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REVIEWS

Zontek Turntable
Timestep T-01MC Phonostage
Transfiguration Axia S Cartridge
Devialet Ensemble
Primare I32 Integrated Amplifier With
DAC and Media Board
Tisbury Audio Passive Pre Mk 2
Etalon Solo DAC/PRE
Ophidian Minimo Loudspeakers
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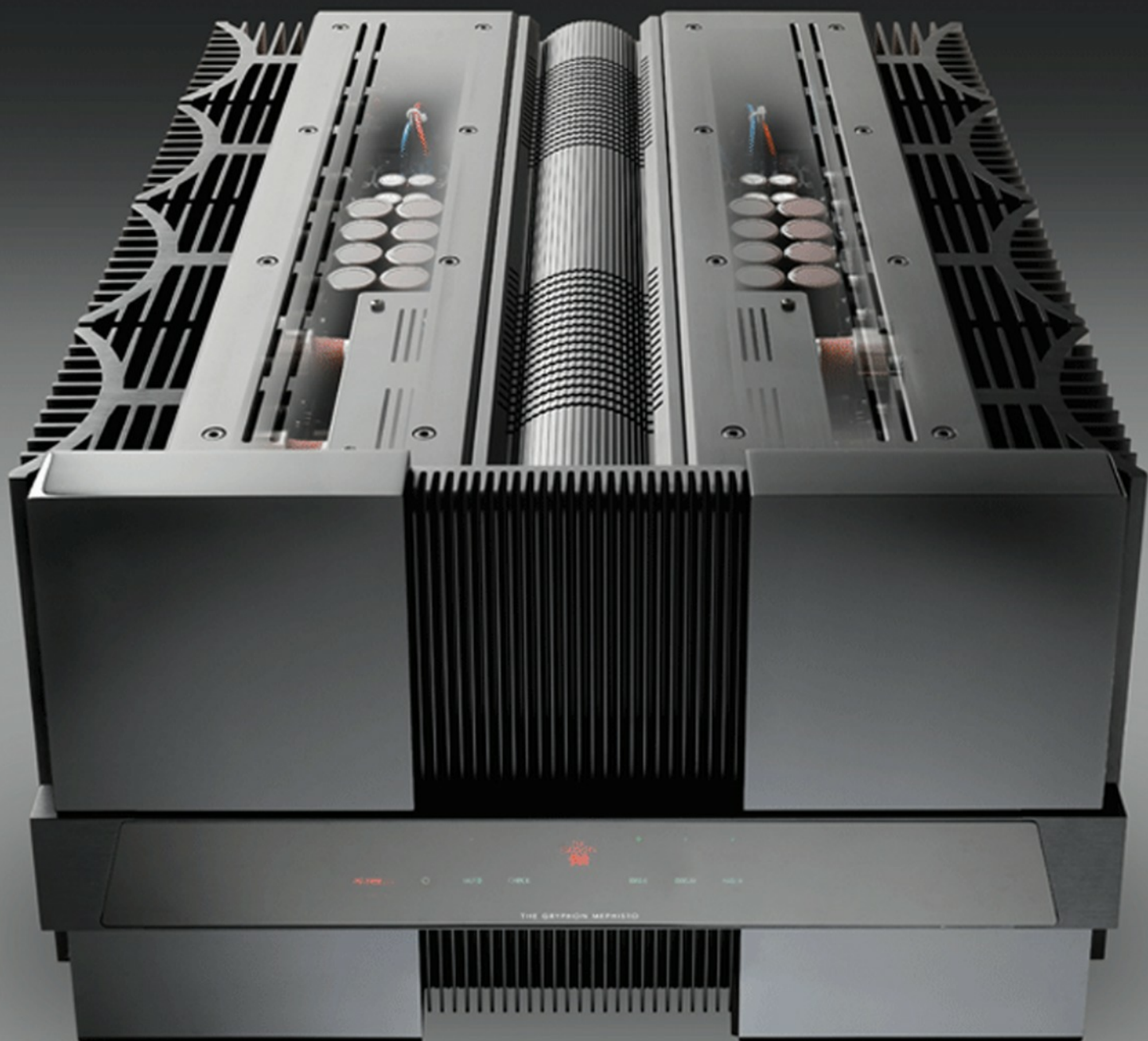
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ZONTEK TURNTABLE

Polish Vinyl Spinner

Janine Elliot takes a listen to this beautifully finished, £11,990 turntable and arm from Polish artisan manufacturer Zontek.



ZONTEK TURNTABLE

What does the Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference and the new Zontek turntable have in common? Very little, apart from large round belt traversing the platter – or in the case of the Zontek, two of them.

The reason I decided to get out and rebuild my aged Michell built icon from Stanley Kubrick's Clockwork Orange will become clearer as I delve into the music. Initially it was appearance of the circular anti-magnetic steel weights etched into the aluminium platter for additional suppression of resonances that made me think of my dusty

Transcriptors (as well as the JBE Series 3 and even a Strathearn turntable, if my memory goes back that far) with the strobe on the edges perhaps more akin to a Technics. This increased total diameter is intended to provide additional stability and applying a greater gyroscopic effect. This was a very retro design from Mr Pawel *Zontek* made from solid mahogany, matching well with the art-deco design of the Zontek phonostage which I was also honoured to have a chance to play with.

With the Transcriptors and Zontek turntables I couldn't have gone further in opposite directions; the



ZONTEK TURNTABLE



Transcriptors relying on minimal contact between record, platter and plinth and with an anorexic 'S' shaped titanium arm with knife edged balanced high-compliance ($20\text{-}30\mu\text{m/mN}$) SME arm, compared with a $14\frac{1}{2}$ inch magnetically supported ebony arm with compliance down to between $5\text{ - }9\mu\text{m/mN}$ on the Zontek with the record held down firmly on a magnetic suspension floating 35kg platter. At its launch in 1964 the elder would have set you back £69 and 6shillings, compared with an average of £2,400 for a new house. In 2015 this Zontek will cost €11,990 with an average new house price of £286,000. If you get where I am going here, the similarity of perspective is uncanny. But in the changing perspective in today's hi-fi world is this turntable worth that price? We'll find out more on that later.

Where the Transcriptors won the London Design Award in 1971, I have to admit the Zontek, with its highly original twin-triangle solid mahogany design with chrome plated trim forming a middle

layer (more about this later) and adjustable feet, which allow for a further two arms, could easily deserve a place in Tate Modern. The Delta Arm which comes with it is equally magnificent, and I loved the side facing Neutrik RCA sockets allowing me to choose my own cable, and incidentally not having to delve up its backside to prod in my cables, as is the case in many others.

My biggest problem in reviewing this behemoth was its sheer weight! Greg Drygala, from GPoint Audio, turned up with two massive aluminium boxes on a trolley; one containing the turntable and another containing a phono stage and power supply (more on these later). With such heavy hi-fi, it is not only necessary to have aluminium boxes to help protect the equipment, but because it is so heavy you really do need metal handles each end to lift it. Oh, and give it that professional touch. A very good selling ploy, though I'm not sure where I would be able to store these boxes. Greg spent an hour lovingly setting up his baby, something that again gives this

ZONTEK TURNTABLE

product a sense of worth and desire. The instruction manual on the website was very much better than many, though in places somewhat hard to understand.

“For experts only. The tonearm suspension is able to adjust the magnetic slot. That impacts tonearm rigid and can be helpful with too high or too low resonances.”

Luckily there was no need to read it as Greg is part of the purchase.

All in at 60kg including platter my poor back and hi-fi racks found this all very, very hard work. Did this excessive weight give for a deeper bass, well actually no. Bass was there, but my Transcriptors (yes, I know, different type of cartridge and arm) actually gave a weightier though much more vague bottom end, and for a product originally designed as a stage prop was quite musical, if not obviously worth a Zontek. What all this weight did help, though, was in giving as good a wow and flutter as I had ever experienced from the infamous Swiss Papst motor in my review sample. The latest version of this turntable will use an equally acceptable Premotec DC 7W motor. Greg told me that the extra plinth

weight gives “perfect quiet background and stability”. The platter levitates above the stainless steel middle filling to the sandwich, but the wooden plinth around it acts as dampers and provides extra weight as well as being aesthetically pleasing. The turntable comes as standard with one armboard complete with the Delta arm (incidentally designed before the turntable). This armboard itself allows using almost any tonearm of any length and is equipped with a micrometry transmission engine VTA adjustments in steps of 0.01mm up to 15mm. The Delta arm is an engineering marvel, and as complicated to set up as my aged SME3. Having a magnetic suspension does mean that setting up tracking force has to be done at the record height, meaning that if you play an aged wafer-thin LP and then a 225g obesity the cartridge mass will be different, something I recently mentioned in my ClearAudio review. The Delta is made from ebony, just as the wood of my oboe and indeed most other woodwind instruments, chosen because of its sonic qualities and because of its high density; it features in most violin fingerboards and piano black notes. For Zontek, the ebony arm was decided because it gave better bass and less vibration. Indeed each arm is individually designed with extra holes in the wood to aid balancing rather than a home for woodworm.



