

# Hifi Pig Magazine

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April 2014  
Issue #5

**FOCAL**  
THE SPIRIT OF SOUND

## Hifi Pig Visits Focal Headquarters

### REVIEWS

Brunoco Diva Digital Amp/DAC, Reference Fidelity Components Pluto II Interconnects, Onix A25 Integrated Amp, AudioValve Eclipse Valve Preamplifier, Skogrand Centaurus A Speaker Cables and Interconnects, SoulNote SA 710 Integrated Amplifier, Temple Audio Bantam Gold Integrated Amplifier

**INTERVIEW** Behind the Brands with  
Funjoe of Clones Audio

**PLUS** Editorial, Reader System, Dealer System,  
Album Reviews

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# I'll Have a P Please, Bob

**W**ow, what a month it has been for us at Hifi Pig Towers.... Spring is definitely in the air and we have been out and about again, snoofing to our heart's content! After last month's article, you may be forgiven for thinking I've come over all 'Sesame Street' with the letters of the alphabet....but this month really has made me think about the letter P.

So what is P for? Our visit Focal this month reinforced that P is for Passion and Pride.....and People.

The more people that I meet in this industry the more I find that are so passionate about their creations, it is really very refreshing.

It seems to be an industry that people get into because of a love of music, whether as a listener or as a musician that deep-seated passion for music is there at the core.

And people are justifiable proud of their work.

Take Gerard at Focal.

As you will read in Stuart's report from our visit, he is incredibly passionate about music and the Hifi industry and proud of what Focal produce. He took the time out, not only to show us the finer aspects of Lyon's restaurants, but to personally take us on a tour of the company's offices and factory in Saint Etienne.

Now, I really do like a factory tour, this probably stems from when I was a kid and my dad used to take us with him to the lace factory in Nottingham where he worked as a textile chemist....I always find it fascinating to see something being manufactured from beginning to end.....and then hearing/seeing the finished article.

It really helps you to get your head around what exactly is involved, for example, in producing a pair of loudspeakers.

With that pride in their craft and workmanship Focal are investing a lot, both into new technologies and developments but also in the people that work for them.

To brand their speakers 'Handmade in France' they have to have a team of people who are highly skilled and the best at what they do, and those people have to have time and effort invested in their training and they need to be happy in their job.

This investment doesn't end with the workforce through.

Focal have a big R&D department and they are constantly investing in new design and technology. This doesn't just happen by accident. Yes, Focal do make some very expensive loudspeakers...but without the very expensive speakers there wouldn't be the revenues to develop the new technologies, like the new Flax drivers, that allow them to bring high end qualities into much more affordable products. We heard the some of the new Aria loudspeakers and were very impressed, you could have told me they cost double what they do and I would still have thought they were an excellent buy.

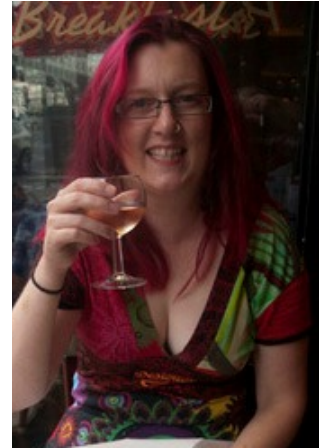
I know I'm using Focal as an example here, but this pride in the creation and manufacture of hifi is widespread in the industry.

How often are we now seeing on the product, on the packaging and the website of a company the legend 'Made in France', 'Made in Great Britain' or 'Made in the USA'?

It all goes back to one of those P words...PRIDE in what you make and how and where you make it.

Is this a backlash against the cheap products of a throwaway society? Or a realisation that a lot of people are prepared to pay a little more for quality items with a bit more finesse and history behind them?

Probably a bit of both....and that has to be a good thing, for the consumer, for the manufacturers and for the industry as a whole.





# Black Pearls

DIVE DEEP INTO YOUR SENSES





## Cranage Hall Audio Show - June 15th

Perhaps the most interesting development this month is Hifi Pig's media partnership with the Cranage Hall Audio Show that will take place 15<sup>th</sup> June at the wonderful venue of Cranage Hall in the beautiful Cheshire countryside.

It promises to be a really great day out and what's even better is that it's free entry – register online for your tickets.

The organisers have worked really hard to get some great brands represented at the show with Audiophile Base, Belles, Brodmann, Sherer Audio Engineering,

TAD, Oracle Audio, SSC, deciBelle, creative, Acoustic Energy, Puresound, Palmer, PAB, Soundcare, Acoustifeet, Vandamme, tonar, LDA, Clearaudio, MCRU, Mofi, Tellurium Q, Isotek, ifi, Supra Cables, M2Tech, Whychwood Audionics, Audio Note UK, Renaissance Amplification, Belden, Furutech, aurora, The Funk Firm, Stst and Tune Audio all confirmed so far.

Of course Hifi Pig will be flying over to report on proceedings and will bring you loads of pictures and coverage from the event...but it would be even better if you were there in person and could say hello!



## L'Ecoule de Vinyles Jazz

Now this was an interesting evening to say the least and we were so pleased that we were invited to attend as it was an event that really demonstrated to me the passion and the desire to spread the music that is out there in audiophile-land.

The evening was hosted by Alain Loguillard and Christian Harlé from the [Jazz Angle](#) society of Saint-Brieuc who introduced the audience to a host of jazz from 1954 to 1983.

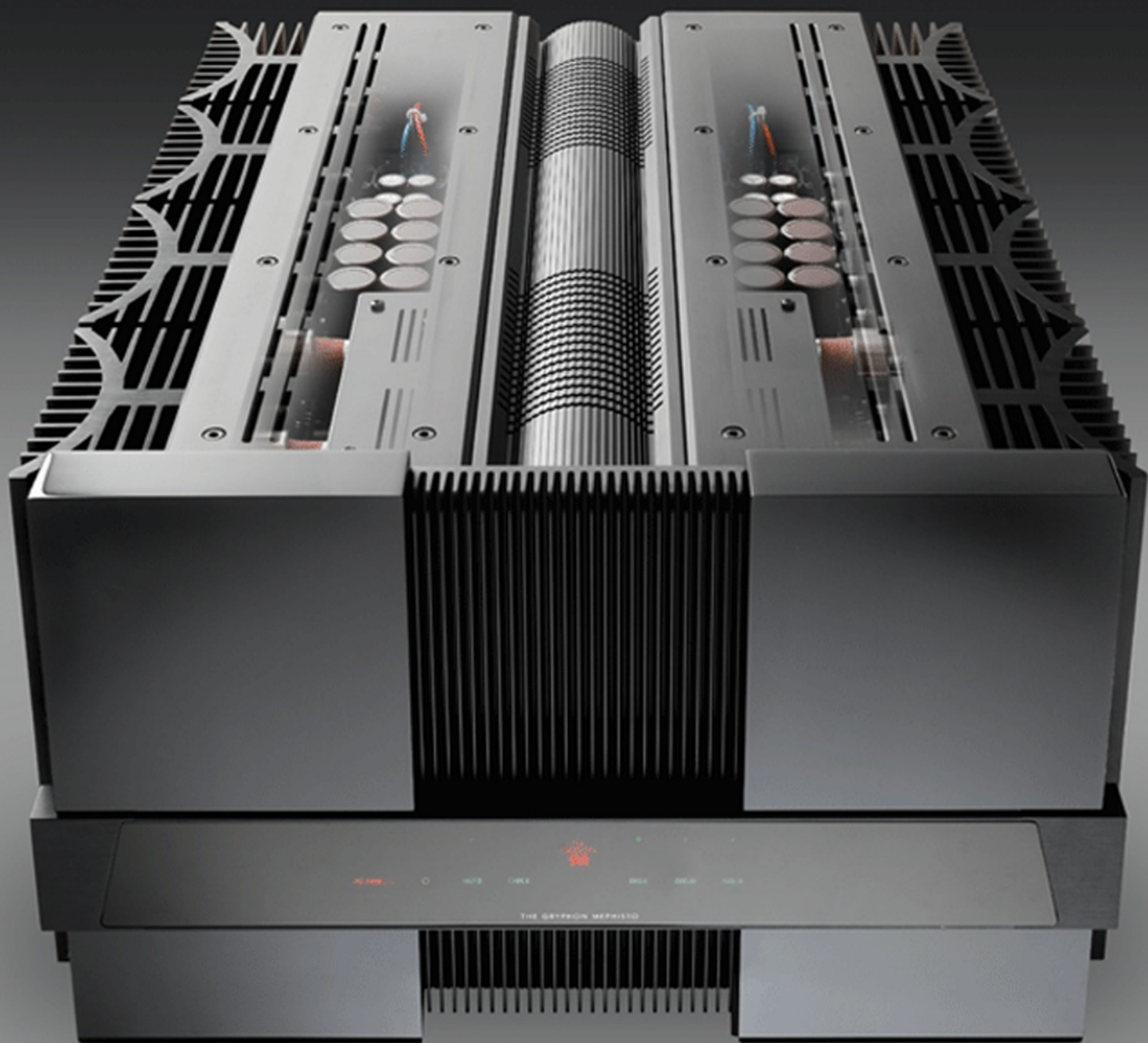
What was good to see was the number of people that turned out for this event at the [Conservatoire de Saint-Brieuc](#). The audience was a great mix of young and old with some clearly been very much into the music already whilst others were there to listen and be educated. Clearly the organisers weren't expecting the numbers that turned up and emergency chairs were sought.

Jazz Angle did a brilliant job of introducing each record offering up a little of the history of the performers and the background to the music being played.

Music ranged from the "challenging" to outrageously foot-tappy from artists such as Jay Jay Johnson,



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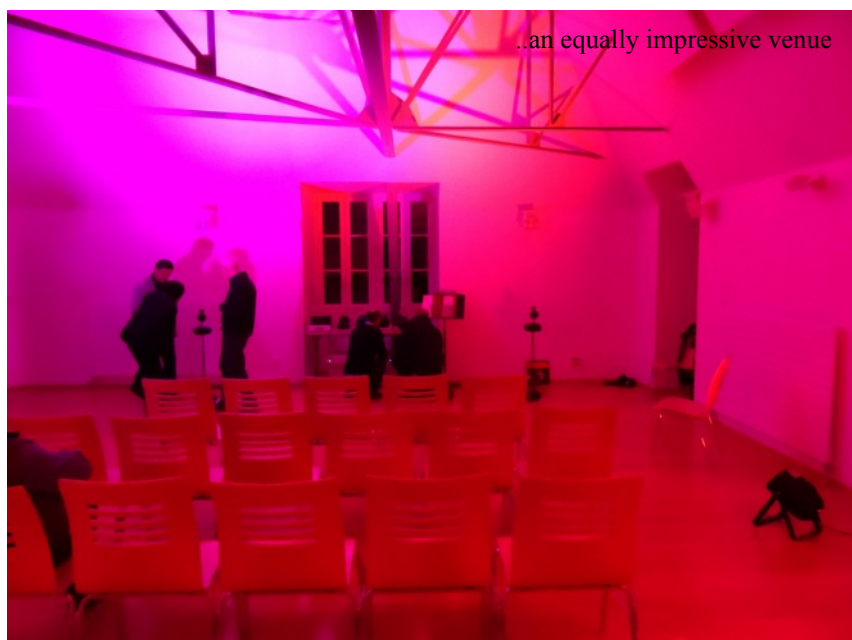


Clifford Brown, Bobby Jaspar, The Jimmy Giuffre 3, Art Farmer Quartet, Jen-Luc Ponty, Mal Waldron Quartet and others.

It's a good thing that people are out there that are so passionate about their love of music that they want to share it and Hifi Pig applauds those here (and elsewhere) that are willing to put time and effort into this type of event. In the UK there are the well known Classic Album Sundays and let's hope that these inspire other groups to come together and share the music.

The evening at Saint-Brieuc was an all vinyl affair with an excellent SwissSonor turntable and preamplifier being supplied by Edgar Morineau of Connemara Normandie. Cartridge for the evening was the equally excellent Ortofon SPU Gold Synergy. This was the first time I'd heard the SwissSonor kit outside of the confines of a show and it certainly managed to sound very nice indeed.

Amplification was supplied by 3D Labs and the speakers for the evening were the excellent Leedh E2 ([read the review](#)) supplied by their creator Gilles Milot.



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# Reader System

This month's reader system comes from Dave Rosam who explains in his own words how he came to have the system he has today.

Hello, I'm Dave Rosam. I listen to ugly music and don't have any vinyl.

I'm known as Uglymusic on the hi-fi forums, and I run Audio Chews ([www.audiochews.com](http://www.audiochews.com)), if you want to drop in and say hello..

The strange thing is, despite running a forum, I'm not much of a gear head. Buying music comes first. And what's this ugly music, you ask? It's a lot of free jazz, post-Ornette jazz, post-Coltrane jazz, the stuff that's not played by chaps in straw boaters and stripey waistcoats. A friend of mine once said 'Dave, you're not going to play any more of that Ugly Music, are you?'. The name stuck.

Incidentally, I don't much like the term Avant Garde Jazz. It's a term that suggests willfully disruptive or otherwise unmusical.

But I digress. This piece is supposed to be about boxes and cables.

Before I started this piece, I tried to remember what I've owned over the years. Frankly, I can't remember. Partly because I did my time as a freelance reviewer when so much gear went through my hands that it all became a blur, and partly because I'm not really a gear head. But I said that already.

Seriously, I think reviewing hi-fi showed me so much kit is 'so what?', or just so far from what I want from my system that I'm just not interested.

David's system in its entirety



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## Back in the years before Thatcher

Back in the mid-70s, my parents bought me a hi-fi. I know it had a Garrard SP25 (it was probably a Mk III), a Binatone amp and I can't remember what the speakers were.

I sold cameras and hi-fi as a Saturday job and swapped the speakers for Wharfedales (Dentons, I think). A pair of Videoton Minimaxes also found their way through sometime during that period.

And, by the time I went to university, there was a Pioneer PL12D, a Yamaha cassette deck and some Leak 2030 speakers and I've forgotten the amp. The Binatone was long gone.

## Live music

I guess the main thing about my university years was going to live music in Birmingham - reggae sound systems playing thunderous dub, ska gigs in the open air, free improv in pub back rooms, jazz at a hotel on the Hagley Road, Weather Report and James Brown (amongst others) at Birmingham Odeon, punk and other stuff at the student union.

My hi-fi didn't cut the mustard.

## I went digital

After graduation, working at my first jobs in London, a couple of friends bought the new fangled CD players. To be honest, I wasn't bowled over. The sound was thin, bright and brittle. So it was a few years before I bought a Philips CD player and was seduced by the rightness of digital.

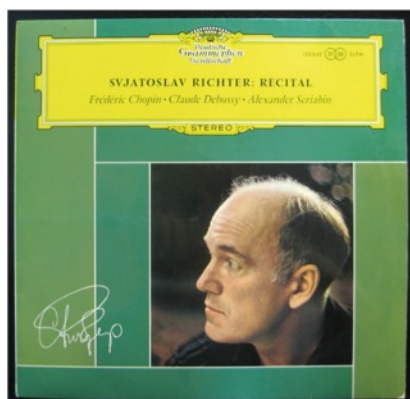
Around about that time, I acquired a pair of Tannoy DC2000 speakers, bought a pair of Albarray M408 II power amps and played around a lot with home-brew passive pre-amps. The Philips was shown the door and a Musical Fidelity DAC and Cambridge Audio Transport invited in. There was another CD player, I think, but it's lost in the fuzz of the mid-80s.

## The Dave Wiley years

Then the story gets complicated. I got asked to write for some Haymarket publications through a friend of a friend who edited one. He wanted someone who could write (I was, at the time, an advertising copywriter) but liked my attitude that the music came first. He gave me the pen-name Dave Wiley, who also happened to be the owner of a hi-fi shop. Oops!

Over the next few years (late 80s into early 90s), I was exposed to loads of kit. The Albarrays were replaced by a series of NVA amps - I've owned everything from the AP20 integrated to the top of the range TDSs with the Statement pre. In fact, I still have the AP20 and TDSs/pre. For a long time, I was convinced they were the very best amps in the world. Although they're still great, I've since found some electronics that do even more of what I want than the TDSs.

I had a pair of Impulse H6 horns, which I loved on the end of the powerful NVAs. But, perhaps the most formative discovery was a little pair of Royd Minstrels. They were fantastic, even if I ran the bass/mid cone up against the end-stops more than once. I used a pile of CD players, transports and





DACs. I remember being impressed by a Micromega DAC I had for some time.

