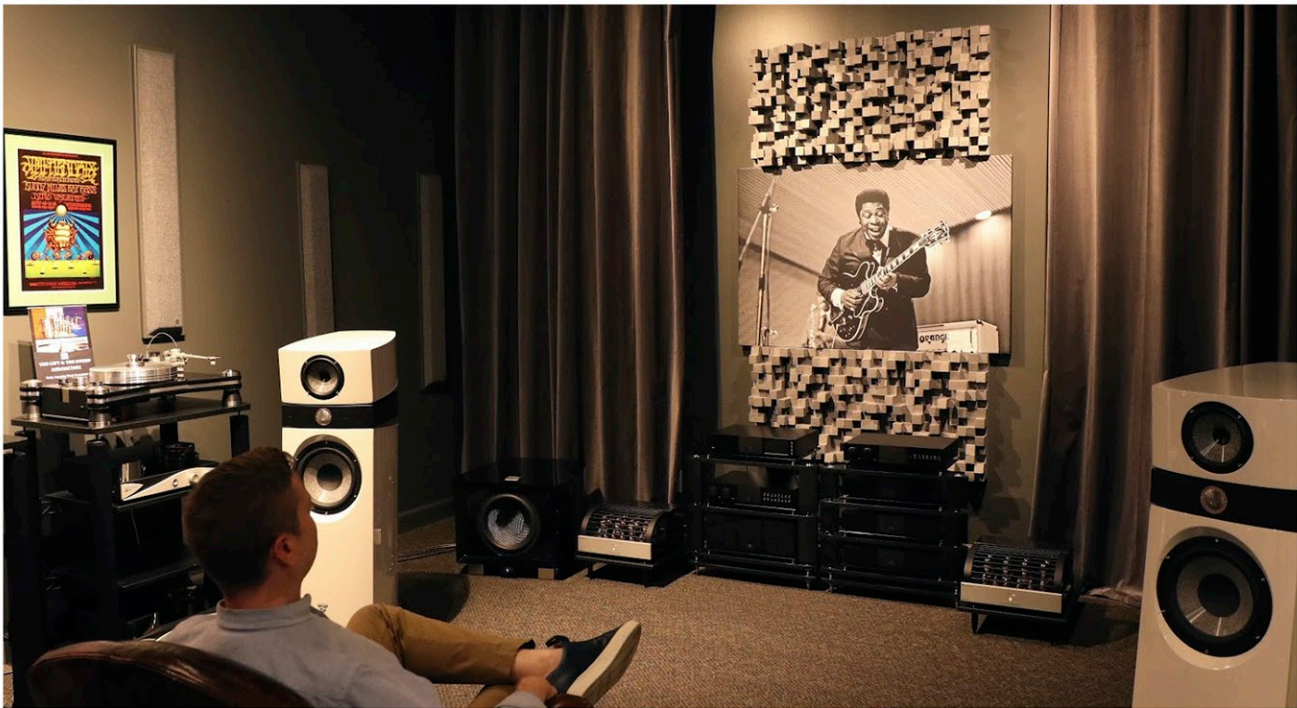
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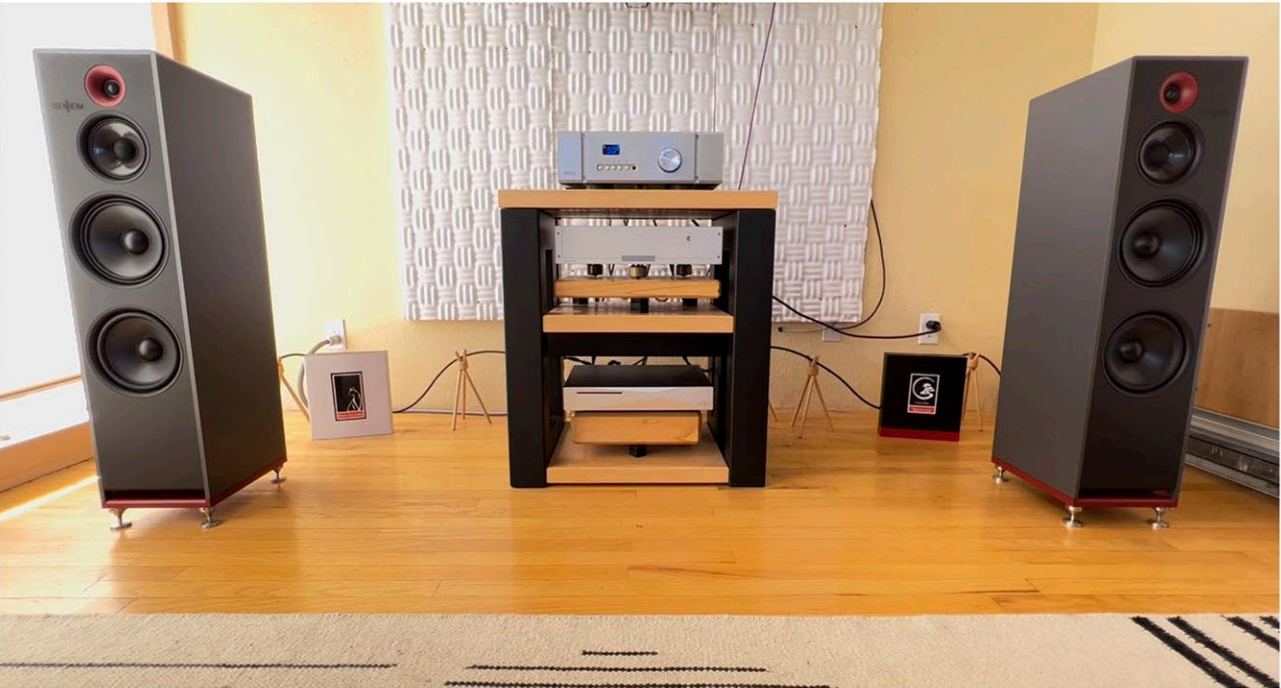
www.coincidentspeaker.com