ZONTEK TURNTABLE

The weight is two-tear-drop design, each at a different angle so that it aids bias compensation.

The Delta arm itself takes some 6-weeks to make, using the black ebony for the wand and sandwiches of ebony and bronze for the main column, though 24 carat gold or rhodium coated bronze can be fitted to special order. As in the platter, it uses a one-sided magnetic suspension system, which magically holds the arm in place and means there is no resistance to arm movement, unlike the aged nylon knife edge bearings on the SME3, which can be heard to 'grind' when playing less than helpful LPs. It also provides exacting control on anti-skating. The surprisingly heavy Zontek Delta is cleverly thought out and uses miniature worm gear to exert torsional force to the lower part of the arm's suspension, and each arm is individually tuned and adjusted to meet customer requirements, for example the cartridge mass by added weights. Indeed the arm can work with cartridges from 14g to 22g effective weight. I loved this novel arm design. No friction, and very stable in operation, with ingenious headshell allowing perfect alignment with the record groove. It didn't take me a long time to get used to it being made of ebony, and it did not look or feel feeble, though I did wonder if it might grow leaves if I watered it. Where my titanium SME3 arm was filled with damping material inside, the use of ebony here reduced any subsonic vibration from the record and the magnetic suspension stopped any motor noise getting as far as the speakers. The idea of a wooden arm isn't new, though. Grace amongst others did so in the 80's (their 747) and even NAD brought out a flat 'plastic ruler' arm in their 5120 turntable, which always made me laugh. This mammoth 14½ inch arm really was serious stuff and worked well for me and its novel design was soon forgotten as I delved deeper into the music.

The turntable is another clever design. Instead of the popular idea of square turntable and separate motor unit, or both built into the same wood structure, Mr Paweł decided to make the whole affair out of two separate triangular shapes, with smaller hidden feet underneath to keep it magically suspended. What looks like a single conventional looking plinth is actually two separate parts. What's more, the plinths are actually a sandwich of two layers of wood and a special steel plate between, which also isolates the electronic speed regulation circuitry from the platter



above. The motor itself is also decoupled from the housing, as one would expect from any decent turntable design.

With such a heavy platter and massive gear ratio between it and the motor pulley, two belts works better than one, and a stable speed was achieved within 3 seconds of pressing the illuminating green button on the front. Speed regulation is on the side, with (in the production model) two speed adjustment silver pots on the left side and a 33⅓/45 switch underneath. In the older review model there was only one pot and no switch, so speed change was done by adjustment of the pot and looking at the strobe on the platter. Whilst I had no problems in having to do this, customer requests forced Mr Powell's hand to redesign this function to the two pots and switch.

For my review Greg set up an Ortofon MC2000ii, a cartridge I have always loved, so I could compare with the Kontrapunkt *b* on my trusted Townshend Rock. I used the Manley Steelhead phonostage in this review, though did use the accompanying Art

ZONTEK TURNTABLE



Deco phonostage as well, and will give a separate review on that later.

The sound from the Zontek/Delta/Ortofon was easy to listen to; very musical but with a clarity that an SME3/V15iv could never compete with, and more relaxed than my Townshend. However, I felt that the clarity came at the expense of personality, something which was even more noticeable with the valve 5636 pentode 6N16 dual triode design of the matching Zontek phonostage. The sound was as clear as 24/192, and for me that was a disappointment. The definition and naturalness from the Zontek was absolutely marvellous, and so stable that imperfections and scratches on the records paled into *insignificance*, but for me it was like choosing between a Ferrari F12 and an Alfa Romeo 4C. OK, the latter is cheaper and probably not as good, but it has a personality that suits me better. Playing my aged 1982 Rachmaninov Piano Concerto 2

(Philharmonia Orchestra) the deep breathes from the Cypriot pianist Martino Tirimo, as he got engrossed in his music, was more real for me on my Transcriptors even though the music was far less accurate. The detail, depth and stereo spread from the Polish turntable was tops. No record I put on the platter phased it. It could cope with anything I played, and for a new company's first foray into vinyl this was epic.

Typical of David Gilmour, 'Castellonizon' (from 'On an Island') with its introductory musique concrete assortment of church bells, fireworks and country village greens, had the Zontek organize them into their individual components rather than being a mishmash of unrelated soundbites. Where the Townshend Rock gave a more forward and faster rendition, the Zontek was very relaxed and open, giving me more time to understand why the soundbites were there in the first place. The sound

ZONTEK TURNTABLE



sound was relaxed but no slower, and the bass did go down as far as my Torus infrasonic generator could go, just not quite as perfect as I hoped. The high inertia Papst motor on the review sample was perfect for the job giving a stability of speed that 50 years ago would have been impossible. Only the motor noise could be heard very slightly on the machine, though not through the speakers. Patricia Barber sang “Gotcha” (from ‘Live in Paris’) in the room in front of me, with the clarity from cymbals and tightness of bass the cleanest I had heard through my ScanSpeak tweeters and Townshend Supertweeters. Ray Davies’s lisp was clearer and therefore more noticeable in ‘Sunrise in the City’ (from ‘Working Man’s Café’), which made me wonder if the accuracy was a good thing or not.

CONCLUSION

So, was this all worth €11,990. Well, compared with a number of other turntables this is a small price to pay for the experience I had with my music, especially considering it includes the lovely arm and looks worthy of a place in Tate Modern.

It also comes complete with a styling wood/metal record clamp as standard, unlike most. If you would like to sit in the best seat in the house then expect to pay for it, and boy, did I have a good seat here. It extrapolated every detail from the music with not one frequency sounding out of place, whatever genre of music I presented it with. It was so good, particularly at mid and top frequencies with only the lowest frequencies not quite clear enough for me.

Perhaps the front damper on my Townshend Rock was too good. But, would I give up my hard earned cash, well, that depends on how much I would really want it. This is a no-expense-spared design created to get the very best out of your polyvinyl chloride plastic disc, but I guess I will need to keep my bank polyvinyl chloride card in my purse until they bring out something a bit cheaper. Shame.

Sound Quality – 9.1/10

Value for Money – 8.4/10

Build Quality – 8.6/10 (Beautiful Delta arm)

Overall – 8.7/10

was further back in the soundstage and with an equally wide stereo spread. This was damn good. This heavyweight was as nimble as the diet coke in my empty glass. Only the bass wasn’t quite as tight as I would have liked for €11,990, but I began enjoying vinyl more than I thought I’d ever be able to. You see, all the imperfections and personality from my aged Transcriptors got in the way of the recording, and now I could see why things have moved on in half a century. Where so many turntables, even today, add their own idiocentricities, this Zontek was neutral, clear and articulate. The



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TIMESTEP T-01MC PHONOSTAGE

Black Magic Box

This unassuming black box from UK manufacturer Timestep is said to punch way above its £1000 asking price. Janine Elliot finds out if this is indeed the case.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



I have several phonostages of different sizes and abilities. I still prefer listening to vinyl over anything else as it gets me closer to the music and musicians, and perhaps a few scratches. My Californian Manley Steelhead at \$7300 way back, was a big price for some big satisfaction, but I still love my little aluminium box Reflex phonostage by Graham Slee. That is a single PCB and a separate switched-mode transformer. You see, us Brits tend to put more of the thought into the electronics design, rather than making it massive boxes, knobs, lights and switches. And Dave Cawley, who designed and builds the T-01MC, continues that British tradition of engineering rather than looks. Having said that, this 1U rectangular box, looking more like a box of

Black Magic chocolates, is drop dead....magic, especially when considering the price at £5 short of a thousand. The only visible life is the on-off switch (*rather than a button*) and a gorgeous red indicator (*rather than the usual blues...*). I think the original was amber. Apart from that it just has gold plated RCA ins and outs and ground connection with a ground-lift switch. Go inside, and then its modesty continues; a PCB on the right and on the left the expensive toroidal transformer incorporates a primary/secondary interwound screen, a silicone steel screening band and is potted into a circular mild steel can, and just to make sure of no hum or buzz nothing in the middle. You might think I'm poking fun at this, but I really am not. You see, Dave

TIMESTEP T-01MC PHONOSTAGE

Cawley, like Slee, puts all his energies into the design. Flashy it isn't, functional it most definitely is.