## Priorities

I was discovering that my main priority in hi-fi is timing. Where so much kit plays in stiff 4/4 that's great for rock, or in stiff, precise time suited to classical, they killed jazz. I also discovered I'm a detail freak. I had manufacturers coming round to my flat and complaining that there was too much detail coming from my system. That's a viewpoint I see as utter cobblers. One last part of my reviewer-era system was a Michell Gyrodeck, that has just been given to a friend.

At the time, I was working in Soho and went to a lot of gigs at Ronnie Scotts. The sound was consistently the best I've heard in any venue. Getting to sit at a table near the stage was an unforgettable sonic experience. The visceral mixture of direct sound and fantastic PA that I can still hear in my head is what I aim for in my living room. I'm not a man for listening from the gods in the Royal Opera House, although I've done that too.

This timing thing, the human interaction of improvising musicians is something I find digital brings off better than most turntables. Notable exceptions are my mate Jim's Garrard 401 and Voyd turntables (he's a jazz nut whose sonic priorities are as close to mine as dammit, only he uses analogue, valve amps and horns to get to a similar end. Go figure!). Oh, and I've coveted some Townsend Rocks I've heard along the way.

## My current rig

If you've been on Audio Chews you will know that, like Stu, Hi-Fi Pig's esteemed Grand Fromage, I'm a relatively recent convert to Single Ended Class A tranny amps. My 12 watt per channel Green Goddess power amp is a one-off built for me by Colin Wonfor from literally bits and pieces he had in his loft.

Colin's SECA amps - he's been designing them for decades - present music like nothing else I've ever



heard. The experience is tangible, visceral and realistic. There's a big three-dimensional soundstage extending beyond the speakers and right into your lap if the recording's up to it. The bass is tuneful; I can hear how a double bass player is playing each note. Reeds are properly textural, and percussive events are utterly convincing.

I have to admit, though, that if you want the real full-on SECA experience, you'll need to get hold of a TQ Iridium 20 like Stu uses, but the Green Goddess does much of what the Iridium does, and it's really great to have a one-off, built by a friend.

The Green Goddess drives a pair of Royd RR3s, the top model in Joe Akroyd's swansong Revelation Series. They replaced the Minstrels a few years back as a secondhand purchase from one of the forums. I'd been a bit away from the hi-fi world and wasn't really aware of the RR3s' rarity and cult status. My friend Alan more or less bullied me into buying them. I'm glad he did. They are quite exceptional, to my ears. The best small speaker I've heard, and I've

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heard a lot. Definitely a Royd, with all the life that Joe believed in, but less raucous and somehow more grown up.

The RR3s aren't very efficient, and have a deserved reputation for needing a good, powerful amplifier to get the best out of them. The little Green Goddess drives them loud in the 27ft living room of my new house. That's one of the weird things about Class A watts. They somehow have more welly than normal watts. The Class A sound is weighty and chunky like you'd never expect, yet balanced with great subtlety too.

The pre-amp is TQ's little Listen Pre-amp, the first active pre-amp I've ever owned. It works great with the Green Goddess, and has a Class A headphone amp, which I have to admit I haven't used. Both Colin Wonfor and Joe Ackroyd have talked about minimising phase distortion, so perhaps it's not surprising the amps and speakers work so well together - oh, and the interconnects are TQ and the Green Goddess is biwired to the Royds using TQ Graphite and Ultra Black speaker cable, which contribute greatly to the sound I love.

## The digital source

The digital source is an old White MacBook running OS X Mountain Lion, with an SSD and a few tweaks to the OS to get rid of unwanted processes. It's dedicated to media playing, streaming audio and video around the house to the hi-fi, my home office system, a couple of Apple TV boxes and our iPads.

My preferred audio player is Audirvana Plus (the paid-for version), which I've used for a few years now. Its designer really knows what he's doing when it comes to making a great sound, and I understand the next version will not rely on iTunes for library functions.

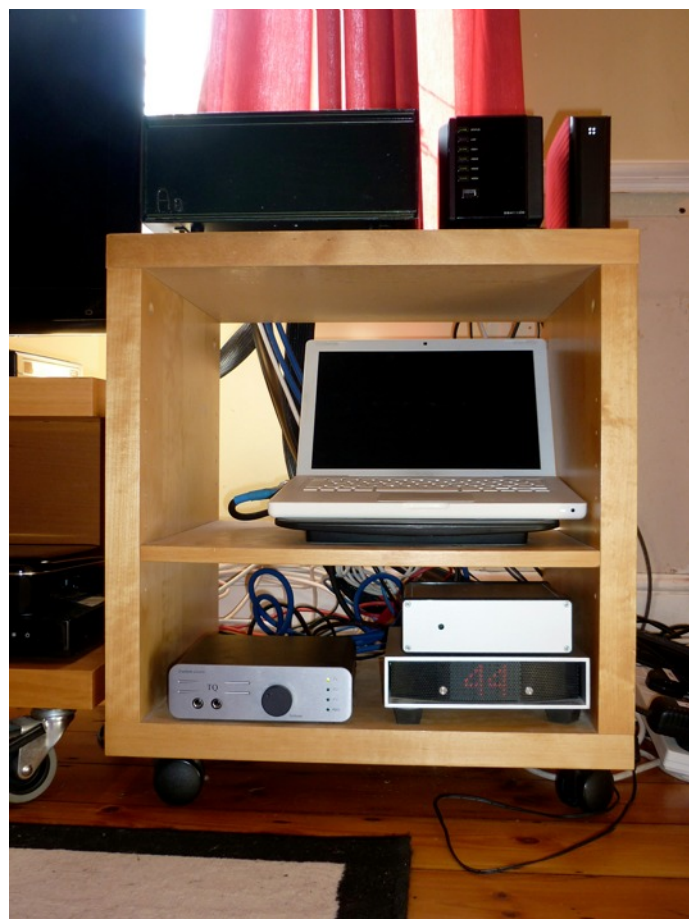
The DAC is an early M2Tech Young with an outboard PSU built for me by an Audio Chews member. For some time now, I've felt as if the MacBook and Young were possibly the weakest part

of the system, but every time I upgrade downstream it's only the faults in the recordings that are shown up. I'm genuinely surprised how good a front end it is.

## High Resolution is the way forward

As I write this, I'm listening to a fantastic ECM high-res (24-bit, 88.2kHz) download of Charles Lloyd's *Mirror* album. It's definitely the way to go if the recording and mastering are up to it. The album, along with over 3000 albums mainly ripped from CD and several hundred movies ripped from DVD, is on a Synology DS411slim NAS (Network Attached Storage) box containing four 1TB 2.5 inch drives - about 2.7TB of RAID configured storage.

The Synology is quiet enough to have in the listening room and is utterly reliable. I'll buy another Synology product when I run out of space. And, talking about future plans, I imagine I'll be looking for a more powerful SECA amp and a new Mac mini. But my plans are notorious for being derailed. I'll probably end up with a new pre-amp and a pair of headphones



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# Dealer System

When hi-fi pig asked us to build a system for this feature we looked at creating the most enjoyable system we could for less than £5000. Music in our opinion is there to be enjoyed so the components we put together must convey the groove and soul of the tunes being played. We are fans of a massive selection of musical genres, however, our default setting is rock - the dirtier and grungier the better! Having experienced numerous live concerts over many years we realise that a hi-fi system can't reproduce the massive bass of a live venue sound system or the full range of a live female vocalist.

However, if the system can reproduce the feel and nuances of the music without adding too much of its own signature to the sound, and if it can reproduce

music in its whole dynamic range in a fatigue free presentation, then it must really be a great system. I've personally made the error of purchasing components that initially sound impressive and then after I'd spent a while living with it the sound becomes almost grating and then upgrading becomes a mission to find that 'right' sound.

***How they've managed to get the bass extension out of these little cabinets amazes me and as they're paired to the powerful Rogue, the bass is deep but kept in check.***

With that in mind we decided to go for a vinyl based system as we're lovers of the format and with the massive resurgence happening at the moment it seemed almost crazy not to do it. In our opinion the system we chose is a real cracker; we went with a



# Dealer System

Rogue Audio Sphinx hybrid integrated amplifier, powering a pair of Kef R300 standmount speakers. This is being fed by an Analogue Works Turntable One, fitted with a Jelco SA250ST and an Ortofon 2M red cartridge. Before anyone stops reading as you've discounted the 2M Red for being a 'standard' cartridge for lower end turntables, give one a proper listen and I think you'll be surprised how when paired with the right arm and turntable combination it will render many 'expensive' cartridges to shame.

The Analogue Works Turntable is new to the market and is based on a low torque motor, driving a huge solid alloy platter, has an external power supply and de-coupled motor pod. The turntable is a real joy to listen to and is our new favourite deck, it defies its modest price point. All cables are by Supra as we love the overall dynamic they bring to this and indeed many systems. All equipment is supported on an Atacama Eris Eco 5 stand.

The Rogue Audio Sphinx integrated amplifier is a hybrid valve pre-amp controlling a digital power

stage. The digital output stage gives out a very meaty amount of power which has been capable of driving every speaker we've ever thrown at it, and done so with aplomb. As it's a digital amp it gives off very little heat which takes a while to get used to, that's for sure. After a night of listening to music, the amp is still only warm where the valves are situated. The Sphinx has an inbuilt moving magnet phono stage which we've utilised for the system. As an added bonus to this already impressive amplifier is the notable built in headphone stage which can be used even when the amplifier is in standby. We really believe that this amplifier is huge value for money. We're driving a pair of Kef R300 standmount speakers with this Rogue amp. The speakers are mounted on Divine Audio's own 'Dick' speaker stands, these have been produced by a local supplier specifically for us and due to this the costs are greatly reduced. Kef have been making outstanding loudspeakers for many years now and the R300s are no exception. How they've managed to get the bass extension out of these little cabinets amazes me and





# Dealer System

as they're paired to the powerful Rogue, the bass is deep but kept in check.

Anyway on to the important bit, how does it sound? Well a very wise man once said, the best way to listen to a system is to go and make a cup of tea, sit down and enjoy the music. And over the last week we've drunk an awful lot of tea and not produced as much work as we should have! The system gets your toe tapping along to the music while at all times drawing you into the ever addictive soundstage, allowing the most important thing to us - total appreciation to the music and not the hi-fi which drives it. This is being written whilst listening to the truly brilliant Kurt Vile album, Walking on a Pretty Daze, because of the systems appeal my mind keeps wandering off towards the music and therefore, away from what I'm writing which is a pain as there is a deadline to meet, but it's just so good!

As well as this being a great system for vinyl, the Rogue amp/Kef R300 combo makes the most of almost any source, whether it's a 1990's Technics

CD player or cutting edge music streamer, the system extracts the soul out of everything it touches.

## System Prices

Analogue Works Turntable £849 in bamboo  
Jelco 250ST Tonearm £349  
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# Hifi Pig Visits

# FOCAL

**F**ocal-JMLab as most readers will be well aware is a French manufacturer of loudspeakers for the home, for the automobile industry and for the professional market...they have recently introduced a small range of headphones too. They are based in the South Western French city of Saint-Étienne and have been operational since 1979 when current Chairman of the Supervisory Board Jacques Mahul launched the company.

Jacques was an engineer, journalist and music lover (a great fan of Pink Floyd) based in Paris and he initially began making loudspeaker drivers in the workshop of his father's engineering company (France Filiere) in Saint-Etienne with just himself and one more employee. The drivers proved to be a huge success and were used not only by high-end DIY enthusiasts but also picked up by commercial loudspeaker manufacturers.

As well as producing loudspeaker drivers under the Focal name Jacques also began to experiment with designing his own loudspeakers and when his small bookshelf DB13 featuring a dual voicecoil driver was launched he quickly moved from selling to acquaintances to manufacture proper.

The 1980 saw both the Focal driver brand and JMLabs loudspeakers establish themselves in the worldwide marketplace with Focal continuing to innovate new designs and products such as the Polyglass V cone and the PolyKevlar (K2) cone. The K2 is a clever sandwich structure of two layers of aramid fibres applied to a centre "filling" of a hollow-micro-ball structured material. The Polyglass cone, introduced in 1988, is essentially miniscule

micro-balls being deposited onto a paper cone to achieve a light but very rigid material with great damping effects.

As well as mid and bass drivers attention was also focused on improving the frequency response curve of the tweeter driver and a host of innovative products were used including glass fibre and Kevlar. In 1981 the company introduced the inverted dome tweeter with the basic concept still being used by them today for its low directionality and high dynamic features.

In 1990 the current Managing Director Gérard Chrétien arrived at the company and the business moved forward at a pace. Gérard is an interesting character having being the editor-in-chief of the well renowned audio magazine L'Audiophile since its launch in 1977, he also acted as our most gracious host for the duration of our trip. The company developed and implemented an international marketing strategy for the loudspeaker brand and saw them move into not just European markets but also the lucrative North American and Southeast Asian markets. Strengthened by numerous accolades, including Loudspeaker of the Year in 1992 for the JMLab Vega, the company's reputation mushroomed as did its business with turnover increasing from €9 million in 1992 to €26 million in 2000. Clearly the company had moved from being a well respected domestic manufacturer to being a leading player in the global audio marketplace.

During the 90's, 1995 to be more precise, Focal introduced the W sandwich cone which is two sheets of glass fibre with a foam-like core and is again employed to maximise low mass allied with high rigidity and damping factors.



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In 2002 the company relocated its St Etienne facilities to their current home in the city and developed the “Made in France” philosophy which Gérard is still justifiably very proud. It’s also the year that the company introduced the Beryllium tweeter which is still seen on the Premium Utopia and Electra ranges - *you can see being made in the following article*. It’s an interesting concept with Beryllium being seven times more rigid than Titanium (and ten times more expensive than gold) but having a similar mass resulting in a lighter and faster tweeter with great damping qualities. Of course Focal still employed the inverted dome concept and when allied with Beryllium offers a frequency response extending to 40kHz.

A year later in 2003 the two distinct brands incorporated under the single Focal-JMLab banner for all their home products with them becoming simply Focal for all sectors of the business in 2005.

2007 saw the introduction of the Aluminium-Magnesium tweeter a partnership that offers the damping qualities aluminium and the rigidity of the magnesium. Used on the Chorus range in the Home line and in the CMS range in the pro line the Al-Mg takes the response up to 28kHz.

Chatting with Gérard Chrétien over dinner the night before we took the official tour it became clear that he is not only passionate about the sound of a product but also about the way that it looks and its relationship with the home and living space. More of this later, but we at Hifi Pig feel strongly that the aesthetics of a product, particularly a product as large and visually imposing as a loudspeaker, should not be overlooked. To this end in 2003 the company began a close working relationship with the Paris based design agency Pineau and Le Porcher to develop the design aspects of their offer. This



Managing Director Gérard Chrétien with Focal's Flagships

relationship not only made the loudspeakers they were producing desirable lifestyle products but also helped cement the company's brand message in the psych of consumers. This partnership developed new and distinctive ranges for the brand including: Profile and Electra in 2005, Chorus V in 2006, Utopia in 2008 and Dôme in 2009. The same attention to detail and design sensibilities is employed across the range and whilst many of you reading this will be well aware of the distinctive and it has to be said imposingly beautiful design of the Utopia, the same care and attention is given to the diminutive and yet gorgeous little Dome loudspeakers. The fit and finish on all the range looks exemplary with cabinets for the higher-end ranges being built in Bourbon-Lancy at the Guy HF cabinet makers which Focal bought out in 2007. The clear intention here is

# Focal Visit

to control the manufacturing process from initial design and conception right through to final production and, in a world where increasing numbers of manufacturers are turning to cheaper facilities in China and elsewhere, this makes that Made in France philosophy mentioned earlier an important differentiator between Focal and other loudspeaker manufacturers.

In 2011 Focal-JMLab merged with the well loved UK hi-fi brand Naim to create a new holding company Focal & Naim which owns both Focal and Naim. However, lovers of the individual brands will be pleased to hear that the two companies remain independent when it comes down to what the consumer sees on the shelves of our local audiophile emporium. Both Naim and Focal have very strong brands and I for one believe that this coming together, yet maintaining individuality with regards to the individual marques branding and products, is incredibly important.

Focal built a custom made showroom and listening facility at their Saint-Etienne site in 2012.