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Sarasota, Florida - Suncoast Audio
www.suncoastaudio.com
7353 International Place, Unit 309
Sarasota, Florida 34240 941.932.0282



Santa Fe, New Mexico - Gestalt Audio
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Club Mix compilation expert, Scott Tetzlaff's theme for this playlist is "Jazz-ish."

The first track starts out sounding like it's going to go off the rails, but it sets "the tone." A lot of cuts here that are Jazz inspired, and reworks of classics you know.

Enjoy!



The Dining Rooms - Do Hipsters Like Sun Ra?

Guy Monk - Living the Truth

Llorca, Nicole Graham - Indigo Blues

El Michaels Affair- C.R.E.A.M.

Dzihan and Kamien - Stiff Jazz

Fieretag, James Alexander Bright - It's Alright

Koop - Summer Sun

Gare Du Nord - Beautiful Day

Ramsay Lewis - Do What You Wanna (Mr. Scruff's Soul Party Remix)

Dinah Washington - Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby? (Rae and Christian Remix)

Nina Simone, Sofi Tukker - Sinnerman (Sofi Tukker Remix)

Mel Torme - Comin' Home Baby

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— Angela Cardas Meredith, Cardas Audio

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- Kevin Hayes, VAC

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- Jeremy Bryan, MBL North America