Best known for aftermarket power supplies, and even a 78's speed controller for the Technics SL1200, Dave Cawley is also a designer of weather satellite technology and regularly visits the USA to lecture NASA scientists. He first made a phonostage in 1981 for a friend, but only recently now offering them to market. This black box is based on an old idea, only now making noises in the audio world in the last few years. Dave is quite open about its design, it having its roots in a 1960's Californian University design. There is nothing wrong with that. Any of you knowing me well will know that I still feel highly of some of my 1950's - 80's hi-fi;

"The circuit ... is a modified cascode, in much the same ways as low noise valves were used in communication systems. • This is effectively a very high gain single stage with local only (*no global*) feedback. • The RIAA equalisation is also not part of any feedback loop, in fact there are no feedback loops of any sort"

Indeed, this design is carefully sourced with the best components, from Shottkey diodes, matching high-grade Dale CMF55 resistors, Wima polypropylene capacitors in the RIAA stage, to the hand-selected FETs (*Field Effect Transistors*), sourced like fresh fish in Billingsgate market. The box it all fits in has enough room for a few fish to swim in the middle, though you would never guess by the musicality and life in this understated beast. This is pure minimalism; a one-fits-all design meaning less circuitry and switches for the shortest, cleanest signal path ensuring the highest performance. The design is based on 0.35mV sensitivity and 100Ω, 1nF

loading, designed for use on anything from a Denon DL-103 to a Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement. Luckily my Ortofon Kontrapunkt *b* works well from 100200Ω, though Dave can match your cartridge on request. If the exterior (*and interior*) looks minimalist, the use of FET regulators in the dual mono design and power supply, and (*thank goodness*) no ICs or transistors ensured a sound that immediately made me sit up and listen. The specification clearly states "transistors : none; Op

**Not only was
this so quiet,
but it was
un-phased
by anything I
played at it.**



TIMESTEP T-01MC PHONOSTAGE

amps : none; ICs : none; integrated regulators : ...”, yes, you guessed it, none. Dave tells me;

“Some think FET's are new, but in fact I was using them in the 60's as low noise VHF amplifiers. They have significant advantages especially in the area of low noise. Even some valve phonostages sneak a FET in to get the lowest noise, but you might never see it!”

Indeed this was a very quiet performer, and I had no need to connect earth from my Townshend Rock, and as long as I didn't sit it directly on top of my Krell power amp (*come on, would I do that?*) it was as quiet as my cat when he's asleep and not having a nightmare. Patricia Barber 'Live in Paris was as quiet as the audience would allow.

“JFET's have the lowest noise in the audio spectrum and that was our choice as well as Pass Labs”, Dave told me. “We buy them from Toshiba in unopened boxes of 3,000 and select matched pairs of 8 per unit. This is a laborious process and we have many that we can't ever use”.

Not only was this so quiet, but it was un-phased by anything I played at it. The double bass in Barber's “Blue Prelude” was just so real I couldn't believe my Torus sub would get that low and with such clarity, putting to shame nearly any other phonostage I have ever heard, no matter what the price. As I got to use this machine more and more the bass got better and better. It wasn't bass heavy either, as the crash and ride cymbals were as clear as my glasses the first day I put them on; next track “Witchcraft” just showing how high it all could go. Only the ‘width’ and ‘depth

of sound’ showed why this was under a thousand pounds, rather than ten times that price, as with the Pass Labs XP-25. That beauty sounds more valvey than my Manley and this black box similarly sounds nothing like I would expect, perhaps the clue is “transistors : none”.

Whatever potion is in this magic box it really comes to life, and I really enjoyed this phonostage. The more I ran it in the better it got, particularly in the bass end. The T-01MC is more forgiving and less clinical than some, but that doesn't mean it is lazy or inaccurate. Far from it. It's just more human. The extra headroom meant nothing came under pressure whatever I fed it with. I enjoyed this amp more than I have any other I have reviewed. My Alfred Brendel Mozart Piano Concerto K595 (Academy of St

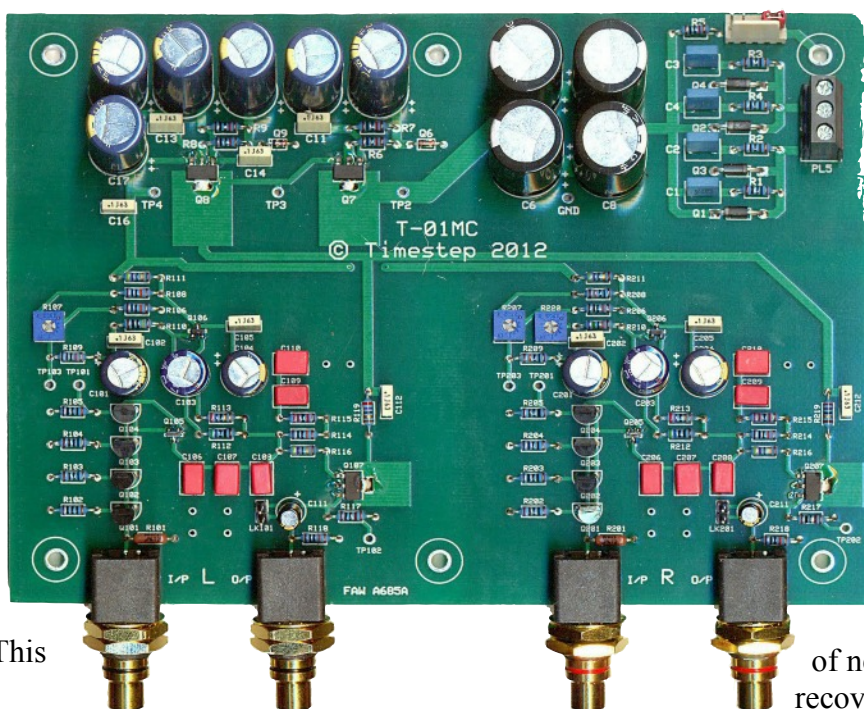
Martin-in-the Fields, Philips) was so spacious and controlled that I could hear the full decay of the piano notes, and the scratches in this aged and famous 1970's recording didn't detract from the music, indeed I didn't really notice them. The powerful percussion stabs and thrust from instruments in Andrew Lloyd

Webber's 21st Variation taken from Paganini's own, gave a force without any suggestion

of needing to take a breath to recover, as did the gutsy drum pattern in Mark Knopfler

“Cleaning My Gun” (‘Get Lucky’). My ears didn't feel like they were listening to an automatic level control on my old Akai Cassette. My cartridge sat comfortably within the grooves without any sense of struggling.

Dave puts this ability down to the fact there is no global feedback, and especially to the use of a 72V supply rail. “Some units are slew-rate limited and elongate the pop, other are supply rail limited so clip and then take time to recover, but ours, because of the no global feedback, but especially due to the use



TIMESTEP T-01MC PHONOSTAGE

of a 72V supply rail, does not suffer in this respect”, Dave tells me. Most phono-stages run on 24V. Goldfapp “Tales of Us” (180g) album, with their distinctive openness, country-style mixed with electronica and ambience just loved being put through the Timestep. This was so human and I got to understand the mind behind the music than I had before, more than with my Manley. This phonostage was gutsy without sounding like it was on steroids. It was full-bodied, without being stodgy; the mid-range was warm enough to make it welcoming without sounding like you had too much. A recent phonostage I reviewed at 9 times the price sounded thin in comparison. The Timestep was forward and more exciting and emotional where my Manley was recessed and calmer, and I loved it.

CONCLUSION

So, I guess you get that I am quite excited by this little box. Its understated looks hide quite a big monster, and whilst it could easily have been put in a Slee-size box or conversely a two-tier monolith with handles, I’m glad they haven’t. This phonostage needs to look like a box of Black Magic, because that’s what it is.

Sound Quality – 9.0/10

Value for Money – 8.9/10

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.8/10

Designer’s Comments

In 1981 I built my first moving coil phonostage with parallel high current low noise transistors. This phonostage stayed in use for 25 years until 2006, when I had the opportunity to evaluate 17 phonostages, at which point I realised that I could do better. I started on a design using quad dual matched low noise transistors, but this project only got as far as the prototype PCB.

Early 2012 and another half dozen phonostages were evaluated. I returned to designing again and found a paper by a Californian university dated 1969. Based on this paper I realised I could manufacture a £2,000 phonostage that would sound as good as a £10,000 one. Bold but true!

With a background in the design and manufacture of weather satellites I was determined to only use the best components possible. According to NOAA who are an offshoot of N.A.S.A., Timestep were once the largest manufacturer of HRPT weather satellite reception systems. We progressed low noise to such a point that NEC made special FET's for us, so I bought 3,000 Toshiba FET's and spent several days hand selecting and matching them. It is not only the choice of components, PCB layout is also critical, it must perform extremely well but also be affordable.

I believe that with the tonearm on its rest and with the volume control at absolute maximum, there should be no hum, none at all. There should be a just a nice soothing hiss, nothing else. Any hum or buzz, even if it isn't audible behind the music, will without doubt modulate the music and destroy the flow of the music. You may not hear it, but something will be not quite right.

Working with one of the best transformer manufacturers in the UK, we ordered one of every type and with half a dozen transformers under load, did indeed measure significant hum fields. In reality the results were not entirely unexpected. So we had yet more custom made and found the ideal specification. I believe the T-01MC has less noise than units costing ten times as much, even with their separate power supplies.

We also have a ground lift switch that allows the circuitry to float in the case of an earth loop. The chassis is still connected to mains ground for safety reasons. You will find our ground post insulated from our chassis, something I believe never seen before in a phonostage.