In 2013 Focal further developed the sandwich concept of drivers cones to include the Flax membrane cone. It's an unusual material to use (yes it's flax as in the blue flowers you can see growing in fields and used to make linen!) but Focal claims it offers low colouration through light, rigid and damped cones.

In 2012 the turnover of Focal-JMLab was €42 million, of which 70% came from exports and arriving at the factory it was good to see lorry loads of loudspeakers leaving the premises. Europe makes up the majority (57%) of the turnover with America making up 20%, Asia/Oceania 20.5% and Middle East and Africa 2.5%. Their products are distributed in over 160 countries throughout the world and they currently employ more than 200 people at the 17 400m square premises in Saint Etienne where production, research and development and management are based.

Hifi Pig were kindly invited to be the guests of Focal for a couple of days in mid-March and the results of that visit can be enjoyed in the next article.





The first thing that strikes you about Gérard Chrétien, the Managing Director of Focal, is his infectious enthusiasm for his brand and the clear vision he has with regards to moving Focal forward in the worldwide marketplace. Speaking in his office before the actual tour of the facility and at dinner the night before he talks passionately not only about his love for music and all things audio, but also his belief that audio products, particularly those for the home market, should deliver not only on sound quality but also with regards to strong aesthetic values – “It’s an holistic philosophy! Things need to stimulate ALL the senses. Design IS important” he enthuses. This design philosophy is clearly evident in the flagship Utopia model that stands imposingly in the foyer of the offices, but also in the diminutive Dome desktop system he has in his office. There’s a real attention to detail throughout the range.

*Gérard also exudes an immense pride in his company being French and this is brought home when he tells us that 88% of Focal’s output now carries the words “Made in France” on it.*

There is also the feeling that he believes that access to great sounding kit should be inclusive and that is apparent when you realise that Focal products are not only available in the rarefied environments of audiophile outlets, but also in more down to earth mass-market outlets like FNAC and Boulanger (in France)...and other well known stores worldwide.

Gérard also exudes an immense pride in his company being French and this is brought home when he tells



Utopia drivers



# Focal Visit

us that 88% of Focal's output now carries the words "Made in France" on it. In a world where increasing numbers of companies have outsourced their manufacturing base to China and the Far East it's good to see that some are resolutely committed to investment in European facilities and European workers.

***This is clearly a company that are in it for the long haul and looking to further consolidate themselves in the global marketplace***

Gérard is clearly a clever and cultured bloke and he has a love of jazz music, but he's also very approachable and walking to the office building from the car (and later on the factory floor) he is greeted and greets all employees knowing each by name - "I

don't believe in hierarchy" he says in perfect English when I comment on how refreshing this is to see. The workforce and the investment Focal makes in them is vital as some of the processes involved take two years to master. This commitment to the skilled workforce is further evidenced with the company's purchase of the Guy HF cabinet makers in Bourbon-

Lancy (Burgundy) back in 2007 where cabinets for the luxury end of the company's loudspeakers are crafted. These people know their jobs, know Focal and know the ethos of the company and so why would anyone want

to farm out to China where the whole expensive process of training up production staff would need to be undertaken...or risk the finished product being sub-standard. Focal make this more expensive workforce employable with the mantra "Produit Mieux et Moins Cher" (PMMC) which translates as



Inside the purpose built listening room



“A better but less expensive product” and for one specific driver they have managed to take the production process down from eight hours to just 10 minutes enabling all drivers in all Focal loudspeakers to be Focal built since 2002.

This commitment to PMMC has meant investment in training the workforce but also in financial and intellectual investment in the design of new manufacturing processes. However, walking around the factory you notice that despite their being a good deal of techy looking manufacturing



Final checks done by ear



Critical stages of the manufacturing process carried out by hand

equipment, ALL critical processes are still carried out by hand. This “hands on” approach extends to the final testing of a driver too. Of course there are oscilloscopes and what not all around, but every single driver rolling of the small production line is checked and analysed by ear and by trained personnel. Despite this hands (and ear)-on approach and attention to detail they can still output 2000 drivers each day and each driver is uniquely numbered.

This is clearly a company that are in it for the long haul and looking to further consolidate themselves in the global marketplace as creators of innovative, stylish products that are made in France by a committed workforce led by a creative, forward thinking and inclusive management team.

Our thanks go out to Gérard, the company’s UK PR company and the whole of the Focal team for making Hifi Pig feel so welcome and allowing us such close access to the inside workings of the business.



# Focal Visit



course which use electromagnets and in the Stellar Utopias each bass driver has 8Kg of copper and a total weight of 30Kg enabling the driver to deliver a sensitivity of 97db at 30Hz. This level of attention to detail is to be expected in high-end loudspeakers such as the Utopia range, but it is also very evident down the price range with the drivers on the entry level models using polyglass microballs “sprayed” onto paper – again this is to add rigidity to the driver!

Perhaps the most interesting part of the actual tour of the shop floor was when we went to where the tweeters are made. Many readers will be aware of Focal’s use of inverted dome technology and I was keen to find out why they used this. Originally the inverted dome was used to allow low mass and high efficiency with flat frequency response. The first inverted domes used Kevlar which begins to break up at 14KHz whereas the more recent Titanium goes up to 22KHz and the Aluminium/Magnesium alloy to 28KHz. Memory foam is used for the suspension for its low mass and low frequency resonance. Focal found that the amount of glue used to fit the voicecoil was critical in that it had the ability to mess with the frequency response of the tweeter and so the glue is now added by a special silk screen process. Consistency is clearly vital here and despite making 20 000 tweeters per week consistency of product is maintained throughout.

The latest tweeter used on the high-end range of Focal loudspeakers is made of Beryllium which is very light, very rigid (it can scratch glass) and also very expensive (fifty times the cost of gold we’re

**D**uring our tour of the Focal factory Gérard is keen to repeat another of the company’s mantras and that is “Rigidity, Weight and Damping” when speaking about the company’s drivers. Whether the W Sandwich or the more recent Flax Sandwich cones, the belief that frequency response should be managed at the driver stage and not in the crossover is paramount in the design process.

The Sandwich approach is an interesting one and the latest Flax Sandwich is perhaps the most interesting in that it uses a material that one wouldn’t usually associate with high-end driver technology. The drivers are essentially a very rigid, single fibre (not twisted) flax sheet of uniform thickness between two pieces of plexi-glass foam with the cutting of the drivers being done by specially developed laser tools. Voicecoils are added by hand to enable very tight tolerances to be maintained.

The Utopia range of loudspeakers have very impressive drivers of





## Focal Visit

informed). However adding a huge magnet to the Beryllium tweeter allows it to operate between 1000 Hz and 50KHz and with a sensitivity of 97db. This goal of high efficiency drivers allows the complex Utopias to achieve an overall sensitivity of 93/94db.

Of course, as a magazine focusing on relatively high-end products we're keen to talk about the Utopias and other loudspeakers but it's interesting to note that the 25 engineers in the R&D department have been thinking out of the box somewhat and April will see the launch of a new and we're told highly innovative, five-way soundbar (The Dimension) and there's also an active and wireless speaker in production (The Easya). These more lifestyle oriented products carry that inclusiveness I mentioned through, but we're told that whatever product is launched it will always have the Focal family sound.



The listening rooms acoustics really are impressive but surprisingly easy on the eye



# Focal Visit

Of course, no visit to a loudspeaker manufacturer's facility, however impressive, would be complete without having a little bit of a listen to the finished product and so we were ushered to a specially built large room where a trio of speakers were placed in front of us. Needless to say electronics used were Naim and the attention to detail in the room was very impressive. Clearly the room had been designed to show the Focal loudspeakers at their very best and the room was acoustically pretty dead.

First up was a pair of Aria 926 loudspeakers which are sold at around €2000 per pair. They're designed to be good with a wide range of music and to have a broad appeal. They use an Aluminium/Magnesium tweeter and Flax Sandwich drivers. My first reaction to the 926 was that it seemed to offer a good deal of product for the asking price. Sound-wise there was an overall naturalness to the sound with the speakers being open and visceral.



Scala Utopia V2s were very nice indeed

Piano was very piano-like, there was a good insight into the recording space and bass was well controlled and deep. As well as looking like a lot of speaker for your money it would seem that the 926, on the strength of this listen in unfamiliar surroundings, offered good value for money too.

Next up was the 948 which we were told was tuned to have a similar sound to the Utopia and it is clearly a step up the high-fidelity ladder. There is a bigger sound to the 926 on orchestral tracks and the speakers offer a fast and dynamic sound with good soundstaging. My notes say "I could live with these" and they are obviously a more refined speaker than the smaller 926 but surprisingly they cost only €3000 a pair which I again thought was good value for money.

The next speakers out front were the Scala Utopia V2s and this was clearly a much better loudspeaker than the two that went before it...and so it should be at €21 000. There's a more relaxed and effortless sound here with that Beryllium tweeter clearly adding something quite special to the mix.

Sadly we had a 'plane to catch and our time in the listening room wasn't as long as we would have liked, but it was long enough to appreciate that Focal are consistent in creating a good sound with a family character that is evident at all the levels we listened. Out of the three speakers we heard the one that stood out as offering the best bang for your buck was the 948 but I can't help thinking that, despite what I said about being able to live with them, I'd always have in the back of my mind the sound of the Scala Utopias.





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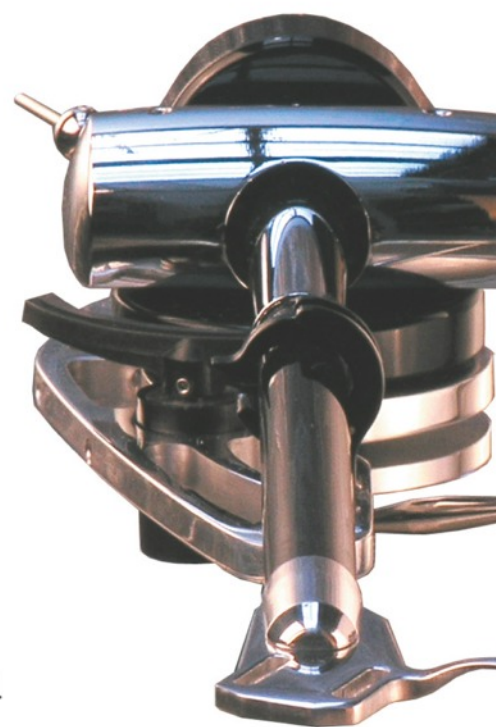


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# Brunoco Diva

## Amplifier and DAC

by Danny Worth



Originating from Canada the Brunoco Diva is a small form factor digital amplifier with integrated DAC and is only a little bigger than a Mac Mini. It's housed in a stylish aluminium case and sports connections for coaxial RCA, optical and Async USB digital inputs supporting up to 24/192, along with one set of analogue inputs which run through an ADC (Analogue to Digital Converter) in order to utilise the inbuilt amp. Output is 40wpc. The amplifier is not a standard class D and DAC combination it is in fact a full digital amplifier which the manufacturer has the following to say about it "Diva is full digital amplifier, that means input PCM(pulse code modulation, master digital signal) signal is processed and amplified in digital format. So there is no DAC(digital to analog converter) needed. DAC is necessary for conventional analog

amplifiers(both solid-state and tube) because analog amplifiers need input analog signal to amplify.

DDC converts input PCM signal into PWM signal which can be amplified by PWM amplifier in digital domain. The Critical part of digital amplifier is this PCM to PWM converter. Performance of DDC is based on how the algorithm used can minimize the distortion and noise and do the exact conversion which results in final sound quality. One of the most important factor to sound quality is SNR(signal to noise ratio) and especially residual quantization noise and RF(radio frequency) switching noise of PWM should be removed from the audible frequency range(20-20kHz)."

The external power supply is a very high quality analogue design and is very heavy in comparison to the



main unit and there's no doubt that the quality of the PSU is a key factor to the Diva's performance.

Substantial packaging encases the cute little Diva keeping it safe for its long journey overseas and during unpacking it's easy to appreciate the unit's all aluminium build quality and substantial weight to the high quality power supply, along with a true credit card sized remote control with only 6 buttons - in fact this is all that is needed for full control of the unit. First impressions left me feeling satisfied with

***A slight change in the equaliser settings to add some more punch to the sound and I was really amazed with what could be achieved from the unit.***

what I was presented from this new kid on the block.

I ran the unit in for a week of continuous play time ensuring it was ready for a good listen.

First impressions were, "digital amplifier" but during the week I noticed a certain amount of weight and a little more richness coming through filling out the

bottom end nicely, my only gripe was this added weight to the bass was emphasising a steep roll off point giving the bass a more one note approach.

There is an equaliser built into the device - not the usual rock, dance, acoustic type, it's way more subtle than that, the settings have a couple of letters and a number (ie BaMd2) to refer to them, each setting is like a slightly different version of the previous. The goal is to use these settings as more of a digital room equalisation than the typical graphic equaliser found

in cheaper products. Playing through these differing settings I found one or two which I preferred, notably for their smoother roll off of the bottom end allowing notes to fade more naturally in my listening space, which even though subtle was a very welcome addition.

The EQ really does seem to be very transparent indeed, has been implemented very well and doesn't seem to get in the way.

Chris Jones' 'Soul Storm Comin' has many overlaid smaller guitar details which is a highlight of the Bruno - it has a great way of picking out these smaller



Neat and tidy round the back too

# Reviews

details even in a strongly central focused track and each can be heard in its entirety along with each textural strum of string and richness to Chris's vocal. I've found many times with Class D amps (not all of them) that the attention to detail is fantastic yet the performance as a whole can suffer with a colder tonal balance, the Diva is voiced extremely well and doesn't suffer from this 'coldness' - it's not a Class D amp after all. It's far from coloured and far from warm, it's has all the characteristics of Class D yet with a richness to the sound!

Phantom Limbs 'Don't Say A Word' displayed glossy vocals with great undertones of rich harmonies, sound staging with the dinky Diva is fantastic along with great layering allowing drum rolls, guitar strings and double bass to really recreate stage placement fantastically well, encapsulating the performance in a high end way that belies its meagre price point.

As you're all probably are aware by now I am partial to some heavy dance beats - I've always liked what digital amplifiers can achieve with this sort of music - a clean and crisp representation of the genre - and the Brunoco is no different. Hitting the volume seriously hard the little Diva achieved some insane volumes and spl's through my loudspeakers, I reached a volume which was so loud I had to turn it down a little before I reached any perceivable levels of distortion and the neighbours came knocking! A slight change in the equaliser settings to add some more punch to the sound and I was really amazed with what could be achieved from the unit.

In comparative terms at twice the cost of the Brunoco Diva is the £1000 Peachtree iDecco, also using similar technology. The Brunoco makes for a much more engaging and exciting listen in comparison, leaving the iDecco's blander and colder sonic signature behind in the stakes of sound reproduction.

I've written this review using my Squeezebox Touch as in my mains system it is my most known source and is easier to gain an impression of what the

Brunoco Diva adds to the sound. However, I did get a little carried away in what we can call my own free time testing the unit with some big and small single driver speakers, some two way bookshelves in a desktop system, with some wall speakers in a bedroom system and also with other sources such as the Mac Mini, a Windows laptop and an Apple TV and I'd be very happy to use the little Diva with any or all of these sources. Notably in the bedroom with a TV on the wall a set of wall speakers and an Apple TV, it's was a wonderfully minimalist approach to reproducing great unobtrusive sound quality.



## Conclusion

Connected to a Mac/PC, Streamer, CD/DVD, Television or Smart Device, the Brunoco Diva can cater for all of today's digital devices and can be setup in the smallest of spaces.

Whether the chosen music be a stripped down acoustic or a big medley for an evening listen or a more beat

driven piece - or let's say 'party mode' - the Diva has a substantial amount of intelligence at reproducing each sound and note with plenty of air and space around them and can hold a coherent overall image with rich tones and decay that just makes it such an enjoyable listen.

It can pride itself on having a 'grown up' sound and a sound that belies its small size and low cost, with plenty of inputs, great looks, a decent outboard power supply and the ability to use what we could call a simple but effect room equalising option which has gentle changes in the sound that allows for some fine transparent tuning - all in all with its enjoyable and toe tapping sound is an excellent in a modern home or hard core audiophiles second system.