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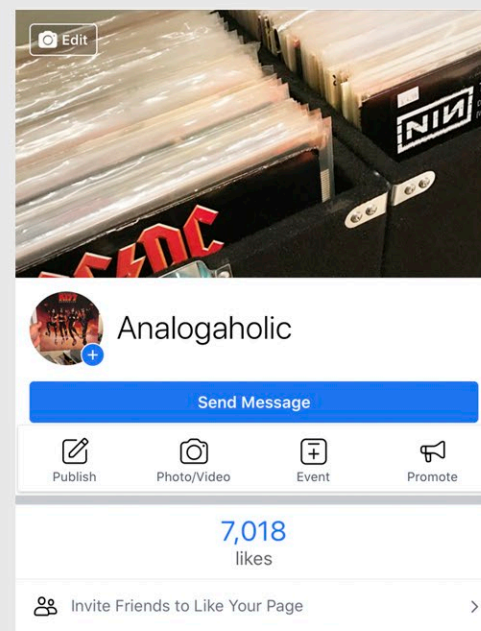
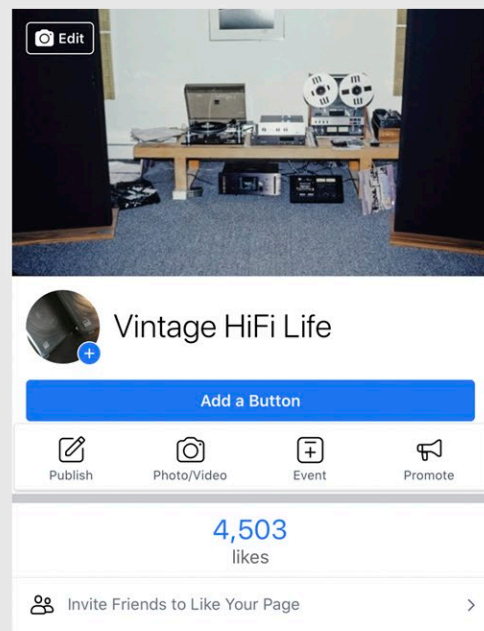
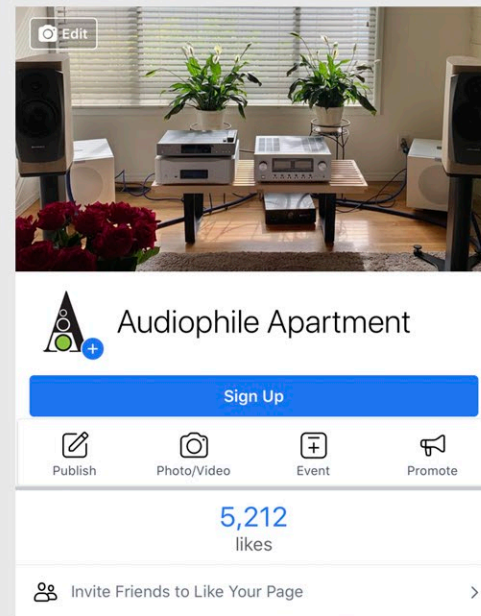
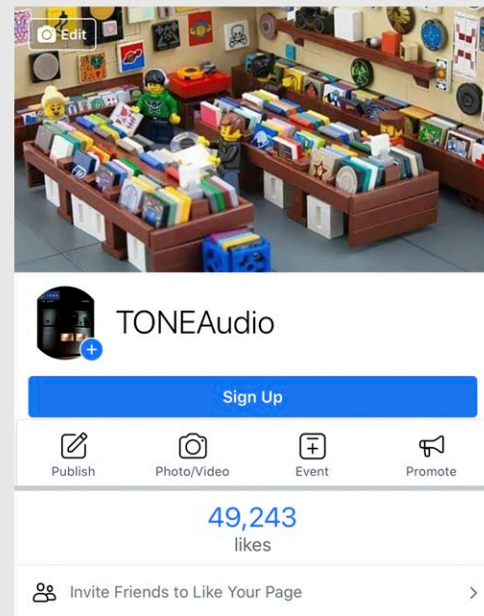
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Here they are with links. Just click on the page that interests you most. We look forward to hearing from you when you have a spare moment.



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Next issue, **113:**

Next issue...A little bit of this, a little bit of that.

Often, the issue is more of a concept album with a central theme - analog, digital, speakers and such.

But new gear is arriving all the time, so #113 will be dedicated to some of the miscellaneous things we have in store for you.

Stay tuned.

And as always, drop on by our Facebook page and let us know how you are...



TONE