The T-01MC was designed and manufactured to sell at £2,000, and we think it's remarkably good for a £2,000 phonostage. However we know that we can sell a lot more at just under £1,000 and the economics of high quantity translate into lower unit costs, so we made it so!

Dave Cawley

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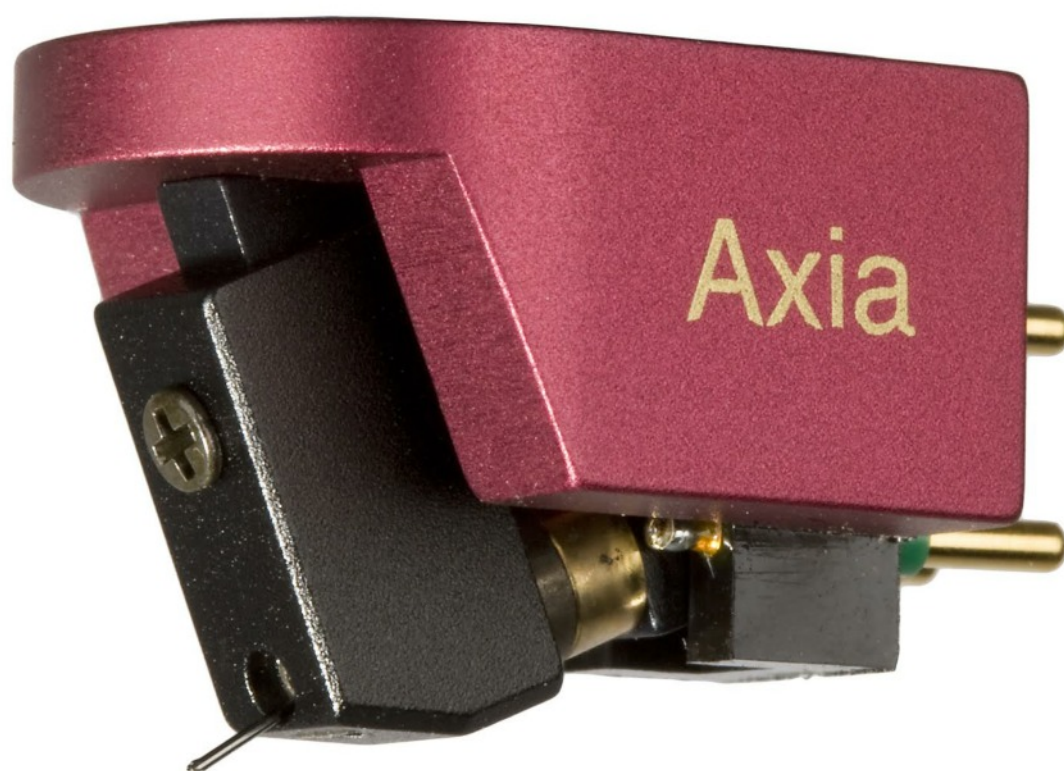


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TRANSFIGURATION AXIA S

Vinyl Playback Elevated

Janine Elliot takes the £1375 Transfiguration Axia S cartridge for a spin.



I have spent many lonely and sad evenings setting up my vinyl over the years, from my original ceramic (yes, remember them!) cartridges, a few embarrassing magnetic Shure cartridges for my Garrard SP25/iii, to my semi-grown up players with Philips 400, Ortofon VMS20E, Shure V15iii and iv, right the way to my present Kontrapunkt b. To be given a cartridge as different from my Ortofon as chalk is from cheese was a breath of fresh air and enabled me to have an open-minded view in my assessment.

SET UP

To say this cartridge was easy to set up was an understatement. The thick aluminium body with parallel sides was a gift for even the fumbling vinyl fan. The only slight adjustment I needed to make once set up was to get the stylus angle (*rake*) just right (*around 30 degrees*) in order to get optimum stereo width and so that the sound didn't sound 'narrowed' between the speakers, which it did sound initially. The instruction sheet suggests you change the angle so that the stylus doesn't sit vertically into the groove but "points back slightly". I also made slight setting adjustments on my Manley Steelhead phonostage so that load impedance was around

TRANSFIGURATION AXIA S

20ohms. In terms of weight this cartridge likes to be set up at around 1.8 - 2g, and I ended up with 2.1g only to allow for the trough/paddle combination of my Townshend Rock7 turntable. Interestingly, my Kontrapunkt is suggested at 2.2 grams but worked better on this turntable at a mere 1.8g.

I have eagerly observed the Transfiguration brand over the years, designed by Immutable Music's Seiji Yoshioka. I have particularly liked their unique and clever yoke-free design (*more of that in a bit*) and with family members with names like Pheonix, Temper and Spirit, they could well have been the names of my own children. All used the patented 'yokeless' double-ring magnet design, and their present generation continue this tradition. The latest models in the range, Axia S, Pheonix S and Proteus, continue the trend of lovely names. The word 'Axia' translates from Greek word αξία meaning "value, capable, merit, worth and worthiness" and this model certainly lives up to its name. The Axia S forms the lowest priced, but for me the better looking, of three moving-coil cartridges from Transfiguration, the review sample being imported into the UK by Decent Audio. Retailing at £1375 it ain't cheap, but bearing in mind it is joined by the Phoenix S, priced at £1995 and the £2995 Proteus, this is an exceptionally good value model given its credentials. Like its family members, has a body made of machined, solid aluminium. Within this are two magnets arranged in a yokeless, double ring configuration which results in the 5N silver coils being positioned efficiently inside the magnets. This model has a Samarium cobalt magnet at the front and a neodymium one at the back, whereas the other models have neodymium at

both ends. Neodymium rare-earth magnets first appeared around the 1980s, and have the strongest magnetism, though interestingly Samarium cobalt is the more expensive to buy. The unusually short cantilever is made of 0.3mm diameter solid boron and is tipped with a 3 x 30µm Ogura PA stylus (*seen in a number of cartridges from other manufacturers*).

The sound was very tight, very musical and not in the slightest hinting at being in any difficulty or hurry, with an excellent stereo width and depth of sound, and a good dynamic range helped by the Neodymium back end.

After a very short set-up period I could begin to listen. I was lost for words in the opening track of side D of the "The Division Bell" re-master, (*Pink Floyd*). The aptly titled track 'Lost for Words' gave me an insight into how good this cartridge was going to be. The opening musique concrete gave way to a guitar trio with footsteps that was oh such fun. Or was it my feet tapping. From the lowest bass rhythm through the mid warmth of David Gilmour's voice right up to the tight metal strings on the guitars the detail was all there. Adjusting the rake angle until it was just right allowed the music to open up into as 3-dimensional a sound that vinyl can produce. Vinyl is just so good! The sound

was very tight, very musical and not in the slightest hinting at being in any difficulty or hurry, with an excellent stereo width and depth of sound, and a good dynamic range helped by the Neodymium back end. The bells and piano riffs in the final track were as clear as the best I have ever heard it, and the thumping marcato in the drums and bass even surprised me by its strength. I was lucky that this review sample didn't need a break-in period, and I could listen in a way that I hadn't before with my Ortofon Kontrapunkt. Where the Kontrapunkt is an aging but great cartridge I felt the Axia opened up the music with energy and panache, more than my stalwart needle. What I was struck by was the amount of confidence and dynamism when

TRANSFIGURATION AXIA S

compared to the more clinical Ortofon. I did, however, feel at times that this extra energy and detail could make the sound very slightly 'cluttered'.

With that in mind I played some intricate classical music from Manuel de Falla, his "Love The Magician" (LSO, Geoffrey Simon, Chandos) which brought out a heaped portion of magic from the oboes, piano and strings and the vocals. De Falla is a complicated composer mixing everything in short spaces, whether it be different textures, timbres or techniques all mixed in a pint-pot size. To play this work well I would need to have a good needle, and this did it well, from the col legno on the strings (*using the bow stick to hit the strings, rather than the horse hair*) to the bursts of the horns or trumpets, to the empty spaces in between. This work has it all, and the Axia S sounded much more at home in this work than in the Pink Floyd. Depth of field was very musical and this cartridge sounded very much at its best. With such a variety of instruments and changes in depth of music this cartridge played it all so very well. Playing my trusty old Ortofon Test record, the Axia S was at ease with all but the most cruel setting on the vertical and lateral tracking tests, perhaps aided somewhat by the Townshend trough and paddle system. Moppin and Boppin (*T. Walter/Carter/Cirkeby*) on side B was the best I had heard it played for years. Polka from the Bolt (*Shostakovich*) gave a much wider and deeper soundstage from the pianissimo's to the sforzando's than on other cartridges I have reviewed. Prokofiev Cinderella (LSO, Andre Previn, EMI) allowed me to get a really good insight into the warmth and musicality of the middle instruments. I could hear the First and Second violins as I would if I was conducting this underrated work from the ballet suite supremo.