**Build Quality - 8.5/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.5/10**

**Value for money - 10/10**

**Overall - 9/10**

**Price when reviewed - £499**

**Highly Recommended for its detail driven, exciting performance that is true value for money.**



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# Reference Fidelity Components Pluto II Interconnects by Jerry Jacobs

I reviewed the original Reference Fidelity Components (RFC) Pluto cables for Hifi Pig some while back and I think it is fair to say that I gave them a [rave review!](#) I know of quite a few folks who subsequently bought a pair and were very happy indeed with their purchases.

It is only right to remind you that I know Paul, the proprietor of RFC, well. But that cuts no ice as far as reviewing his gear is concerned - as always, I tell it like I hear it!

The Pluto Mk2's use the same conductor cables as the originals, but take advantage of the latest RCA connector technology with the new Eichmann Harmony copper plugs.

## Technicalities

Eichmann claims the following features and benefits for the Harmony plugs;

- Signal/Ground pins are pure Copper and >101% IACS (not Tellurium Copper (95% IACS) or Brass (28% IACS).
- Signal/Ground pin optimization to enhance electron flow
- Signal/Ground pins are now much stronger and shaped like a tag, which makes soldering small/large/multiple wires, very easy.
- Signal/Ground Anti-Short shield has been added between the Signal/Ground solder tags.

- Signal/Ground pins are arranged to maintain a maximised distance from each other, and the utilised foil technology ensures that Capacitive, Inductive, and EMF effects are minimized.
- The Head Assembly jaw structure has been redesigned and mechanically improved, to allow an easy snap-like connection to a Phono/RCA socket, ensuring the ultimate connection with easy removal.
- Ground pin includes thread teeth which ensures that a metal Housing is star-point grounded.
- The Housing Assembly uses 2 screws to retain and secure the Cable.
- Extremely high temperature melting point thermoplastic polymer has been utilized.

*A new level of detail has been resolved for me in recordings I have played dozens of times.*

If you're a technical specialist the above will certainly mean more to you than it does to me, but RFC says that connection to sockets is much improved ... more positive and plug is more durable, they are lower in capacitance, too, for a cleaner signal and use pure (5 or 6 nines pure) copper rather than using the commonly found pitch or tellurium based coppers, which has then been silver plated.

Oh, and personally I think they look damn sexy, too!



## The Sound

Well, the proof of the audiophile pudding is, as ever, in the listening ....

They are stunningly transparent cables. A new level of detail has been resolved for me in recordings I have played dozens of times.

Bass is deep, powerful, vibrant and superbly defined. No fat or flab, just the music.

They lock on to rhythms like a hungry python, just amazingly foot-tapping.

Imaging is naturally focused and in-the-room 3D.

Treble is extended and pure, not harsh at all, sibilance is naturally presented.

This is one of those happy occasions when comparisons become difficult, because the component is unequaled in my experience, so superlatives become mandatory!

The Pluto Mk2 are not a 'nice' cable like some, colouring and smoothing or accentuating the signal in a euphonic manner. They just allow the most transparent pathway for the music signal that I have yet heard.

They take the excellent Pluto mk1 and just do it all even better.

At £105 for a 1m pair the value for money is completely out of sight.

They are the best cables I have heard at any price and I have bought the review pair. No way was RFC getting these back!

**Build Quality - 10/10**

**Sound Quality - 10/10**

**Value for money - 10/10**

**Overall - 10/10**

**Price when reviewed - £105**

*Author - Jerry Jacobs*

Following Jerry's recent enthusiastic review of the RFC Pluto MK2 interconnects I contacted Paul for a second listen, which is now common practice at Hifi Pig when a product receives a score of 8.5 or over overall.

The cables arrived the following day sporting the new KLE (Eichmann'esque) plugs which look and feel great and were an extremely snug fit into my amp and dac, which is how a quality plug should be made.

Sound wise, I have a few cables I can compare them to, which due to Jerry's comments will be ones in much higher price brackets and to get straight to the point I know many readers have been asking 'are they the best cable I have ever heard at any price point?' No they're not in my opinion but do read on...

The Pluto MK2 is what I would deem as a highly accomplished and resolute cable for the money.

It's a bit forward in the top end and very clean sounding. Midrange is very much of the same flavour, which would have left the cable to sound extremely lean if it wasn't for the ample serving of bass.

The bass notes are fairly extended but lack the overall drive, presence and information conveyed with the Oricon Symphony Orange cables which also hold a strong coherent spread and never sacrifice tonal complexity for perceived resolution, which with some cables equates to an emphasis on top end registers or a certain brightness which is slightly evident in the Plutos.

Sound staging is exceptional with these RFC cables. Central focus is strong and soundstage width and height is a great attribute to the cables. Indeed I have heard cables costing way more than the new Plutos that are not as keen to spread their wings as wide and some other cables which have the ability to do so but can mask the finer details with overwhelming coloration.

***As the RFC Pluto II interconnects achieved an overall score of 8.5 they were sent for second review to Danny Worth for his opinion.***

Eichmann Harmony copper plugs on the Pluto II along with the same cable as the mark I



My Audioquest Sky interconnects, have a hugely developed harmonic graduation to rolling off room boundaries beyond the physical parameters and explore micro dynamics in a far more developed manner whilst still drawing the listener in the centre of the stage and pulling your gaze back towards the next cue whilst your following the decay of the previous note. The Plutos show the bigger picture so convincingly but just don't have the fine inner details on the further points of the stage.

There is a definite sharpness to the sound of the Plutos, very similar in presentation to the Acoustic Zen Matrix Ref II, in fact I'd go as far to say in many systems I have heard with the AZ's in I think the better control of the Plutos leading edges would lean me more towards them rather than the AZ's which cost considerably more.

I would say that the AZ's have a little more weight and presence to vocals but the Plutos have an encapsulating effect to them which is unmistakably awesome. As I mentioned before they don't have the complexity of the Sky's spread/resolution, but the direct sphere of sound which I find myself sat in is absolutely incredible - you could argue that its three dimensional capabilities and imaging is right up there, never over exaggerated width wise but front to back I'd firmly say that they do it better than most

other cables - I'm throwing in the mix here and I believe that this where the MBL's that Jerry has are making this cable sound pure magic.

To accompany the marvelous soundstage is the sheer control that the Plutos have and their sibilant free nature which makes for an extremely accurate yet non analytical sound.

Bandwidth registers the top end miles beyond many cables I've heard costing many times the price. However, I would have liked it to have more refinement and the ability to have discerned the higher and lower frequencies with more rendering, displaying notes with more individual tonal detail to deem it 'the best cable at any price point'.

The cables have fantastic speed and timing, one off the best cable I've heard for absolute precision in this area is the Graditech Kides - the Kides have a better rendition of inner detail, being more accurate to each detail, instrument or vocalist. Although the Plutos once again have a trait of a high-end cable their overall capabilities are masked a little, but I am finding this slight trade off a small factor in comparison with its sheer imaging capabilities.

I could sit here all evening and keep throwing comparisons at the Plutos, as I could any cable I might



add so I think it's best to now concentrate on what I think about them as a whole.

The Plutos delve into the music way further than their price could even begin to suggest, there is huge amounts of detail which manages to remain strong through the central focus and can still remain prominent enough to fill a huge soundstage convincingly, displaying great height, width and three dimensionality. The absolute rendering of the details is not as 'grown up' as some of the big boys and where as some individual frequencies are displayed perfectly they don't all have that trait and one minute sparkles will sound incredibly clear and natural and the next a guitar rasp would sound a little muted, but in comparison with cost the Plutos take bounds and leaps to push themselves closer to the high end completion that no other cable anywhere near this price point has ever achieved for me.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt in my mind that the Pluto MK2 from RFC is ridiculous value for money. Its performance is second to none in its class and can even play with the big boys without being out of its depth. The overall refinement of the detail it displays is slightly lacking, but its overall presentation and magically immersive soundstage will have many people trading in their more expensive cables for a pair I'm sure.

In their price range, popular mainstream branded cables simply sit in awe of the Pluto's capabilities and comparing them to the rest in this review should be a joke.

**Build quality - 8.5/10**

**Sound quality - 8/10**

**Value for money 9/10**

**Overall 8.5/10**

**Highly recommended for their bewildering performance to price ratio.**

Hifi Pig's First Outstanding Product Award goes to the Reference Fidelity Components Pluto II Interconnects



# Onix Audio A25 Integrated Amplifier

by Stuart Smith

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**





I won't go too much into the history of Onix as we've already covered this when Jerry reviewed the [Onix RA-125](#) back in July of last year.

The A-25 amplifier was created to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the much loved Onix OA21 and to recall the "old-style" sound of the original Tony Brady project. The amp is a dual-mono integrated affair which will deliver 2 x 30W into 8Ohms ( 5 of which are in Class A) and 2 x 50 W into 4 Ohms and it costs around £775.

It has to be said that the A-25 is a smart looking bit of kit with its half-width elongated shoebox design and glass panelled front. There's a big gold volume control (Alps Blue Velvet), a source selector button and a power button on the front. It's sleek, it's elegant and I really like the look of it, though I'm sure that it will have its detractors who will say it's a bit blingy – I don't think it's at all blingy and just looks understated and classy when parked on the rack.

Round the back you get two pairs of RCA inputs, a pair of balanced XLR inputs and a pair of RCAs for bypass for when you want to use the amp in a surround sound set up. There's also a pre out section catered for by another pair of RCAs and finally there's a nice pair of loudspeaker binding posts. Feature-wise it's well catered for I'd say with enough inputs to satisfy most people. A remote is available though the review sample came without.

***There's a slight overall warmth (which some will really enjoy) and this leads to a really nice non-fatiguing listening experience***

## Listening

We thought that the ideal partnership for the Onix would be the [Q Acoustics Concept 20](#) loudspeakers fed with the computer through the DAC and we felt that this partnership, which comes in at around the £1500 mark using a computer and not taking the reference DAC as the source into account, would be probably where Onix would like to pitch this amp.

We'll also use it for watching a few films I dare say.

First onto the virtual turntable was a healthy dose of disco in the form of Patrick Adams Presents Phreek and here I found that the Onix offered good overall definition and tightness in the bass kick and whilst it doesn't dredge the very lowest registers it is perfectly acceptable for such a modestly priced amplifier. Comparing with the recently reviewed [Tellurium Q Claymore](#), which excelled in the bass department, the Onix could be seen as lacking a tad, but then the Claymore costs four times as much as the Onix and so we're comparing apples and oranges. Comparing the Onix to the slightly less expensive Clones Audio i25, bass was somewhat tighter with less flabbiness with the Onix.

On with Brian Jackson and Gil Scott-Heron's "Winter in America" and its opening tune demonstrating the amps ability to give a really good insight into the recording. Vocals are a strongpoint with the A25, as is the portrayal of all the mid-range frequencies and I reckon this amp will be really popular with those whole love vocal music - I'm sure it will also shine at hifi shows given the kind of music often played at them.

There's a slight overall warmth (which some will really enjoy) and this leads to a really nice non-fatiguing listening experience – you really can listen to this amp for hours and feel the music as being as fresh at the end of the session as it was at the start.

Overall the mids do dominate slightly and, at the relative budget end of the scale of things where this amp sits, this is no bad thing I'd possibly suggest. Piano and acoustic instruments were

particularly nicely portrayed I noted, as were hi hats which were sharp and crispy. Again comparing it to the little Clones amp there's a touch more colouration and warmth to the overall presentation which depending on your preferences you'll either prefer or not.

Soundstaging is very wide and extends way beyond the speakers left and right and there is good, but not exceptional, portrayal of depth of stereo image.

# Reviews

Overall you get a very acceptable, and somewhat enjoyable, insight into the mix and it's also very stable.

On Rock (Hawkwind's glorious re-release of [Warrior On the Edge of Time](#)) compared to the £6K reference amplifier there is a slight blurring of the overall image but it is still possible to pick out individual instruments from the mix quite easily. An analytical tool the A25 is not, but the soundstaging on this kind of music was highly entertaining. Hihats were again crisp and basslines easy to follow.

The amplifier performs at its best when allowed to breathe a little at medium to high volumes, but at low volumes (to which I rarely listen) you are left with very little bass content and a mid and top heavy sound...so any excuse to turn up the noise I suppose! If you are a late night listener then this amp may not be for you and perhaps here the inclusion of a headphone amplifier for occasional late night sessions would have been useful.

Shifting to electronic music I expected to be underwhelmed by the Onix, but popping on Tresor.136 (Annex 3) I found it a very interesting listen indeed. The opening track on the record has a kick that's easy to mess up, but here it was tight and taut and the sub bass synth was certainly very much in evidence. There's still that slight warmth to the overall sound, but again I found myself really warming (*pun intended*) to the Onix. Instead of that cold and analytical, studio type sound you can get with some amps you are offered up a portrayal that allows good insight into the music without there being so much information you end up mentally pulling a track to pieces and losing a degree of enjoyment.

Track two on the Tresor album by Stewart S Walker has an electronic hat sound that really cuts through the mix and this was portrayed superbly by the Onix. There is still that ever so slight blurring of the sound at the very top end compared to the best but for its class I thought the sound was really very acceptable indeed. Dave Tarrida's "Mouse Catcher General" has a really cool sub bass synth sound that some amps





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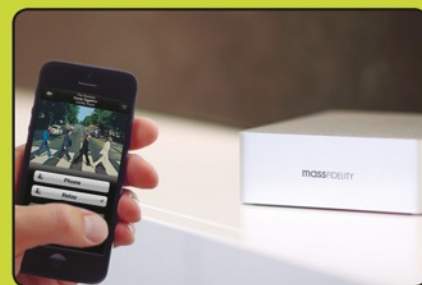
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# Reviews

can struggle with, but despite what I've said previously about the bass on the Onix it coped really well.

## Conclusion

At the asking price I believe that the Onix A25 offers users a very good value product. Its sound is weighty and nicely controlled in the lower registers and despite its moderate quoted output it certainly packs a punch.

With the great value Q Acoustics Concept 20s I certainly got the impression that the two were bringing the very best out in each other and as a relatively inexpensive system this pairing would be very good.

At playing music the Onix does a formidable job and it certainly gets your toes tapping for extended periods. It's fast, punchy and a good deal of fun and whilst it may not have the very last degree of finesse at the frequency extremes as our (£10K) pre and power partnership, it certainly does a great job at conveying what it is fed with in a coherent and (I can't stress this enough) fun way. The Onix lacks a little of the Clones overall finesse too, but what it misses out on here here it makes up for in spades with clout and foot tapping enjoyment. Bass isn't always the last word with the Onix in absolute depth but what is there is tight and taut, whereas the Clones can sound slightly flabby and uncontrolled in this area.

Overall the sound of the Onix A25 is very enjoyable indeed with a balanced musicality erring in favour of the midrange especially..

Soundstaging is wide (very wide for an amp at this price) but when compared to the best it lacks that 3D thing a little and here it's on a par with the Clones if not actually slightly better.



It does well with all the genres you can throw at it without having to make too many compromises along the way and after extended listening I really got to like the overall balance of the sound. I particularly enjoyed its punchiness!

In the sub £1000 price range there's a lot of choice in amps to be had but I'd strongly suggest that the Onix should be on your short list of amps to audition with your kit. It performs well, is well specified and looks fabulous.

As an after-word, we had a pair of speakers that came in for audition and it was clear that they needed a kick up their backside to get them singing and of the five amps we had to hand the Onix, despite being one of the least expensive, gave us the best results.

**Build Quality - 8/10**

**Sound Quality - 7.5/10**

**Value for money - 8.5/10**

**Overall - 8/10**

**Price when reviewed - £775**

**Recommended for listeners looking for a relatively inexpensive amplifier with good looks, good features and a non fatiguing sound profile that is fun to listen to with a wide range of musical styles.**



# AudioValve Eclipse Valve Preamplifier

by Jerry Jacobs



**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**

# Reviews

The very first thing I did as I carefully peeled away the protective covering after lifting the Eclipse out of its carton was whisper and astonished "Wow". The pre-amp is *gorgeous* to look at! An absolutely stunning mixture of Art Deco architectural loveliness and German hi-tech precision. It has a see-through perspex top and is gently internally illuminated with a couple of red LEDs when in operation. You just have to see it, photos really do not do it justice.

AudioValve have been around for quite a while and have earned a reputation for making good sounding valve-based equipment with salon-level visual appearance. The current product range encompasses 14 different models of valve amplification, from headphone amps to pre and power amps, and integrations.

The Eclipse (or Eklipse as it is called in German speaking areas) is a valve (tube)-based remote controlled pre-amplifier. The review sample had "Eclipse" on its faceplate.

It has 7 stereo RCA inputs, 2 pairs of RCA outputs

and 1 pair of XLR outputs.

The front panel sports and output selector (including mute), source selector, volume control and, quite unusually, a balance control.

## Valve options

I decided to perform this review with the pre-amp valves in stock form; four Electro-Harmonix 12AU7A. The audiophile world is practically awash in tube-rolling options, and undoubtedly the overall flavour and presentation of the Eclipse pre-amp can be substantially modified by inserting your own choice of valves. Which in a way makes this review something of a snapshot of a moving target, but hey ho, that's part of the fun of valve based kit, I guess!

According to Steve Dorian, of the UK distributor Audioelec, *"The Eclipse is a "tube rollers" dream. Depending on what your sonic tastes are will determine which tubes you will want to use in the Eklipse. While you may like the sound of the Eklipse with the stock Harmonix tubes, in my opinion, NOS*



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Purposeful looking and well equipped

*tubes like the RCA Clear Top take its performance to a higher level."*

Yep, based on my experience of other valve pre-amps, I can well believe that. And I would certainly encourage Eclipse owners to try a few alternatives to see how the sonic standard can be raised further from the excellent performance already available with the ElectroHarmonix valves.

### The Sound in Eclipse

This is a very fine sounding pre-amp - there's an immediate feeling of rightness and a wonderful sense of dynamic ebb and flow. I knew I was going to enjoy this review from the off.

Overall tonality is pretty much spot on, I think. A genuinely full-range sound, from the generous (but not too generous!) bass thru a very palpable midrange to a smoothly extended treble which gets vocal sibilance (a difficult challenge) just right.

Vocals have more individuality and character than I often hear, with excellent articulation and clarity, and sheer in-the-room presence. There's a rich tonal texture conveyed in voices that make them seem more real than usual with the Eclipse. Very nice indeed.

Bass is deep, textured, controlled, powerful and vibrant. It really is impressive. I'm tempted to characterise it as solid state bass done right! Those

listeners who prefer some valvey bloomy loveliness to the lower frequencies may well be disappointed by this valve pre-amp, but my own view is that the Eclipse is far more realistic in its portrayal of lower frequencies than that.

***Despite the eulogy of praise so far presented in this review, its imaging ability is, quite possibly, where the Eclipse pleases me most.***

There is an impressive lucidity in complex, multi-strand music. Nothing seems to phase it, music is just presented clearly and without confusion no matter how 'busy' it gets. I was very impressed by this, all too often the musical plot is lost as the going gets going, not so with this pre-amp.

Despite the eulogy of praise so far presented in this review, its imaging ability is, quite possibly, where the Eclipse pleases me most. There's a wholeness to the soundstage, a sense of immersion in the recording space that really encourages involvement in the musical experience. There's a 'you are there' feel to the presentation that really tops off an already impressive performance.

The one area that I have any real reservation about is in the ultimate resolution of detail. Leading edges of

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transients are slightly smoothed over, a little of the 'spang' of plucked strings, for example, is lost; rapid runs become just slightly homogenised and run together. The feeling of musical immediacy is reduced compared to some amps, you may feel that you are seated a little further back from the musicians than with some components. I know that some listeners will like this aspect of the Eclipse's presentation, those who enjoy a slightly laidback and less intrusive presentation. Others, like me, would prefer to feel they are closer to the action.

I often find it illuminating to try and come up with a single word which encapsulates a hifi component's nature, a word that instantly conveys my emotional response to its sound. For the Eclipse I think that word would be

"vibrant".

## Usability

There's a warm-up period of about a minute after switch-on before the Eclipse becomes operational.

The remote control of volume is nicely slow in operation but not too slow, you are unlikely to get whisked to unexpectedly high volumes by the careless press of a button.

But the manically flashing red light indicating remote operation is a bit distracting! - personally, I'd cover this with a small piece of black insulating tape.

An unusual feature of the Eclipse is its ability to clean and deoxidize the internal relays' contacts. An amazing racket of clicking switches results when this feature is selected - it's quite worrying when you first do this. And there is a firm recommendation in the user manual to turn your power amp OFF when using this function - I suggest you follow this recommendation!

Tube hiss / valve noise? Nope, I never heard any. OK, if I turned up the volume toward full there was a faint tracery of hiss - but the volume level would

have been insanely, ridiculously, speaker-destroyingly loud - I can't believe that anyone would ever have an issue with this.

## Value for money

This strikes me as being reasonable, not one of the world's great bargains, but you get what you pay for. Current UK pricing is £3,700, for which you obtain wonderful appearance (subject of course to personal taste), superb build quality and genuine high end

sound. My feeling is that you pay a bit extra for the visual design aspects, but that seems fair enough to me and will be an important aspect for many buyers at this price level.

## Summary

Despite the slight shortcomings heard in ultimate resolution, I can imagine many music lovers falling in love with the Eclipse

pre-amp. You can count me as one of their number! It really is a musically rewarding and engrossing pre-amp.

So the Audio Valve Eclipse pre-amp is recommended! - for its musical palpability and sense of involvement, and yes, the vibrancy of the presentation. If you want the ultimate in resolution and micro-detail I would suggest you may want to look elsewhere, although you may have to sacrifice other aspects in which the Eclipse excels if you do so!

**Build Quality - 9/10**

**Sound Quality - 8/10**

**Value for money - 8/10**

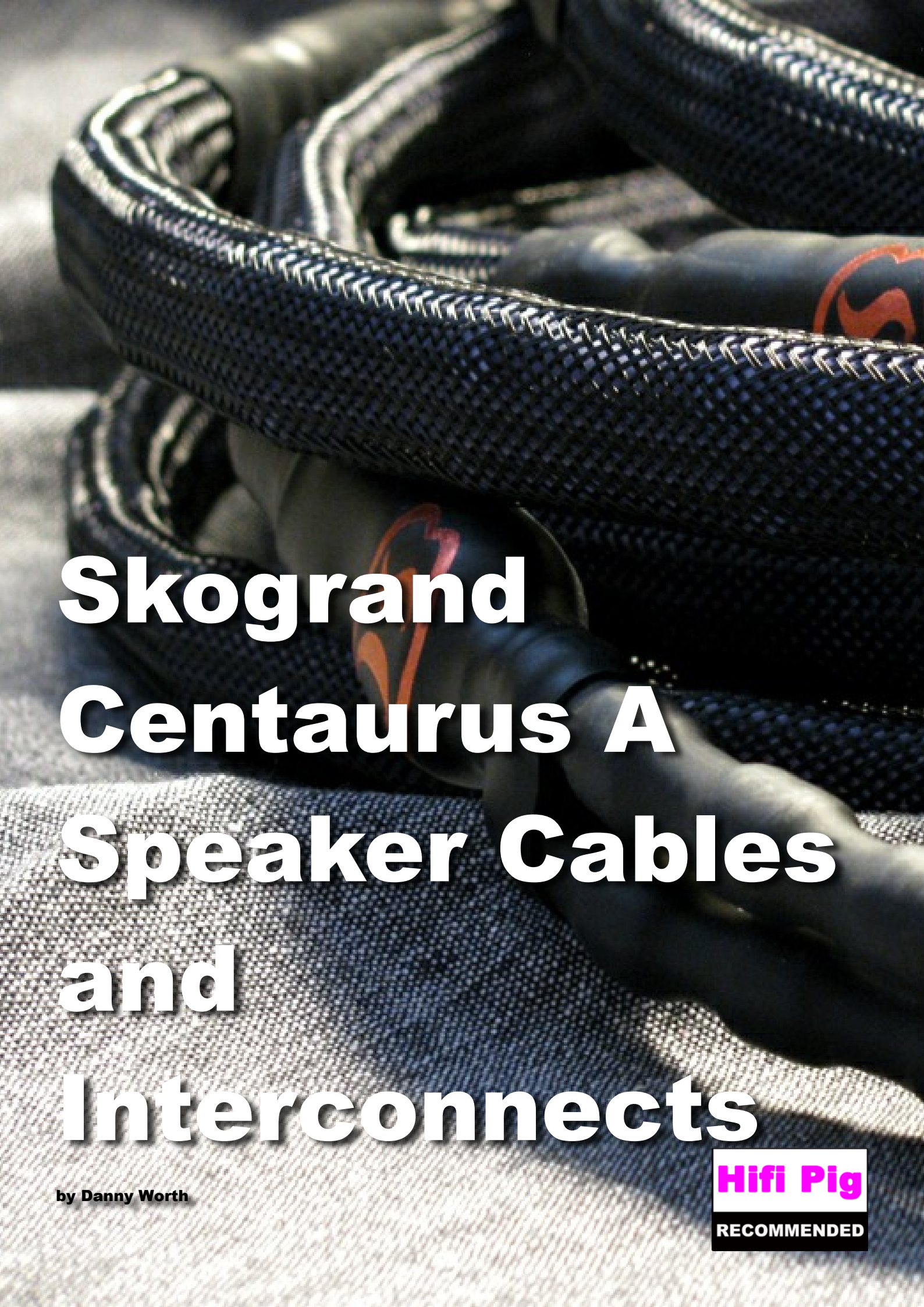
**Overall - 8.3/10**

**Price when reviewed - £3700**

**Recommended for its musical palpability, sense of involvement and the vibrancy of the presentation**







# **Skogrand Centaurus A Speaker Cables and Interconnects**

by Danny Worth

**Hifi Pig**

RECOMMENDED

The Skogrand Cables workshop is situated all the way up a mountainside at the end of a steeply climbing dust road in the rural parts of Eastern Norway not too far from the Olympic village of Lillehammer. It is a place of peace and the quiet and serene surroundings offer a harmonic backdrop to the humble building housing the Skogrand team.

As a child owner Knut Skogrand was brought up listening to classical music on vinyl with his Father and it was his Father that taught him how to feel the moods, colours, patterns, dynamics, overall structure and intent of the creator of the music.

### **Knut says;**

"I am originally – and at the core of my being – a musician. Working as a musician for decades I have performed within many settings live, in studios and at rehearsals, always feeling a kind of urgent lack of silence. Growing up in the peaceful countryside and living in the serene mountain hills of Norway I have grown accustomed to filtering sound through a mesh of tranquility and sonorous peace – having sounds around me standing out as meticulously shaped entities from a perfectly silent background. This is something I have strived to reconstruct in my musical thinking and performance"

Skogrand Cables is supported by two branches of the Norwegian government for their global research and findings in the field of effective and unpolluted energy transfer.

### **SC Centaurus A (Speaker Cables)**

The Speaker Cables are very large in diameter, they are thick, heavy and need a little careful management when routing. Their construction utilises 12awg copper with a complex array of air and Teflon structured dielectrics leaving one part of the cables two twisted cores thicker to the touch than the other.

Replacing the Audioquest K2 speaker cables with the Centaurus A into my system was quite simple considering the dominating size of them. The small spacers at the each end of the cable act like bending notches allowing the user to gently bend the cable to aid routing at set increments for ease of connection which was great for my amp as my rack is fairly close to the wall.

Routing of the rest of the cable isn't as easy but there is a good amount of flexibility but there is no chance of hitting right angles with the main bulk of the cable.

Once sited and the system switched on keeping Orion's interconnects and power cables in place to single out the Skogrands feeding my Ayons from the Emille, I began to play a few tracks from the SSD fed, modified Squeezebox Touch into the Totaldac d1 tube.

Initial impressions are one of a clean and delicate highly resolving sound, a little 'over airy' with a very slightly forward top end and a taught and light bass compared with the K2's. The Centaurus A also seemed to excel with speed and rhythm.

Over a period of about 200 hours I felt comfortable that the cables were burned in and ready for some serious listening. After this time I found the cables were retaining all the qualities of my initial listening experiences with the plus point of the top end thickening up to give a more solid higher frequency sparkle and cleaner, tighter edge.

I will say that although the cable seemed a little more relaxed and even more resolving and more harmonically developed, I wouldn't go as far to say I felt that there were dramatic changes, especially in the tonal balance of the cable which was still clean, tight and fast.

The cables strengths lie in detail retrieval, delicacy and the ability to express through to the listener harmonically accurate nuances and transparency with ease and an unmistakable finesse.

Listening to Keisha White 'The Weakness In Me' her vocal was so refined and sensual, piano notes were accurate in tempo and had good leading edges, although I felt they lacked a little fullness in undertones which is a difficult task for most setups to recreate absolutely correctly. Bass showed a slight lightness to me, yes it was textured and extended but it didn't have the overall presence and richness of tone which I am used to hearing in my room.

A raspy almost scalping of the strings could be heard on the acoustic version of Fleetwood Mac's 'Big Love' which in my reference cabling setup doesn't quite have that edge as cleanly defined as it has a somewhat richer tone. Each pluck of a string had a twang which could only be described as having more in the room appeal. The speed of the cables really came through on this track through the guitar solo as it did with the intense solo on 'Keith Don't Go' by Nils Lofgren a track which I always play for speed and accuracy tests. I found the bottom, most fleshed out notes were slightly sacrificed for the crispness of



the strings leading edge accuracy and the pin point imaging of the guitar. Vocals on both tracks fell into the same scenario, pronunciation of each word and phrase was clean, completely non sibilant and expressive, but the tonal characteristic lent to a more clean nature whereas my system is tuned to lean more to the warmer side of neutral which is more to my personal taste.

Swapping the Ayon loudspeakers out for the Frugel3 speakers, which are around a 10th of the cost but with a very different tonal character, was pleasantly received.

The more textural presentation of instruments came through wonderfully with the Centaurus A

speaker cables in the system. The expression of notes and vocals with the 1/4 wave enclosure were conveyed more naturally and the cleanliness and brighter side of neutral tone favoured the Frugels better than the already clean sounding Ayons.

Imaging and layering of sounds was superbly accurate with both speakers and harmonically both have a huge spread of micro detail, but now using the single drivers there seemed to be a more fleshed out tonality to the sound and the speed of the cables 'hurried up' the bass response of the cabinets wonderfully giving more attack to a speaker design which is renowned for having a slower and less taught bass than a conventional design.

The Frugels don't do Electronica or rock very well and in my system I didn't feel that the Skogrand did either, but for vocal and instrument reproduction a single driver design hooked up with these cables was an absolute match made in Heaven!

I could imagine very large multi driver speakers to have a wonderful touch with the Skogrand with their natural spls and horns would also be an absolute joy to listen to as well as single driver speakers.

I don't think my ceramics were the best match for the Centaurus A speaker cable but there are so many attributes such as the airy detailed and delicate top end, the beautiful midrange and soundstaging which absolutely shone, there was just the shift of the tonal bal-

ance the wrong side of neutral that didn't suit them.

## SCI Centaurus A (Interconnects)

The complimentary Centaurus A interconnects are constructed from 22awg solid copper conductors in Teflon tubing with a suspended shield of tinned copper lightly twisted up the length and with gold plated plugs.

The overall size of the interconnects is bewildering compared to their tiny conductors and this is due to the dielectrics and shielding used. They are fairly

*Instead I was presented with an almost dead on neutral and clean presentation, again with an informative amount of layering and spread.*

stiff and need a good 6 inches plus of space behind the connected equipment before they will bend around safely to another piece of kit. So beware as smaller Dacs and headphone amps will need to telephone the tower to be given clearance for take off!

Once again singling the cables out by removing the speaker cables and adding my Audioquest K2 back into the system (after around 150 or so hours of burn in time) the cables displayed a very well balanced and solid sound, if not a little touch of bass lightness much as the speaker cables did. Never sacrificing the taut and extended performance of the lower notes the interconnects have a great ability to inform the listener of soundstage placement in busier brassier passages as if the room had been further damped to rid any wobble and of bloom.

Exploring the midrange with some stronger vocals I expected to hear the slightly leaner character and the tipping of the scales towards the brighter aide of neutral as I did with the matching speaker cables - either this or a warmer tone which would compliment the aforementioned speaker cables.

In fact I didn't hear either of these expected characteristics! Instead I was presented with an almost dead on neutral and clean presentation, again with an informative amount of layering and spread. Vocals were a little larger than pin point which allowed for

# Reviews

more perceived depth and height without losing focus and were conveyed naturally.

I like a little bit of warmth in the lower mids to tickle my own tastes and I didn't find this in either of the cables. However the clean, controlled and strongly edged flavour of the sound (which can stop and start on knife edge and has a certain quality of silkiness rather than the warmer feeling I like) never sacrificed texture in the music.