Miles Davis 'Bitches Brew' re-master is a bitch to play on any spinner, particularly the title track on side B. Occasionally I did feel the Axia S could overcomplicate the sound at times. However, this is by no means a complaint, rather a characteristic of the sound.

CONCLUSION

This cartridge is quite some wolf in (*red*) sheep's clothing. £1375 certainly isn't cheap, but the Axia S is one hell of a musical player, not sheepish in trying to extrapolate the best from the music, and more than justifies its price when comparing with others at this price point. It worked well with all the music I played, only at times showing me slightly that I could do better, which I guess is why you might want to spend more on the Pheonix S or Proteus. I liked this model a lot, and maybe when my Kontrapunkt stylus gets blunt I'll reinvest in an Axia S.

Sound Quality – 8.7/10

Value for Money – 8.5/10

Build Quality – 8.55/10 (including the box it comes in!)

Overall – 8.58/10

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Paint It Black

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DEVIALET ENSEMBLE

All Together Now

French company Devialet have taken the audio world by storm since they launched and Stuart Smith now takes a listen to their £5590 Ensemble package.



Let's get one thing out of the way from the outset shall we – the guys at Devialet certainly know their marketing and the hype behind the brand has been at fever pitch pretty much since the French company launched. However, aggressive marketing has ensured that when talking about Devialet you tend to get two very distinct responses; the “It’s all style over substance marketing hoo-hah” on one side and “It’s the best thing sliced baguette” on the other. Given some of the rooms using Devialet amplifiers at this years Munich High-End it certainly seems to be the case

that many of the high-end speaker brands have fully embraced Devialet’s amplifiers, one case in point being the Leedh room.

Here for review we have the Devialet Ensemble which is a package deal of the Devialet 120 (we actually had the 200 sent) and a pair of Atohm GT 1 Devialet Special Edition loudspeakers.

Devialet use something they call Analogue Digital Hybrid technology at the heart of their system which they say gives users the best of both digital and analogue worlds. ADH works by connecting a class

DEVIALET ENSEMBLE



A analogue amplifier which drives the output voltage to the speakers and then several class D amplifiers are added in parallel and act as slaves to the class A amp to give the speakers the current they need to sustain the output voltage.

Before the ADH section Devialet use a “Magic Wire” DAC which “implements the DAC at the core of the class A amplifier, in order to reduce the parasitic, musical-impeding phenomena such as noise and distortion”. Again in simple terms the Texas Instrument PCM1792’s output is converted directly to a high-voltage without any processing in-between.

Power supply is onboard and provided by a switched-mode psu with “Power Factor Correction” which Devialet say is able to provide huge peak power delivery and an efficiency of 85%.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

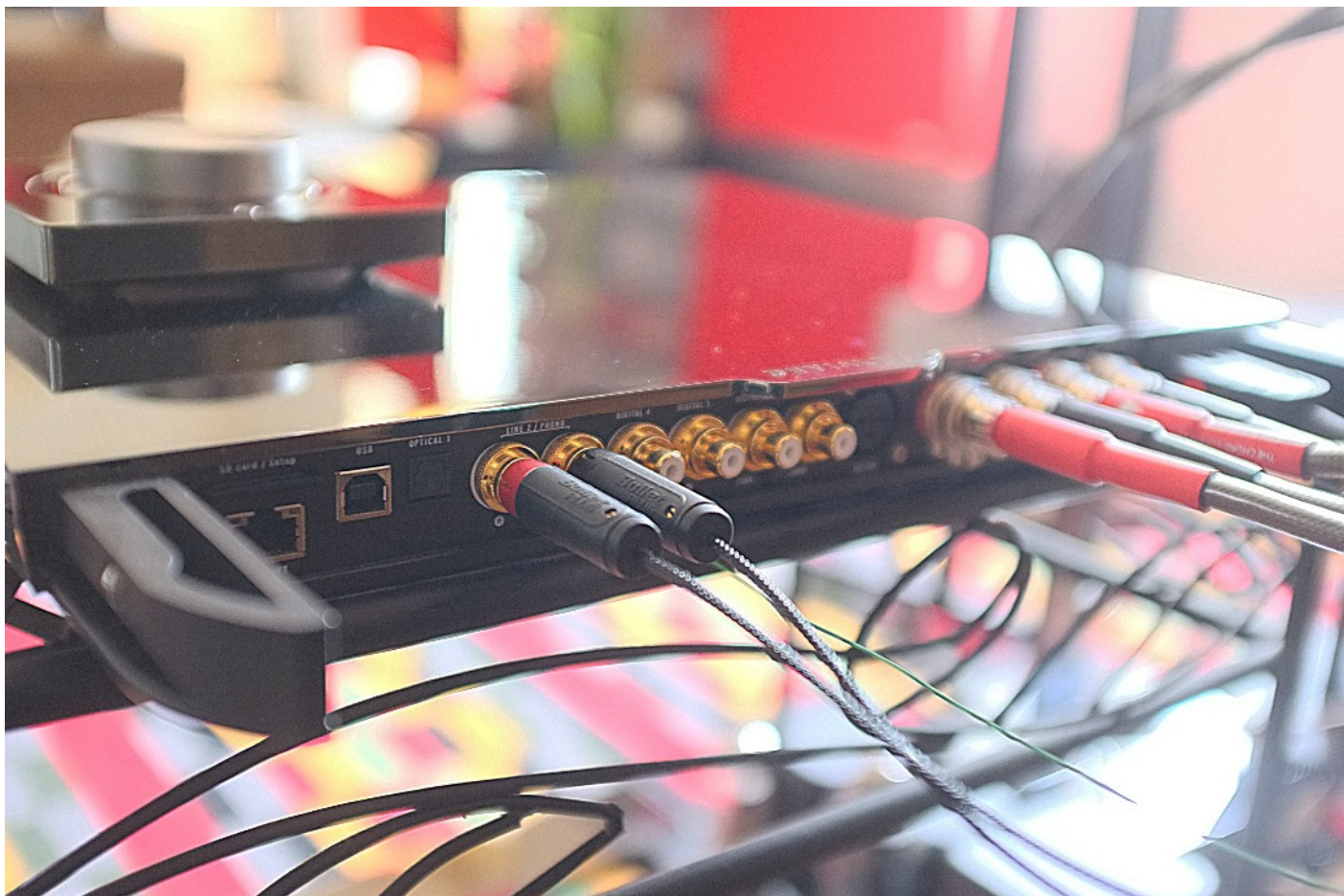
The packaging of the Ensemble is absolutely fantastic and you certainly get that Christmas morning feeling that we bang on about all the time – that feeling of having spent a good deal of money on

yourself and the expectation you get when the item finally arrives and you start to unpack it. Certainly very high marks here for Devialet and something many could learn from.

The amp itself is a thing of great beauty depending on your viewpoint, with its low profile form and silver, chromed, mirrored finish. The quality of the chassis cannot be questioned and is certainly of a high quality being milled from a single billet of Aluminium. There are no knobs or controls on the amp save a single power button which also indicates the state of the amp and the function selected. The remote is the most gorgeous remote I’ve ever had the pleasure of using with its large rotary knob for volume. It’s just so tactile and screams touch me!!! Yes there’s a good deal of Le Bling on offer here, but I don’t think it’s necessarily over the top and because of its size and low profile the whole thing is pretty unobtrusive should you want it to be...if you like to show off you can even hang it on the wall.

The speakers that come with the Ensemble package are Atohm GT1 Special Editions that have been designed by Devialet, have an impedance of 6 Ohms

DEVIALET ENSEMBLE



and are 89dB sensitive. It's a two way bass reflex system measuring 330 x 200 x 265 (mm) and it all looks pretty conventional and quite nice in the gloss white finish. The tweeter is a 1 inch soft dome affair and there's a 6" main speaker. I did have the protecting baffle for one of the woofers drop off soon after unpacking but these are simple to slot back in. Of course the speakers have been treated to Devialet's SAM process and when SAM is activated on the "amp" bass response is quoted as being as low as 23Hz as opposed to 39Hz when SAM is not engaged. For the purposes of this review the speakers were placed on stands that brought the tweeter pretty much to ear height.

SET UP

Set up of the Ensemble system is a little different to the usual plug and play scenario most of us are used to but once you read the manual and instructions it's all pretty much plain sailing. Round the back of the "amp" there's a little slot for an SD card and you go online to your personal "Configurator" where you can decide what inputs do what, what processing you

have running, as well as loads of other things you can tweak and play with, more of which later. All this sounds a bit complicated if you are used to more conventional set ups but it isn't really and it means that when Devialet come up with a new firmware update or a new feature you can download and install it quickly, easily and for free.

The procedure for set up goes - Go to your computer, log in to your Devialet account and go to the Configurator, add the stuff you want to add and get the inputs doing the function you want them to, download the file you are presented with, copy it to the SD card, pop the SD card back in the back of the "amp" and everything automatically installs when you turn the amp back on.