Again I'm feeling that the cleanliness of the Ayons is not best suited to the slightly cleaner Skogrand interconnects as they do like a little bit more body to sound completely cohesive to me and I would imagine some good paper cones would be more of a suitable match.

Using the Frugels was a better balance and the slight lack bass of their cabinets really tightened up wonderfully and created a far more detailed and developed presentation to their character.

Using both cables together into the Frugels (while we're on the subject) was nothing short of beautiful. The textured and expressive nature in the midrange was a joy, especially allowing for previously mentioned guitar solos and vocals to take on a silkiness

to the sound that I've never heard in such a clean manner before. For me it seems to be a key characteristic and standout attribute of the Skogrands. I can't say I've heard a cable combination that can achieve this combination as well before without sounding bright at the same time.

The top end mirrors the midrange perfectly in its attributes and nature. It's open, transparent and airy, fast and clean with a silky leading edge and a very 'clear' and 'articulate' way of decaying notes without distracting the listener from the main body of the music.

I found the bass in both cables to be identical in isolation and when paired together - obviously a purpose made choice of characteristic by Skogrand.

I would conclude that using the Skogrand speaker cables and interconnects together does give a little more of a balanced presentation from midband upwards. The combination fleshing out the vocals slightly, gaining more of a pronounced and precise timing to instruments and I much preferred the cueing and decay of instruments which for me with just the speaker cables was a little aerated and softer in precision and tonal representation.





The absolute balance of the sound for me as a whole was more palatable and enjoyable, although bass notes were refined and had fantastic finesse for my own tastes in my own system and I would have enjoyed a little more emphasis on drive rather than flow.

## Conclusion

The Skogrand Centaurus A are like a good single malt... delicate on the palette, able to convey each detail of the ingredients and flowing across the palette like silk. They are excellent in absolute finesse and display details in one of the most non-offensive and yet highly resolving nature that I have heard from a cable at this price point.

For my own personal tastes I would have enjoyed a little more of a fleshed out lower midband and upper bass and the whole presentation was just a little too beautiful and graceful for me with the Ayons. Using the single drivers the synergy was more palatable and a warmer more robust speaker suits their character better for me.

Encapsulating the music and the listener is their trick, they are very seductive and alluring, displaying a wide, deep and high image that doesn't leave any voids or blank spots in the listening room. They have a way of energising the listening space with absolute grace and precision.

If you can accommodate their very generously proportioned size and pride your systems attributes on vocal representation, clear and clean imaging, precision and realism, the Centaurus A's will enthrall you.

**Build Quality - 8.5/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.5/10**

**Value for money - 8/10**

**Overall - 8.3/10**

**Speaker Cables - \$4,750 - 3m Pair**

**Interconnects - \$3,250 - 1m pair**

**Recommended for its beautiful finesse, ultra quiet background and encapsulating characteristics.**



# SoulNote SA 710 Integrated Amplifier

by Stuart Smith



Nippon Hifi are sole distributors for the SoulNote brand throughout Europe and it's they who first contacted Hifi Pig with a view to taking a listen to one of their little SA 710 integrated amplifiers. They also do a larger amp and a CD player we'll take a listen to later on.

Yes, me too! I'd never come across the SoulNote brand before but it appears they have a long and illustrious history spanning back several decades and have close ties to a Japanese chap by the name of Mr Nakazawa who is president of CSR in Japan (the first company to be listed on the Tokyo stock exchange by all accounts). It's a history that involves Marantz, Superscope and Philips, plus the launch of a number of breakthrough products including Mr Nakazawa's development of the world's first two-body CD player

(Philips LHH100) back in 1988...there are lots more products I could mention but this is a review so perhaps not the place to delve into the history books too far! Suffice to say, SoulNote was born out of the desire for Mr Nakazawa to create products free from the constraints of the "bean counters" and concentrate on delivering on sound quality for music lovers.

The SA710 isn't a new design by any stretch of the imagination having been launched in 2008 and so I was a little intrigued having not heard of this little Class A/B beastie that boasts no negative feedback and so accepted it for review with the usual caveats.

First impressions were that it looked nice enough but nothing spectacular – it's a black box of normal width with a power switch, input selector, a volume



knob (stepped) and a quarter inch headphone socket on the front. Flipping the amp round you get a good range of inputs including three line level inputs and a balanced XLR input, a gain switch that gives about 14dB lift in its high position, some nice and sturdy speaker terminals, two variable level pre-outs and the AC input. Overall it looks decently put together.

The user manual states that the speakers must be of 8 ohms or more but I connected it to the Mummy's (4 Ohm/94dB) anyway as these were the most sensitive speakers I had available and given the amps diminutive output I thought these the most suitable for the job in hand.

The manual talks about their being "spike pins" to allow the amp to sit on spikes but none were in the pack and so I never tried this option, though there are the threads on the underside of the amp should you fancy a go and they look to be standard fit.

Packaging is ok (single box and polystyrene protection) and adequate but I'd be happier having it double boxed if I was sending it out personally – though it arrived here in perfect condition which is saying something given the care most couriers seem to take over kit. Finish is pretty good and the volume and source selector knobs have a good and solid feel to them. On the rack it looks stylish in a minimal no frills kind of way and I sort of like the way it looks, though others will have it down as being a bit dull and lack lustre...it's definitely quite utilitarian!

I'll be honest and say that, given I had never heard of the SoulNote brand, I was fully expecting sending this back without review, but as I plumbed it in for the first time and turned it on there was a "crikey this sounds pretty decent" moment that happens once in a

while with review kit – sometimes it's the other way round and stuff goes straight back without a word being said other than "thanks, but no thanks".

As mentioned, this is a 10 watts a channel amplifier but given the deep bass that came out of the speakers and the control that the amp exerts over these low frequencies you'd hardly believe it was such a weedy (on paper) amplifier. The bass notes fair bounce along and are tight, controlled and deep. In the bass department (I'm a bit of a bass head) this is a very capable amplifier to my mind and it certainly made a very positive first impression on me.

It was a bit of a revelatory experience listening to this amplifier if I'm honest and the last time I had this kind of feeling was listening to Neil Young on the Tellurium Q Iridium for the first time. I was a bit gob smacked with the SoulNote from the off. I was telling Hifi Pig colleague (Danny) on the phone about first turning it on and had goosebumps whilst talking about it – surely a good sign.

The first record I put on was Deep Dish's "Yoshiesque Two" which is a great tech/house album that rarely fails to please but does put amp and speakers through the wringer. Tonight really was no disappointment in any way and there's that great bass quality that I mentioned, crisp and sparkling highs and an overall balance that suggests that this is a great little amp. Sound stage is wide and there is some depth too – in no way three dimensional but pretty good. The amp is neither cold and harsh nor warm and fluffy but overall pretty neutral in its character.



Simple connectivity with all the usual suspects present and correct plus a couple of extras

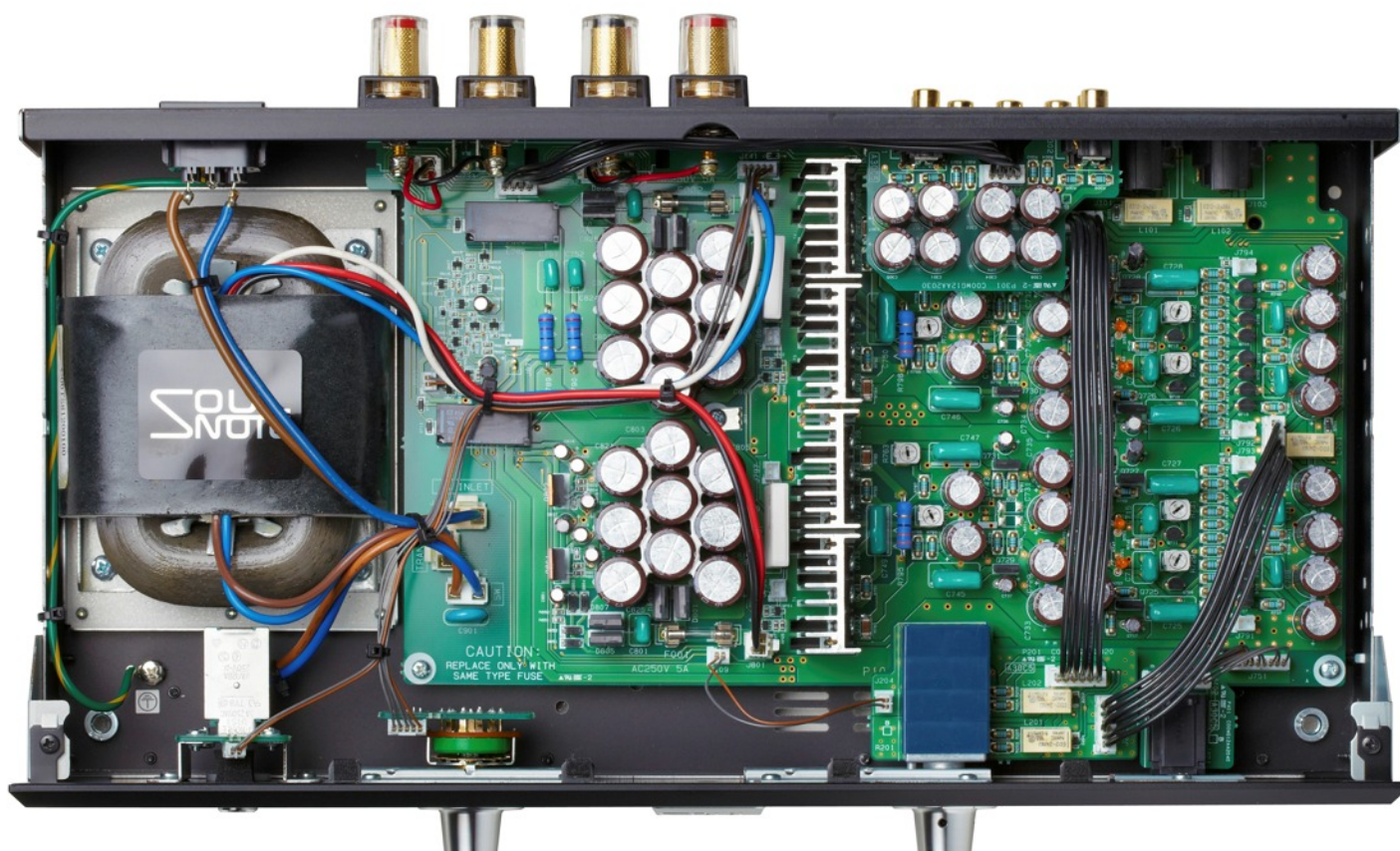
# Reviews

It's dynamically engaging too as on Hawkwind's "Warrior at the Edge of Time" album and it's able to portray the full on acid freak-out wall of sound, but also communicate minor details of the mix nicely and with a good deal of finesse that belies its modest output and relatively modest pricepoint. In some ways this amp reminded me of my much lamented 300B PSE amplifier which is high praise indeed!

As I'm writing this I'm aware I'm becoming a little gushing, but I do think this is a good amplifier and especially for the money they are asking. When I put a posting up on Facebook about us reviewing this amp a while ago there was a comment made along the lines of "10W for €1800 is ridiculous" but in hifi, as in life, it isn't necessarily about who has the biggest willy waving rights in the Watt department and often it's more to do with how those Watts are used to give a great and emotionally satisfying experience... and it's here the SoulNote really delivers.

On the negative side I do think that you will need reasonably sensitive speakers with this amp to allow the 10 Watts to really sing (even with that 14dB boost) and if you feed it with crap it will dish out crap. But feed it good quality files through speakers that are relevant and I think many will love this amp. I'm not sure about the thing about speakers needing to be 8 Ohms either as this would suggest the amp may be unstable with more difficult loads, but I certainly had no problems with the Mummys. The emotional connection to the music (and isn't that what hifi is all about) with this amp is really at a high level, but in the grand scheme of things that doesn't add up to a whole hill of beans in the reviewing game...you want to know how it actually sounds don't you?

I played a lot of techno and house music through this amplifier as I simply loved the slam and overall feel with this genre, but being able to play one kind of music does not a great amplifier make! Roy Harper's "Flat, Baroque and Broke" was on next and there are not a lot of negative comments to be made – again I was pleasantly reminded of my 300B amp. It's very







smooth in the midrange but seems to be delivering the power across the frequencies fairly evenly and without a great deal of effort – it just doesn't seem to get in a flap and get all flustered even when pushed to pretty loud volumes. There's a good degree of openness to the music too which I liked with instruments sitting in their own space in the mix.

"Acoustic guitar sounds wonderful" I wrote in my notes, but there is a tiny bit of brittleness to the very top end but you do have to listen out for it. There is good amount of detail to the sound that does again belie this amp's relatively modest price-point. There is an "in the room" experience on the tune "I Hate the Whiteman" with the level of detail being very high but without being too in your face and overwhelming. Vocals are well portrayed being clean and relatively lifelike with only a little colour being added by the amp and the main vocal being slightly forward in the mix. The midrange frequencies are a certainly a strong point of this amplifier.

Soundstaging isn't overblown or exaggerated and what you get overall is a natural and organic sounding amplifier. There is little in the way of this amp feeling at all over analytical and things have an

unforced feel to them which I enjoyed a lot.

On acoustic music there is good space around instruments and a delicacy to the way instruments are portrayed. The sonic image doesn't get blurred with complex music as the Onix amp we recently reviewed had a slight tendency to do, but then you don't get the same degree of oomph you got with the Onix... though the SoulNote does have more control in the bottom end and this leads to a pleasantly engaging punchiness - it just doesn't go as low as the Onix I didn't think.

At high volume (but without clipping) the very top end gets a bit brittle as I mentioned, but listening at low levels you get a good balance of the frequencies and also good insight into the sound. The midrange does dominate a little at these volumes, but there is still that feeling that everything is represented properly. Lovers of late night listening sessions will really enjoy this amp I think!

The headphone output is adequate and a useful addition to proceedings, but isn't going to win any prizes with those dedicated to headfi. It goes loud

# Reviews

and it is powerful, driving the three pairs of cans I had to listen to with ease – it just doesn't seem to have the same level of intimacy and openness that the amplifier itself brings to the table. Most occasional headphone users will find it more than sufficient for their needs I think!

## Conclusion

It goes without saying that I really enjoyed my time with this little amplifier and if what I've said in the course of the review appeals to you and you're in the market for a well put together, great sounding amplifier that doesn't cost a fortune then try and get a listen to it. You'll need to have relatively sensitive loudspeakers though. Price wise I think it punched slightly above its weight and I stand by my comments comparing it to my 300B PSE amplifier.

It does all genres pretty well (no classical music listened to i'm afraid) with its strong points being an open, detailed sound that you can listen to for hours on end. It has a strong midrange and good punchy and tight bass. The very top end does give way a

little, but this was a minor negative point in an overall sea of positives.

The little SoulNote is pretty basic in its facilities, but more than adequate for listening to music but it has no AV facilities and no remote control.

What this amp does in conclusion is just get on with the job of playing music and as such it will appeal to those people that love music rather than the kit that the music is played on and for this I recommend it.

**Build Quality - 8/10**

**Sound Quality – 8.5/10**

**Value for money – 8.0/10**

**Overall – 8.2/10**

**Price when reviewed - €1799**

**Recommended for listeners looking for a no frills yet reasonably specified integrated amplifier that delivers an effortless sound at both high (if you have the right speakers) and low volume without breaking the bank.**



# Akiko Audio 音



# Temple Audio Bantam Gold Integrated Amplifier

by Stuart Smith



**Hifi Pig**

RECOMMENDED

# Reviews

I'd been waiting to get hold of one of these little amps for a long time ever since I read about them on one of the many hifi forums and then when I read that one of our readers was using the power amplifier version on the end of a Shindo Labs pre amplifier I just had to get one in for review...and fast. There seems to be a good few folk who are ditching their uber-expensive amps in exchange for these little class D affairs, so what gives?

Temple are a family business that sells direct to the public and are based in the UK. They offer a number of products including the amplifier we're reviewing here, monoblocks, a headphone and pre-amplifier, the Bantam Classic and the Bantam USB with everything coming with a 60 day no quibble money back guarantee plus three year warranty - can't say fairer than that then!

Just how tiny this amp actually is came as a bit of a shock if truth be known – they are very small indeed and come with just a push button on/off switch which glows blue when powered up, a volume knob and then round the back a pair of decent quality speaker binding posts and a single pair of stereo RCA inputs. One input, no switches and that's your

lot. Now I don't mention this lack of facilities as being a bad thing at all as this is a low cost and purposefully minimal on features amp that to be fair satisfies my input needs most of the time. It's solid feeling, certainly reasonably well put together and offers up a surprising 25 Watts via a chip. On the rack it looks absolutely lost it's so small, but then size isn't everything and it coped fine with the heavy Ultra Black speaker cables I was using without being dragged down the back of the rack. The amp comes with a dedicated wallwart but many people are using a dedicated battery supply with reportedly very good results, though for the purposes of this review I'll be sticking to the standard PSU it arrived with. The paint job on the amp I had was a little lumpy in places but overall absolutely acceptable.

As I'd read so much about this amplifier being the best thing since part-baked foccacia it was straight in at the deep end for it and so I plumbed it into the main system. Now at around £200 (£189.99 to be precise) putting the Bantam Gold in the company of kit costing god knows how much would seem at first glance to be absolutely nuts, but the hype around these amps is huge and, as I mentioned, folk are using them in high-end systems in favour of much







more expensive offerings and so I thought this was a warranted and legitimate exercise... but the review does need to be read in the context of a £200 amp in a £15K plus system.

During the review period I used digital files throughout with some being ripped as FLAC from CD and some being Hi Resolution downloads. The DAC used was the VAD DAC, the speakers hORNS Mummys and the cables were all Tellurium Q. Source was a laptop running JRiver and Bliss and a NAS for storage.

First impressions were very positive on Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here". The mids are nicely done, the bass is deep enough and nice and tight, but the top end was quite harsh I thought. I contacted Temple Audio about this and was asked if I'd run the amp in which I duly did for a few weeks before restarting the review process proper.

On my return to the tiny little Bantam I found it in many ways quite similar to the SoulNote amp we were reviewing at the same time – revealing, punchy and quite dynamic, but where this amp fell down a little in my opinion and in comparison, was still in the top end. Running in had calmed things down a

good deal, but there was still a feeling that this amp wouldn't compete with the best out there at the frequency extremes. Now don't get me wrong as we're comparing a sub £200 amplifier with an €1800 amp and so the more expensive amplifier really should be better - and it certainly is to my mind. The Onix amp we recently reviewed was in some ways a better amp too, but again that is four times the price of the Bantam. Where the Onix was warmer and more forgiving the Bantam is ruthless and unforgiving and it's certainly a good deal leaner and less warm with a good degree of transparency.

On some hi-rez piano files I found the amp to render the sound a little unnaturally when compared to the reference amp and this niggles at me quite a bit. However, the bass and mids with the Bantam Gold were thoroughly enjoyable and you get a really good portrayal of the stereo image in both depth and width. Vocals were very nicely portrayed and separated from the other instruments in the mix.

Listening to "Closer" from the Deadmau5 album I think I've discovered what this amp does really well (and I mean REALLY well) and that's that side-chained compression pump that is ubiquitous on modern dance and techno. Here the bass was really

# Reviews

good and, despite what I've said earlier, so was the top end. OK, so we're talking about a specific genre of music here, but what was coming out of the speakers was deep, detailed and thoroughly enjoyable. Perhaps further burning in was beginning to pay dividends. On the strength of what I heard with lots of house and techno, I'd suggest that if you like these genres then this is a great choice of amp for you if you're on a budget and have reasonably sensitive loudspeakers – it really is very good indeed and everyone in the house listening was in agreement with this.

Now I'm going to allow myself to be sidetracked a little here but I'm forever banging on at people ([read my rant here](#)) that how in the 80s every teenager wanted the standard “beginners” system of a Dual turntable, a NAD amp and a pair of Wharfedale or KEF something-or-others and it strikes me that what we have here with the Bantam is the modern day equivalent of the old NAD 3020 amps – something that gives you a great big slice of the audiophile pie but leaving you craving for more...if that makes sense. Jerry listened to the similarly priced Amptastic amp recently and enjoyed that a good deal, but sadly I don't have one here to do a direct comparison – I'd like to very much and if it happens I'll add a little post script. What I do have is one of the second generation T Amps from Sonic Impact and in a direct comparison the Bantam Gold wipes the floor with its older chip based counterpart – it's similar in flavour but you just get more of everything, more controlled and just “better” in every respect with the Bantam Gold.

Anyway back to the music and on with Chic's “Good Times” and we've got an expressive and dynamic sound with great separation of instruments in the mix and a particularly tuneful bass – certainly no one-note-fart-fest here! On the Streets “Too Much Brandy” tune there's a richness to the bass but on other tracks from the same album the really deep bass can be a little much for the Bantam and it does struggle a little.

On most acoustic music I found the Bantam to be a real hoot and thoroughly enjoyed it. The Great Reunion album I play a lot had musicians stood on the stage in the correct places and again the vocal was rich and well defined in its space. Horns were natural enough sounding but again I found pianos to sound ever so slightly not quite right.

## Conclusion

I don't think this amp is the panacea that some are claiming it to be, but I still believe that it is a very good amplifier that offers exceptional value for money and will offer a great introduction to what is available in the audiophile world without having to spend a fortune. I also believe that for a person starting out down the slippery audiophile slope the amp will allow them to climb a good few more rungs up the ladder with other kit without having to worry too much about buying a new amplifier and for that reason I think it is a great buy. If I was to be in the position of not having my main amp to use all the time then I would be happy to use the Bantam Gold, but I also think I would miss the added finesse, refinement and all round better quality afforded by what is after all a £6K amplifier.

If I was a teenager or anyone looking to get a great quality amplifier at a bargain basement price then the Bantam Gold would most certainly be on my shortlist. As I say, it will allow a buyer to upgrade other components before feeling the need to change the amplifier and in that time it will give a great deal of satisfaction and enjoyment I'm certain. In absolute audiophile terms it falls down in a couple of areas, namely at the extremes of the frequency spectrum, but who cares to be honest - it's £190, performs brilliantly in the main and you can play with power supplies to satisfy the tinkerer in you should you so desire.

In the main system it did a very good job, but was bettered by the significantly more expensive amps we had in to compare it to...and so it should be.

As a low cost amplifier to use in a second system then this really is going to be very hard to beat in my opinion...and so I bought the review sample.

**Build Quality - 8/10**

**Sound Quality – 7.5/10**

**Value for money – 9.5/10**

**Overall – 8.3/10**

**Price when reviewed - £189.99**

**Recommended for those that want to have a great introduction to what is achievable in the audiophile world and who are on a budget. Very highly recommended to those looking for a very good and low cost second system amplifier presented in a format that is easy to accommodate even when space is at a premium.**



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## ALL REVIEWS



## Slowly Rolling Camera - Slowly Rolling Camera Gearbox Records

**S**lowly Rolling Camera is a British four piece band made up of Dionne Bennett (lyrics and vocals), Deri Roberts (sound design, electronics, trombone, additional saxophone and production), Elliot Bennett (drums and drum programming) and Dave Stapleton who is the composer as well as playing keys. There's a whole host of other contributing musicians on the eponymous album (out now through Gearbox Records) and the guy that recorded and mixed this record (Andy Allan) may be familiar to some as he's worked with Massive Attack and Portishead in the past ...and this is where the heart of the Slowly Rolling Camera sound lies.



The album has eight tracks and kicks off with Protagonist which launches with haunting pads and double bass before launching into frantic broken beats. Despite the beats the overall feel is one of a cool vibe with the "You give me..." vocal being for some reason reminiscent of a Yes track from way back...but that's where the prog similarities finish!

Dream of Life is gloriously uplifting with beautiful strings and a sublime guitar line. The soaring music is complemented wonderfully by the simple and yet beautifully rendered vocal performance that leaves us with a track that puts me in mind of the masterpiece that is "Unfinished Sympathy" ...and that is high praise indeed!

Listening through the record as I have loads in the last couple of weeks I'm struck by how refreshing it is to hear live instruments used on an album that could quite easily have gone down the route of using patches and samples and this use of live instrumentation gives Slowly Rolling Camera a real vivacity to its feel.

The Rain That Falls is the third tune on side A and takes the tempo up a little whilst retaining the broken beats theme. It's a laid back tune with a really lovely and lush arrangement.

There's quite a nostalgic feel to Slowly Rolling Camera in a lot of ways but its production and sound is very much of this century. It's a calming album...and yet quite exhilarating, perfect for winding down after a

hectic day or for that Sunday morning vibe of endless cups of coffee, sun shining outside and knowing you have nothing to do for the rest of the day.

Side A finishes with Outside and it's a simple piano introduction building to a huge wall of sound via solo saxes.

The first side of Slowly Rolling Camera is very much a record about the music and instrumentation with vocals being used relatively sparingly but when they are they're used to great effect -very much a case of less is more!

Side B kicks off with Two Roads and it's simple, repetitive electric piano sound and a plaintive vocal. Of all the tracks on the album I'd say that this is the one that will have the broadest and mass appeal. That's not to suggest that Slowly Rolling Camera is a difficult record, it's far from it and is really accessible, it's just that Two Roads is what many would call the stand-out "single track" to me.

*The guy that recorded and mixed this record (Andy Allan) may be familiar to some as he's worked with Massive Attack and Portishead in the past ...and this is where the heart of the Slowly Rolling Camera sound lies.*

The album's title track is up next and is a slow string and vocal number with a slow tempo in its intro before the drum breaks begin and the tune goes soaring up into the atmosphere and getting into all the trick aerial acrobatics with the sax solo. The tune just builds and builds and builds before breaking again to bring the track to a close. Edge of your seat stuff!!!

Fragile Ground is up next and is another great tune that could well be single fodder in more sympathetic times. It's accessible and yet remains left-field enough to stand its self apart from the pop dross that seems to populate the charts these days.

Bridge brings Slowly Rolling Camera to an end with its sombre feel building to a mournful yet beautiful song...a fitting finish to this album I'd say.

In a perfect world then Slowly Rolling Camera should do very well beyond those that are already familiar with the trip-hop sound. Jazz lovers will get it, lovers of laidback vibes will groove to it, jazzers will enjoy it and it's got enough broad appeal for a really wide audience base.

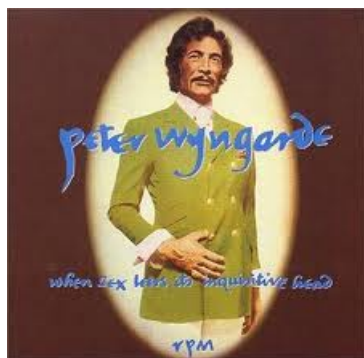
The record is beautifully recorded, nicely recorded and very well presented. Gearbox Records deliver yet again!!!

So far my record of the year.

# Album Reviews

## Peter Wyngarde - When Sex Leers its Inquisitive Head Cherry Red Records

If you watched television during the 60s and 70s (69 -74 to be more precise) in the UK then you will recognise, if not immediately, Peter Wyngarde's Jason King character from ITC's Department S program.



For those not familiar then take Austin Powers and inject it directly in the gentleman's region with a gallon or so of testosterone and you're beginning to get there. Peter Wyngarde's character was a TV sleuth masquerading as a crime writing "shag-monster" who would seduce and "liberate" his on-screen conquests from their daily lives of drudgery and transport then to a world they'd only previously read about in seedy pulp fiction novels.

He was a serious actor and was nominated twice for "Actor of the Year" and by the end of the swinging 60s had starred in over 120 plays and so when this record came out the first time on RCA in 1970 (when Mr Wyngarde was at the height of his popularity) it must have been more than a little shocking - even in a time of relative permissiveness when compared to only a few years prior.

This new release on Cherry Red (out 17th March) can only be described as being absolutely and utterly stark raving nuts! If you were expecting a little tongue in cheek Austin Powers naughtiness and tongue in cheek slap and tickle then think again!

This record kicks off with the 60's theme-music-esque "Come In" where Wyngarde's upper class lovey spoken word vocals set the scene by way of welcome to this evenings "victim" before moving into track 2's "You Wonder Where These Things Begin" which is more seedy spoken word over Greensleeves type music. And then in comes track three. Now there are some pretty direct and forthright titles for tunes out there but this one is particularly straight to the point and is called "Rape". Yep, you read it right ...Rape! Utterly, utterly nuts and certain to raise an eyebrow or two. To say it is politically incorrect is akin to suggesting that Hitler was a bit misunderstood. In these politically correct charged times (or any other time for that matter) this song can only be described as dodgy on so many levels it's untrue. It wouldn't be too far off the mark to tick the racist and

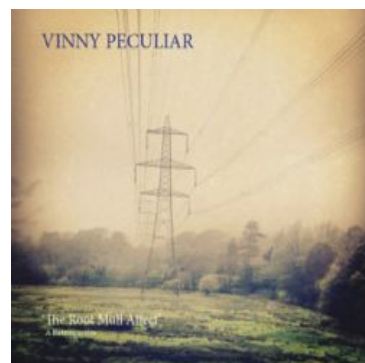
misogynistic boxes before you've got 15 seconds into the tune.

This record really wasn't what I was expecting at all and I'm pretty certain it got (and will get) pretty much zero airplay. It will appeal to some folk as a social document of the times as being quite interesting. The supporting bump says "This record's outrageousness often overwhelms what would still be one of the more bizarre episodes in popular music" and I think that pretty much sums this record up.

Like I say...NUTS!...but then quite a compelling listen in a strange voyeuristic kind of way. File under dodgy-under-the-counter-brown-paper-bag-man-in-mac-porn section of your collection...if you have one!

## Vinny Peculiar - The Root Mull Affect. A Retrospective Cherry Red Records

Alan Wilkes (AKA Vinny Peculiar - his real name is "lame") is a Salford (NW England) based singer songwriter and "The Root Mull Affect" is a collection of outtakes and remixes picked from 15 years of his recordings and represents his 10th album release.



Some will be aware of Vinny Peculiar and he has indeed worked with some well known folk in his time like Bill Drummond, Tom Robinson and Luke Haines whilst his various bands have included members of The Smiths, Oasis, Aztec Camera and the Fall.

The Root Mull Affect is a wonderful collection of tunes and kicks off with "A Vision" which is a great story of psychedelic whimsy of the day John Cooper Clarke joined The Beatles. The new remix of "Jesus Stole My Girlfriend" is superb and tells the story of ...well you can guess I'm sure.

"Flatter and Deceive" is a pseudo-country number of Peculiar's life up to the date of writing the song and is very "northern" with its deadpan and self effacing lyric - I lived this tune much as I really loved the whole of this record. It manages to blend humour, tragedy and pathos in equal measure (Confessions of a Sperm Donor is a perfect example) whilst remaining very much in the pop vein and very much accessible. Lyrically it tells wonderful short stories of every day life that are both funny and moving.



The Root Mull Affect came out on 10th March on Cherry red and comes very much recommended. It's the perfect introduction to Peculiar's work (which warrants further investigation for the uninitiated) and is a useful addition to existing fans' collections. I found it highly addictive and lyrically it could only be the product of a Northern mind and made me feel right at home immediately!

## Wolfmother - New Crown Alternative Nation

Well, this one came as a bit of a shock.

After several lineup changes, the temporary hijacking of the band's material by increasingly egotistical frontman Andrew Stockdale and a break-up which lasted about a month,

Wolfmother have pulled a Beyonce. No they haven't been captured un-photogenically at a Superbowl half-time show, they've dropped a surprise new album.

When the Aussie lads burst onto the scene with their debut album a decade ago, they were a breath of fresh(ish) air blasting straight out of 1969 and into the charts and festival circuits. A lot has happened since then, critical and commercial failures, acrimonious lineup changes and Andrew Stockdale enjoying the view from up his own arse... so, are they still the kings of retro-rock?

I love the "no hype" approach here. Just drop the album with no fanfare at all and it will take care of itself right? No need for Daft Punk-esque media saturation, get it done, get it out and we're off to a good start.

And a good start is as good as it gets I'm afraid. This is rock & roll as base and generic as you're likely to hear. The riffs and arrangements are so predictable and clichéd that even the most workmanlike of bedroom guitarists could jam along like a pro on the first listen.

Despite the band claiming not to emulate the likes of 'Sabbath & 'Zeppelin, half the riffs on 'New Crown' have been ripped wholesale from 'Master of Reality' and had Stockdale's irritatingly unfocused vocal wail pasted on top. They don't stop at aping the Sabs either.