I liked this feature a lot and it effectively means you get free upgrades and new features for life and I can see that when it comes to awarding a value for money score for this package it's going to be quite interesting.

SAM

DEVIALET ENSEMBLE

SAM stands for Speaker Active Matching and it's a DSP built into the Devialet system with the idea that "enables the precise adaption of the sound signal to the specifications of your speaker model".

PHONOSTAGE

I'm getting a little ahead of myself here but wanted to talk a little about the Devialet's phonostage before we got any further down the line. This feature was introduced at this year's Munich High-end and is basically a phonostage you download from the Configurator and add to your Devialet set up. They say it's the most advanced phonostage ever and the specs are pretty impressive, with a whole host of equalization curves being available at the touch of a button on Configurator.

You get to set the loading for your cartridge, and should you fancy a change of cartridge it's a simple matter of going to your account and changing it, download the new file, pop it on the SD card, insert this into the Devialet and off you go.

I was very keen to try the phonostage feature and I have to say I was a little sceptical about the whole thing. You have to keep in mind that all this equalization and loading etc is done in the digital domain, but to be fair the results are pretty impressive with me getting very good results from vinyl using the AT09 cartridge I have at the moment. Bass was a tad bloomy when compared to my much loved Graham Slee Elevator/Reflex combo but it's very hard to knock a product that Devialet are essentially giving away for free to their customers. I'd certainly be happy to listen to vinyl on this set up for all but the most critical of listening sessions. For folk with a turntable and a decent collection of records they want to dip into from time to time it will prove to be more than acceptable. I tried the phonostage with a good range of genres and it responded very well. It is not "the best phonostage in the world" though and there was to my thinking a

**Devialet will
shift huge
numbers of this
combo I guess
and as the
technology
advances so will
your system...at
no extra cost.**

shortfall in dynamism with our current test track "Contact" by Daft Punk lacking a little oomph. The stereo image is good and stable and instruments sit properly in the mix with there being a good analogue feel despite the fact that this is all digital. It's clever stuff as is the whole system.

TONE CONTROLS

Does anyone remember tone controls on amplifiers? Back in the dim and distant past all amps came with a bass, treble and balance control so that you could tune the sound for your taste and for your room conditions. They went out of favour in the mid-eighties when there was a movement towards

the preservation of purity of signal path. Yes I used them a bit but still found myself preferring a flat setting. However, I do see these as being useful and given this is all digital the argument about short signal paths etc is pretty moot.

OVERALL THOUGHTS

I lived with the Ensemble and used it as a package, as the vast majority of people will, and for most of the time I chose to stream from my laptop using the Airplay set up... download the software to the computer, activate it, get it running and you're off.

Overall you get a very good sound indeed and this package will appeal to many. The SAM settings do help a good deal to my ears and I felt that there was a tightening of the bass which in turn offered up a more coherent sound and so I used Ensemble with SAM engaged pretty much constantly. There is a good soundstage thrown by the combo and the mix is presented accurately enough before you, with instruments appearing to have their own space in the mix. This I feel is one of the benefits of smaller standmounts and gives you a sense of being in front of the mixing desk and though the image felt accurate here it wasn't as deep as I've heard and you undoubtedly don't have the speakers "disappear".

DEVIALET ENSEMBLE

As regular readers of my reviews will know one of my pet peeves is woolly and flabby bass that hangs around after the note is finished and here the Ensemble does very well indeed – on one of our torture tracks for bass (Todd Terry's Blackout) the low frequency, electronic "whoomph" felt like I was listening to a bigger pair of speakers and they do go low, though not in the same way a bigger speaker can. This whoomph I mentioned on this track is actually a pretty complex synthesized noise and there is good detail in the sound here. The amp really did seem to grip the speakers really well in these lower frequencies, but as a system bass never feels like it is taking over and there is coherence across the spectrum. On more percussive techno there was attack and bite to the music which was dynamically exciting to listen to.

On more gentle music with the mid-frequencies being the highlight (Fleetwood Mac's Songbird) there is a clarity and flow to the vocal with a good feeling of the recording space, with an absolutely silent background allowing the quiet guitar on the track to be easy to follow and hear. You do get a good deal of detail, but that is not at the cost of being fatiguing, and so you can listen for long periods and at high volume without feeling the need to take a break. The Ensemble isn't a force it down your throat combo either and whilst the detail in a recording is easy to hear, you don't become fixated on it to the point of distraction...this is a good thing and will appeal to those wanting an untaxing listen.

One issue I did have with the sound at times was a slight sensing of pixilation at the very upper frequencies and this had me thinking "I'm listening to digital" here. Please note I have used the phrase "at times" here as this pixilation or digitizing seemed to appear at certain times of the day and I am assuming that this is some kind of interaction between the power from our mains having some effect. At the time I didn't have a mains conditioner

to hand and so couldn't say this is fact or not. For the vast majority of the time the top end was clear and crystal like with lots of air around the instruments with David Crosby's Croz album in hi-res sounding fab.

The Ensemble isn't a force it down your throat combo either and whilst the detail in a recording is easy to hear, you don't become fixated on it to the point of distraction...

CONCLUSION

I really didn't want to like the Devialet Ensemble but ended up having a blast with it. For your money (available for £5590) you get a very good looking, very versatile hifi that is pretty much future proof. This is a real one box system solution given there is connectivity for pretty much anything you can throw at it. New innovations, system updates and all the free stuff Devialet keep coming up with actually make this pretty good value for money.

The Ensemble isn't the last word in fidelity in absolute terms but for the money there is certainly very little that I found I could criticize and remain honest.

Devialet will shift huge numbers of this comb I guess and as the technology advances so will your system...at no extra cost.

The "could I live with this" question has to be asked and for me it's a hands down yes. Yes, our reference system (also using class D amps incidentally, but with a valve pre in place) gives me more of everything but then for the cost of my speakers alone you could have the whole kit and caboodle from Devialet gracing your living room and not wanting to take over your space completely. Most definitely if I was looking for a one stop solution that allowed me to listen to my tunes effortlessly this ensemble would definitely be on my shortlist...though it has to be said it's a swine to keep looking shiny and dust free!

Build Quality 9.0/10
Sound Quality 8.75/10
Value For Money 9.0/10
Overall 8.92/10



MC Step-Up Transformers
Phono Amplifiers
Pre Amplifiers



PRIMARE I32 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC AND MEDIA BOARD

TOP OF THE CLASS ?

Dan Worth takes a listen to this well specified integrated amplifier (£2000) complete with its MM30 Media board (£1250)



The I32 is an upgradable 2 x 120wpc integrated amplifier from Primare which with its modular design allows for users to upgrade with a Media Board to allow for network streaming, USB computer input and iPod USB inputs... along with coaxial and optical DAC inputs allowing for a truly flexible jack of all trades amplifier. Along with the optional Media Board the I32 supports MM/MC inputs, two balanced XLR analogue inputs and three RCA unbalanced inputs.

Two UFPD amplifiers are housed in the heavy gauge screened metal chassis. The preamplifier is a completely separate implementation which has its

own isolated power supplies in order to reduce distortion levels and to allow for a cleaner feed to the power efficient Class D modules, which in standby only consume a meagre 0.2W of energy.

Primare have ensured their signal path design is as short as possible and all signal treatment (*volume, source selection and balance trims*) are processed purely in the analogue domain.

Unbalanced inputs are converted to balanced and buffered by the Burr Brown OPA2134 op-amps and routed to volume and balance controls employing closely matched LM1972 balanced stepped

PRIMARE I32 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC AND MEDIA BOARD

attenuators. Source switching is made via high quality relays.

ULTRA FAST POWER DEVICE CLASS-D AMPLIFIER

The use of switch mode power electronics is gaining in popularity as the result of its lower energy consumption and as a way to squeeze more amplifier channels into smaller spaces. Unfortunately Class D amplifiers and their switch mode power supplies have traditionally deserved a reputation for poor audio quality, characterised by rising THD with frequency. Primare's UFPD (Ultra Fast Power Device) technology provides for the possibilities of a full-range 'audiophile' Class D design. It is a Class D

technology which has a consistent 26dB feedback loop gain across the entire audio bandwidth and is stable way beyond the audible frequencies. This is quite easy to achieve in conventional linear 'continuous signal' amplifiers, but much more difficult in 'non-continuous' high speed switching amplifiers.

After a good 40 minutes of warm up time the I32 really begins to kick into gear, producing fast, clean beats and a massive open and truly transparent midrange with an airy top-end which demands the listener's attention.

Rather than have the amplifier and then the filter as discrete stages, the UFPD design integrates the two, making control with feedback much more immediate and accurate. The UFPD amplifier actively adapts the loop gain to keep the total loop stable during start up, clipping and current limit. It senses the changes to the filter output and compensates by applying the precise amount of feedback. This adaptive pole control al-



PRIMARE I32 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC AND MEDIA BOARD



lows for several more dBs of constant loop gain across the audio band and maintains performance irrespective of load (*impedance*) variations.