Stoner kings Kyuss are ripped off mercilessly... add the Hammond organ and you've got fellow Aussies Legends

of Motorsport.... and Stockdale's violent over-use of his octave pedal would make Jack White blush.

In addition to the hackneyed and unimaginative songs, the playing is pure slop. Tight they ain't. The drumming is all over the place (especially in the final track "I Don't Know Why") and the riffs & solos are so amateurish as to sound like there's superglue on the bloody strings. We're not talking on-the-fly improvisations or back to basics stuff here... this is the work of a third rate garage band.

Augmenting the inept and feeble compositions is the wildly differing production between tracks. Some sound like they were recorded in a boomy tin shed while others have studio sheen and a crisp high end, which would make any album a frustratingly inconsistent listen, let alone one without a hint of any redeeming features.

A few of the tracks are downright laughable. "Enemy is your Mind" is an unashamed Sabbath rip and features guitar work that sounds akin to a drunken cross-eyed Jack White if he'd had half his cerebral cortex removed.

"Feelings" is a disastrous attempt by the band to go "punk". I can't convey how bad this song is... really. Next.

***They set out on the wrong foot by stumbling over a mess of fuzzed out octave pedals, then lazily set up base camp at a rudimentary chromatic riff before calling the whole thing off and fucking off back home for milk & cookies.***

"I Don't Know Why"... Take Tame Impala's guitar sound and add a drummer who's just swallowed a handful of valium washed down with a dozen bourbon & cokes and you're somewhere around the mark. Bizarrely I think this mess was executed this way deliberately. "I Don't Know Why"? I fucking don't either.

And of course there are the "psychedelic explorations" of the title track. Unsurprisingly our intrepid explorers' adventure doesn't really reach any Odyssean heights. They set out on the wrong foot by stumbling over a mess of fuzzed out octave pedals, then lazily set up base camp at a rudimentary chromatic riff before calling the whole thing off and fucking off back home for milk & cookies. Epic it ain't.

The worst thing about this album is the horribly egregious derivation. The looseness and bad production I can forgive... the borderline plagiarism I can't. Looming large over the whole thing are the specters of Messrs Osbourne, Iommi, Butler and Ward. .

I hate to kick the shit out an easy target, really I do, but this album is terrible. If you want good quality Aussie hard rock which harkens to the heady days of the late '60s, there are four girls called Stonefield.



# Album Reviews

'New Crown' gets a couple of points for "My Tangerine Dream" and "Radio" which are reasonable tracks... unfortunately they just don't have any company.

*Stewart Hall*

## Loleatta Holloway - Loleatta Big Break Records

There's a slew of great disco albums being released at the moment and I reviewed Loleatta Holloway's "Queen of the Night" only a short while ago - any excuse as I'm quite a fan of this dance music legend and pleased her music is being made available to a new and younger generation. This eponymous album was first released in 1979 and represented Holloway's third album on GoldMind/Salsoul and was the follow up to the aforementioned "Queen of the Night".

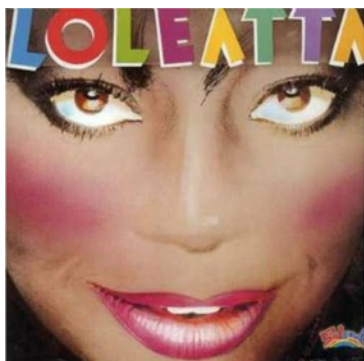
Producers on this particular album include jazz futurist Floyd Smith, Bobby Womack and Bunny Siger using both the Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia and Muscle Shoals Sound Studios in Alabama,

This new release on BBR contains the original seven tunes plus four disco/extended version including a fabulous version of the album's opening track "The Greatest Performance of my Life" by Paradise Garage's legendary Larry Levan.

Musically Loleatta is much as you'd expect - disco-funk with Holloway's gloriously soulful vocals over the top. The album kicks off with "The Greatest Performance of my Life" which is a belter of a tune telling a tragic tale. "It's All About the Paper" was a single but it was this singles B side ("What You Said") which is also on Holloway that grabbed the DJs of the days attention.

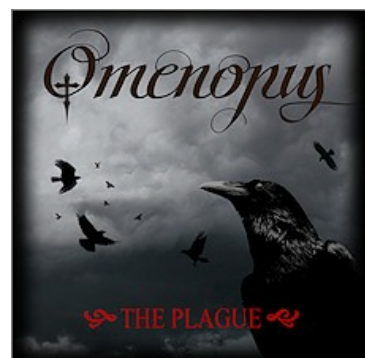
"There'll Come A Time" is an end of night soulful and much slower paced tune that's simply the perfect vehicle for Hooloway's rooted-in-gospel vocal style.

This record is a bit of a must have for lovers of the soulful disco style and given the new passion for this kind of music expressed in clubs such as Glasgow's "melting Pot" it should be bought by the new generation of disco evangelists.



## OmenOpus - Plague/Scars EP Monty Maggot Records

I thoroughly enjoyed the sheer energy and other-worldliness sci-fi themes of OmenOpus' Archives album I reviewed a couple of months ago and so was really looking forward to giving this CD a spin. It's labelled as a two disc EP Album and was released in May 2012 on the brilliantly named Monty Maggot Records.



The first CD I picked out of the case was actually the Plague EP which is a four track EP that starts off with the hugely evocative and somewhat dark "Plague of Ten" (Plague Part I) with lyrics written by Bridget Wishart who also provides lyrical content for parts II, III with the words for The Plague Part iv being provided by Thomas Nashe (1592). As I say Part I is ethereal and quite beautiful in its stripped down style whereas Part II (Plague of Fire) takes a completely different route with a stonking great effected bassline. It's an equally dark track that's difficult to tag a genre - it's definitely rock but further than that I'm at a bit of a loss.

*They're an interesting band are OmenOpus and, as I think I've mentioned before they're very difficult to pigeonhole.*

The Plague Part III (Solitude) is back to the atmospherics with some beats slightly reminiscent of trip-hop in parts.

"A Litany in a Time of Plague" (Plague Part iv) has that lyric from 1592 I mentioned and in parts the whole tune takes on a medieval vibe but then it gets fused with atmospheric synths before breaking into a metal-rock-space-thing.

They're an interesting band are OmenOpus and, as I think I've mentioned before they're very difficult to



# Album Reviews

pigeonhole. They're certainly on the darker side of things (plague is hardly the cheeriest of subject matter to begin with) and they do have moments of beauty but also violence within the same track and I think they'd be of huge appeal to a goth audience - but please don't let that put you off exploring OmenOpus as they're interesting in a world of mass mediocrity.

The second EP in the pack is called Scars (another jolly title then) has six tracks and opens with the tune "Sentiments". I suppose this is a similarly post-goth style mixing as it does the light with the dark and beauty with violence.

"Songline" has the protracted drone of a didgeridoo throughout the track to compliment the sparse aboriginal vocal theme whilst "Brookleaze" is beautifully sparse with just strings and piano sounds that create an enchantingly beautiful tune that juxtaposes "The Binary Dimensions" moonlanding soundscapes. It's tripped out stuff but I also think it's also very clever indeed and whilst you get into

thinking that Omen Opus are all a bit experimental and odd and different up comes the tune "My Secret Ghost" which is much more straightforward ....space rock...I think, though Wishart's vocal adds a

***I suppose this is a similarly post-goth style mixing as it does the light with the dark and beauty with violence.***

menacing, unearthly quality to the proceedings. "Second Sight" finishes off the EP and it's industrial in parts, acid rock in others...but then wait a minute here comes some metal for good measure.

Call OmenOpus what you like, to be honest I haven't got the foggiest idea to be honest, but they are certainly an interesting (and at times disturbing) band that deserve your attention...with a head full of acid they'll be fabulous - if a bit on the darker side of things. Personally I really like their music but then I can understand why others would find the music of Omen Opus a little jarring. Enter at your own risk!

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# Behind the Brands with Funjoe of CLONES audio



## Your History

### • How did you get into/what was your first job in the industry?

It is all because of my father. He wanted to have an audio system like the one I have and so I went and built one as a birthday gift to him. After listening to it he told me he thought it was good enough to sell and so I simply started to sell it online.

Also I want to make my dream come true before my son was born (You know, there is no easy way to do some crazy idea when you've got a young child.). I wanted to show him that whatever you dream just go ahead and it will come true. I was a graphic designer before CLONES audio.

### • Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

My father... really. I was interested in audio when I was 13 and my father gave me so much support for this and we were always talking about and studying around the topic of audio.

### • Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

The 25i I think. It won awards more than I expected including the Hifi Pig Recommended award. It brought CLONES to the attention of the World market.

## You and your system

### • What was your very first system?

The very first system I had was the opamp based LM386 amplifier kit with Sony speakers in my room. It made me interested in audio but the very first audiophile system was the ProAc Tablette II speakers, Pioneer CLD-3380 LD/CD player, Audio Alchemy Dac in the box and a Class A solid state preamp plus 30W pure class A power amp built by myself.

### • Tell us about your system history

Wooah... really lots and so I will list some things I was really impressed by.

For Solid State: I was a fan of Jeff Rowland. I owned the model 1,2,8T and synergy preamp. Gryphon is one of my favourite also Bel Canto, S100, DM100. Krell KSA50, FPB300... Symphonic Line RG7...



# Behind the Brands

For tube: Audio Research SP9, SP11, Classic 30, 60.  
Air Tight ATM-4 bi-amp with KEF LS3/5A is one of the best combos I've owned

•**What component/product do you miss the most/wish you had never got rid of?**

The Gryphon Combo. (The LE preamp is one of the most beautiful preamps I even seen and heard)

•**Best system (or single component) you have ever heard (no brands you represent please...!)**

MFA MC-Reference + Wavestream V8 Mono

•**Tell us about your current system(s)**

Source: Mac mini with the SSD and CLONES audio mPSU Power supply

DAC: CLONES Audio SHEVA DAC, Weiss DAC2, Antelope Zodiac with the power supply mod

Amps: CLONES AP1 + 55pm

Speaker: Volent Paragon VL-2 and KEF LS50

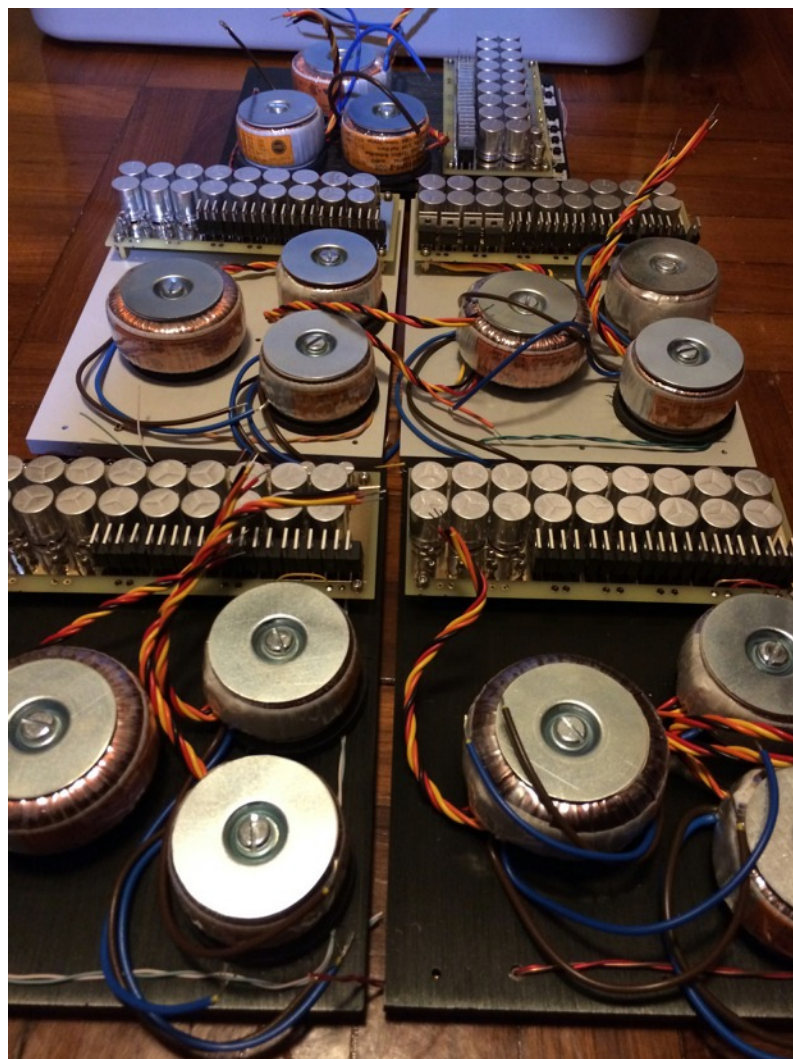
Cables: Signal and interconnect by Blackcat. Power chord by Zonotone.



## The state of the industry

•**What's your view on the valve renaissance of the past 20 years or so?**

It is the cycle of the trend. I like the simple circuits and I believe that it is audibly better. You can argue that single-ended tube sound is still hard to beat when you compare it with the latest in circuit design. In fact I am a fan of tubes...especially single end.



•**What are you views on the state of the industry/where is it going/what will it look like in 5 years/what will typical systems look like?/What will happen to prices?/What will happen to the high end – will it carry on regardless?**

The computer will become the main source of the new generation. You can see it is unstoppable. But on the other side the LP and vinyl renaissance will keep going I think. More and more compact size and delicate hi-end products will surface I think rather than big monster systems

•**What are the industry's biggest con(s)?**

The trend is changing too fast. The period of the product is also too short. We can't afford to spend more than a year to design the product especially when talking about DACs - things just change so quickly. Maybe it is already out-dated when your production is done if you took too long a time. It's just something like what happened in the Computer market. Everything is just too fast and too rushed... It is easy to drown if you are just following the wave of a trend.

## The way you work

# Behind the Brands

- Presuming the measurements are fine, what do you listen for when assessing products?**

For me measurements are just part of the reference. The listening result is more important.

- Your sound preference - ‘Smooth, listenable musicality’, ‘forward, driving, ‘foot-tapping’, involving sound’ or ‘detailed neutrality and transparency’?**

Smooth, listenable musicality. We need something that can touch to the soul of music not just performing.

- Your preference - Full-range floorstanders or freestanding mini monitors with a sub?**

The Bookshelf speaker would be my favour. But not with the sub.

**It’s all about the music, man...**

- What is your favourite recording?**

At this moment in time it’s “Boys Don’t Cry” by Rumer

- Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings**

“Boys Don’t Cry” by Rumer: not the best vocal recording but it is good for testing the balance of the tone.

“Jazz at the Pawnshop”: One of the best live records ever. Good for testing the sound stage.

“The Well” By Tord Gustavsen Quartet: One of the best jazz records and my reference for the detail and balancing...

- What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures**

When I was small and living with my parents. My mother would get angry when I was playing Live concerts like my favourite “On the Night” by Dire Straits. Now, my wife also complains when I play something like this... I don’t know maybe be woman usually like that!

- Having safely ushered your loved ones out of the house as it is burning down to the ground, you ignore all standard safety advice and dash back inside to grab just one recording – what is it?**

If only one, it would be the Soundtrack of the film “Sleepless of Seattle”. The combination of my most favourite inside. I can play it on loop all day!





# **Hifi Pig** Magazine **COMPETITION**



## **WIN an amptastic Mini-1 amplifier worth £99**

When Jerry Jacobs reviewed the amptastic Mini-1 amplifier for Hifi Pig he had the following to say about it. "I am awestruck by this amp. Not just 'for the money', but in absolute terms. It's a great amplifier, full stop. If I was unable to continue my 'boxswap' habit, enjoying the variety provided by a frequently varying audio system, what would my "final amp" be? - in truth, I'd be more than happy if it was the Amptastic Mini-1. I could not say that for the vast majority of the many amps that have passed through my system over the past 30 years or so of my obsession with this hobby. I'm not sure that I can give a recommendation stronger than that.

## **TO ENTER**

To be in with a chance of winning simply subscribe to the Hifi Pig monthly newsletter and we'll randomly draw the lucky winners from everyone registered on the closing date of the competition.

## **CLICK HERE**

### **TERMS AND CONDITIONS**

The winner of each of the prizes will be drawn randomly from all the people subscribing to the Hifi Pig monthly newsletter on the 28th April 2014. The competition is open to all readers with a European address and aged over 18 except for Hifi Pig contributors and their household.

By entering the competition you are giving permission for Hifi Pig to publish your name and information when the winners are announced.

No Cash alternative is available.

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