Primare's UFPD treats all signals equally regardless of frequency or slew rate and has the ability to suppress the filter resonance entirely. Consequently THD is kept very low at all frequencies. With a very wide 'load independent' frequency response UFPD is able to drive any speaker while maintaining control and accuracy.

Build quality is really nice with the thick front panel, heavy gauge chassis, powder coated and nice shiny, smart looking knobs and buttons on the fairly sparse (*the way I like it*) front panel. There's a centrally aligned screen for display of source and volume, along with clear indication of muted playback. Although the rear of the unit is busy with many connecting sockets the layout is nicely grouped and organised.

The included remote control is packed full of buttons being a system remote for other linked Primare components - functional it is, but it's nothing to write home about and is plasticky and lightweight, but hey-ho, it's only a remote and I personally tend to

never use them anyway - it screws up my daily exercise routine of having to get up and turn the volume knob by hand!

Soundstage width is absolute magic with every nuance and micro detail being fully formed in all its robustness and clarity.

SOUND

After a good 40 minutes of warm up time the I32 really begins to kick into gear, producing fast, clean beats and a massive open and truly transparent midrange with an airy top-end which demands the listener's attention. Up until the 40 minute mark point music sounds a little flat and noticeably slow.

Soundstage width is absolute magic with every nuance and micro detail being fully formed in all its robustness and clarity. Class D often leaves a lot to be desired when fleshing out notes with textural timbres and characterises itself all too often with leanness, limp bodied, sterile or cold taints, but the I32 is rich and full bodied in-between and beyond of the

speakers. Tonal information is displayed in its full entirety regardless of image placement. For me, when I hear an amplifier which can reproduce full natural tones throughout the entire listening area, rather than suggestions of detail spread out, makes me instantly want to investigate the product further

PRIMARE I32 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC AND MEDIA BOARD

and adds a real first time excitement to the sound.

Although the richness of the sound signature replicates instruments and vocals incredibly well, the very lowest bass-line of the I32 takes a little getting used to. I'm used to having a slightly looser and gentler roll-off to the bottom end whereas the I32's bass is full and tight, presenting more detail than say my Jeff Rowland integrated and has a tightness that is coupled with weight that defines the lowest notes further and more accurately. With the Rowland it colours the bottom end with a little bloom and

allows for the lowest of registers to gently fade into the abyss - the I32 doesn't suddenly stop or roll short in anyway, it has a point where the note ends, which after a little while of listening made me believe that it had a certain truthfulness about it. When playing upbeat music the I32 is so bouncy and musical it made me sad to revert to the Rowland, especially with the lively and energetic music I play during the daytime.

Listening in the later parts of the day to some Norah Jones allowed me to appreciate how transparent the sound is from this amplifier. Looking right through her vocal, each tender subtlety of her voice had as much prominence in the soundstage as the lightly rubbed strings to one side of the stage, imaging just outside of the left speaker and allowing it to disappear. I was offered up a timbre and naturalness

I really could go on and on exploring and explaining my findings for track after track and I could have quite easily written this conclusion to say 'If the Primare I32 is in your purchase budget and you require a new amp look no further'.

that Class D in my experience simply doesn't normally achieve. I have had the Rowland Class D pre and power for a while now and although tremendously good and better than the Primare in certain ways, just couldn't expose details in such an uncoloured and effortless manner.

Top end again has such a completeness to it that when analysing it closely it's very difficult to single it out completely and the overall cohesiveness of the amplifier draws you straight back into the full sound (*and away from writing the review process!*).

Clarity, air and sparkle must be the key 'buzz' words for the I32's treble performance, though I'd suggest that there is a very

marginal and discrete decibel drop to finely align it with the rest of the frequency response. Notes are very concise and the response of the upper mid-range gives the treble body and thickness especially to strings and cymbals.

Listening to electronica with the I32 shows such pace in the treble as well as the entirety of the sound. Speed and timing seem to be really very accurate and bass notes dig really deep into what is a terrifically dark background.

Listening to Fink's live album 'The Wheels That Turn Beneath Me' allowed for really insight again into the performance. The crowd's applause was vast and wide and I've heard this album with a few pieces of equipment sounding a little nasal and congested or strangled, but the dynamic impact of the ultra fast

PRIMARE I32 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC AND MEDIA BOARD

transients which the I32 produces really gave some wallop and slam to the brisk, heavy, singular drum beats on 'Perfect Darkness'.

CONCLUSION

I really could go on and on exploring and explaining my findings for track after track and I could have quite easily written this conclusion to say 'If the Primare I32 is in your purchase budget and you require a new amp look no further'.

I would have loved to have some ATC's here with this amp and after the review I will be experimenting and playing with other complementary kit as I just enjoyed the amp so much.

The I32 will take all your musical tastes and run wild with them. It's not coloured or warm, it's rich and vibrant, it's not sterile or analytical, it's clean and accurate. The I32 is fast, controlled and utterly poised, it won't bite you if you give it some volume or listen to Spotify Premium with the High Quality button turned on and it won't feel limp or lifeless when you want to listen to something more beautiful.

With dynamics that match the music and an effortlessness that is just so noticeably true, the I32 will remain a favourite for some time to come!

Build Quality - 8.8/10

Sound Quality - 9.2/10

Value For Money - 8.8/10

Overall - 8.93/10

Designer's Comments

The I32 /MM30 combination marries the latest model in the line of 30 series integrated amps from Primare with digital-to-analogue conversion and streaming technologies. As a result of the modular design approach in the I32, the DAC and streaming capabilities, along with Bluetooth connectivity, can be easily added to the integrated amp by way of the MM30's slide in board. This modular approach further allows for future upgrades to be taken advantage of as they arise.

The good stuff in the I32 includes our proprietary UFPD (Ultra-Fast Power Device) Class D amp modules. The term "Class D" is sometimes misunderstood as meaning a "Digital" amplifier.

While some Class D amps may indeed be controlled by digital circuits or include digital signal processing devices, Primare's UFPD modules operate entirely in the analogue domain. Basically, the UFPD amplifier module takes an analogue input sine wave and converts it into a high frequency pulse width modulated square wave for amplification. This square wave is then filtered, resulting in an amplified analogue sine wave at the output.

In conjunction with UFPD, Primare uses an isolated PFC (*Power Factor Control*) technology in the power supply, which controls the current from the mains voltage so that it is a pure sine wave with the same frequency and phase as the mains voltage. This means that even if 1000W is taken from the mains, other equipment in the room will not be affected. Its presence becomes virtually invisible to the mains voltage! The isolating stage of the converter works in a ZVS mode and as a result, the switch flanks contain a lower quantity of harmonics, providing lower EMI and a clean environment for the amplifiers to work in.

The dual UFPD modules in the I32 are supported by an audiophile circuit topology involving an isolating heavy gauge alloy steel chassis and an isolated pre-amp section fed by a dedicated power supply. The MM30 upgrade uses a SRC4392 sample rate converter in conjunction with a Burr Brown PCM1792 24/192 DAC, running continually at 24/192. Incoming data at rates other than 24/192 are up-sampled to 24/192 to ensure the optimal operation of the DAC. For reliable 24/192 operation, we've chosen XMOS because it offers an integrated communication hub hosting the MCU. Please note: 176.4kHz is not supported by XMOS on MM30 (176.4 is supported over network). Essentially the streaming/DAC topology is identical to that used by our £2K NP30 network player, so in the I32/MM30 you're getting a great amp and player in one, for a great price.

Terry Medalen



Essential Elements.

The Element range is the starting point in our product line-up. But we view it as essential to getting a great performance from your kit.

It seems the world's hifi press agree. We've won a lot of awards for Element, including What HiFi's 'Best Analogue Interconnect' for the last 3 years.

We apply as much innovation and effort to the Element Series as our top of the range Asimi.

The 'Integra' low mass RCA connector was originally developed for the Element cable and the principles applied throughout our range.

Our latest Element sc USB cable is based on research showing solid core cable delivers superior results to conventional multi-strand.

Element cables are available for hi-fi, personal audio, digital & video use.

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Best analogue interconnect
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TISBURY AUDIO PASSIVE PRE-AMP MK 2

Passive Control

At £129 this little passive pre has more inputs than its predecessor but costs less. What's all that about then? Ian Ringstead finds out.



Tisbury Audio is a small London based company dedicated to offering value for money products to impoverished audiophiles. We all like a bargain and when it comes in the form of a bargain basement price product like this mini passive pre-amplifier then I think it is worth shouting about.

I first heard about Tisbury Audio a year ago when my boss and head honcho of Hifi Pig reviewed the previous model to this new version. At the time I had been playing around with some Meridian Active speakers (*DSP5000's*) which were great to satisfy my

curiosity with that concept. I had sold Meridian in the 80's and really liked their relatively new venture then into active speakers with built in amps. The DSP range had taken the concept further with DSP technology and very clever it is. Anyway, I decided that good as active speakers are, they do limit one's choice of system configurations and as an inveterate upgrader (*it's a disease with audiophiles*) this is where a product like the Tisbury comes in.

I was so impressed by the previous review of the Tisbury and the money back guarantee they offer I took the plunge. Stuart's review summed it all up by

TISBURY AUDIO PASSIVE PRE-AMP MK 2

saying the mini passive pre added very little to the sound and was effectively a clear window to the signal going to your amp. I couldn't agree more and have used the original version with my Meridian 556 power amp since then to great effect. Stuart used it with £5000 amps, mine was originally about £1200, so not budget, but is an excellent sounding classic design with plenty of clean power on tap. The mark 1 version of the Tisbury works great with my existing 556 amp and speakers (*these vary, but currently are Triangle Titus EZ's*) and I have been really pleased how it works so seamlessly in my system.

Now when I was told Tisbury Audio had a new mk2 version of the mini passive coming out I just had to try it. So what have they done to improve it? Well for a start the unit has grown somewhat larger in size (*rather like myself over the years!*). It has become longer in depth case-wise because Tisbury have obviously listened to customers' demands - the only criticism I find with my mk1 is that due to the slim depth of the case, when you have several leads plugged into the back the unit can tilt backwards. Now this is not a deal breaker but a minor niggle. The case is now longer too because Tisbury have increased the flexibility of the unit without compromising the sound and have now employed a circuit board due to the switching and flexibility on offer.

How have they done this you may well ask? Well a passive pre amp is reliant on the accompanying amp and speakers having sufficient signal level compatibility (*i.e. sensitivity*) to work properly. As

there is no active power supply to help boost the pre amplified signal from your source components, the changing resistance in the volume potentiometer are solely reliant on the levels being within set parameters. The much simpler circuit is one of the reasons why passive pre amps can sound so good, but the caveat is that not all passives do sound good, and many audiophiles criticise them for either level matching issues or the bass lacking punch.

The second generation preamp now has 3 inputs, 2 configurable outputs and a laser engraved walnut and aluminium enclosure.

A new feature is the selectable attenuation, which allows users to reduce the signal by a fixed -10 dB or -20 dB. If your system has too much gain and you can't turn the volume dial past 12 o'clock without hearing damage, this setting will help. This is achieved by adjustable switches underneath the unit.

Output 1 is the primary output and its level is set by the volume control. Output 2 can be configured (*by switches on the base*) as either an additional primary output, or as a 'loop' out to bypass the volume control and (*you guessed it*) loop out to another device. All Tisbury's offerings are designed, made, and tested in their London workshop; and the vast majority of parts and labour costs go to British companies. They could probably have it made cheaper in China, but that wouldn't be true British quality hi-fi now, would it?

SOUND

Now to the sound... well there isn't one as such. So transparent is the Tisbury that it has very little influence that I can detect in my system. The mk2 is as far as I can tell identical to the mk1, but has the added flexibility as a bonus.

I spent many hours just enjoying the sound (*or lack thereof*) with my Triangles and other speakers in for review and they all sounded great. Sources were mainly CD (*I am currently in*



TISBURY AUDIO PASSIVE PRE-AMP MK 2

between turntables) but have had superb results with my last deck and see no reason why a new one won't work as well. The depth of sound field and all the extra little clues one hears in live recordings were all there in abundance and one recording I listened to in particular was Capercaillie live in Glasgow from 2002. Now they are a classic Celtic band from Scotland similar to the likes

of Clannad from Ireland, but they have their own style and more traditional in some respects. The live recording is excellent and the lead singer Karen Matheson is crystal clear in the mix along with the rest of the superb band members. The bass line was subtle but was easily heard in the mix along with the bodhran, Uilleann pipes and other traditional instruments used with this infectious type of music. I couldn't help but smile all the time and tap my feet or hands to the rhythms thinking of River Dance and the like. I love Celtic music and some may argue it all sounds the same, but can't that be said of a lot of different music styles. I also listened to James Taylor's new album "Before This World" and was impressed by the sound again... if not the music so much. Daryl Hall and John Oates are a mightily impressive duo and their catalogue of hits and songs in general is amazing. A mix of live and studio tracks on their disc set "Do what you want be what you are" album were sublime. It's a great album and a must for fans or newbie's. Again the clarity was exceptional.

There's not really much else to say. I could go on and on boring you about music you may not be the least bit bothered about. Suffice to say this new passive pre amp is fantastic value. Tisbury have reduced the price to £129 from the original £135 price of last year. Hey, what goes on? a company improving a product and making it cheaper !! VFM (value for



money) is the key here. Passives aren't for everyone and, like followers of SET valve amps, horn speakers etc. they are a niche product. I for one think they are superb.

The great thing about the Tisbury Audio unit is that it is an amazing way into the upper levels of audio nirvana without robbing a bank or winning the lottery. Most audiophiles are frustrated by the financial constraints of our hobby, but the Tisbury makes this supremely easy now if you have a good power amp and speakers to hand. I recently picked up a Quad 33 and 303 second hand that are 40 plus years old, and I am currently modifying them to bring them up to modern day standards and safety without affecting the integrity of the original sound or circuit design. It will be interesting to compare the sound of the 33 pre with the Tisbury, and use the 303 with the Tisbury as I hear passives work well with the Quad amp.

The bottom line is with such great kit as the Tisbury now for sale online direct, to save you the customer money and give you pleasure what's stopping you. Enjoy.

Build Quality	8.9 / 10
Sound Quality	8.75 / 10
Value for money	9.2 / 10
Overall	8.95/10

ETALON SOLO DAC/PRE

The New Standard?

The name of this French DAC/PRE derives from the word *étalon*, meaning standard, or measuring device. Dominic Marsh gets to grips with the 7530 unit and spills some blood for his art.

I wasn't expecting to be given this component to review and wasn't quite sure exactly what was inside a mystery wooden crate that was given to me a while back, for reasons I cannot explain here. It took me a healthy twenty minutes to remove a good fistful of screws that secures the lid and when the lid was pulled back all I could see was a large area of stainless steel that forms the majority of the Solo's casework. Grabbing it by opposing corners, I gently lifted it out of the foam inserts that hold it in place during transit, whereupon it turned turtle and promptly stabbed me in the right thigh with one of the longest and sharpest spikes I had ever seen underneath any component. The Etalon Solo gave Dominic a very warm welcome I must say. There was nothing else in the crate save a universal remote control handset.

After a few gentle dabs with a tissue to mop the blood off my trousers, I then had to go to the

computer to type the word "Etalon" into the search engine and see what it came up with. Every website returned in the search was in French and given that I only speak two languages (*English and Gibberish*) it took a while to decipher what I was dealing with from this stainless steel cased beast with a taste for blood Group AB.

Having established that it was a DAC and pre-amplifier I then took it to the listening room and there was a very long pause before even contemplating introducing the Etalon into my rack, as long sharp stainless steel spikes and racks, be they glass, wood or whatever material are not a marriage made in heaven. Yes I probably could have unscrewed the spikes, but it is my policy to evaluate equipment as I find it and I assumed the spikes are an integral part of the Etalon's design... which they are Etalon tell me. Looking underneath I found some large headed screws which were less lethal than the



ETALON SOLO DAC/PRE

spikes it's true, but those round headed screws resting on toughened glass would have meant the unit would have moved around the shelf like a sluggish air hockey puck and would still have scratched my rack. It was fortunate then that Dan Worth had given me a couple of thick heavy solid Oak plinths a while back, so one of those slipped under the Etalon Solo gave my rack the protection it needed, although quite how I would deal with 3 conical pits in the plinth afterwards remains a mystery. Do racks have a blood group too I wonder? (*A joke, people.*) I took this up with Etalon who were adamant that the spikes are an essential design element, but I made them aware that if I got impaled by a spike then their consumers may also be similarly injured, plus they like me would be none too happy about having their prized rack scored severely by the aforesaid sharp pointed spikes. Several emails later I got them to agree that consumers need a choice between spikes or feet, or in the absence of feet, some spike shoes at least to protect racks from damage. If they are true to their word, then a printed copy of the manual and feet/spike shoes should be included in the crate with every new unit shipped.

CONSTRUCTION

I was rather impressed at how much detail it was bringing out in the music that I was playing at the time and the bass too was both weighty and insightful, having real gravitas and power to it.

It would be wise to point out that the Etalon Solo DAC comes in two variants, one with a built in pre-amplifier (*supplied for this review*) and one version without the pre-amplifier section.

As hitherto mentioned, the casework is made from a non-magnetic metal – stainless steel to be precise. The front panel is made from a slab of real wood which the Etalon website describes as a “Walnut stained dregs of wine brilliant” which I perceive to be a solid piece of Walnut stained to a gloriously deep rich red colour and beautifully varnished too I might add. Inset into that is a stainless steel panel which occupies around two thirds of the front panel and a central LED display which shows a number for the input selected, plus an incremented LED readout of volume setting. I have just described the entire fascia to you as there are no switches, buttons, knobs, sliders, or anything else for that matter to press, fiddle,

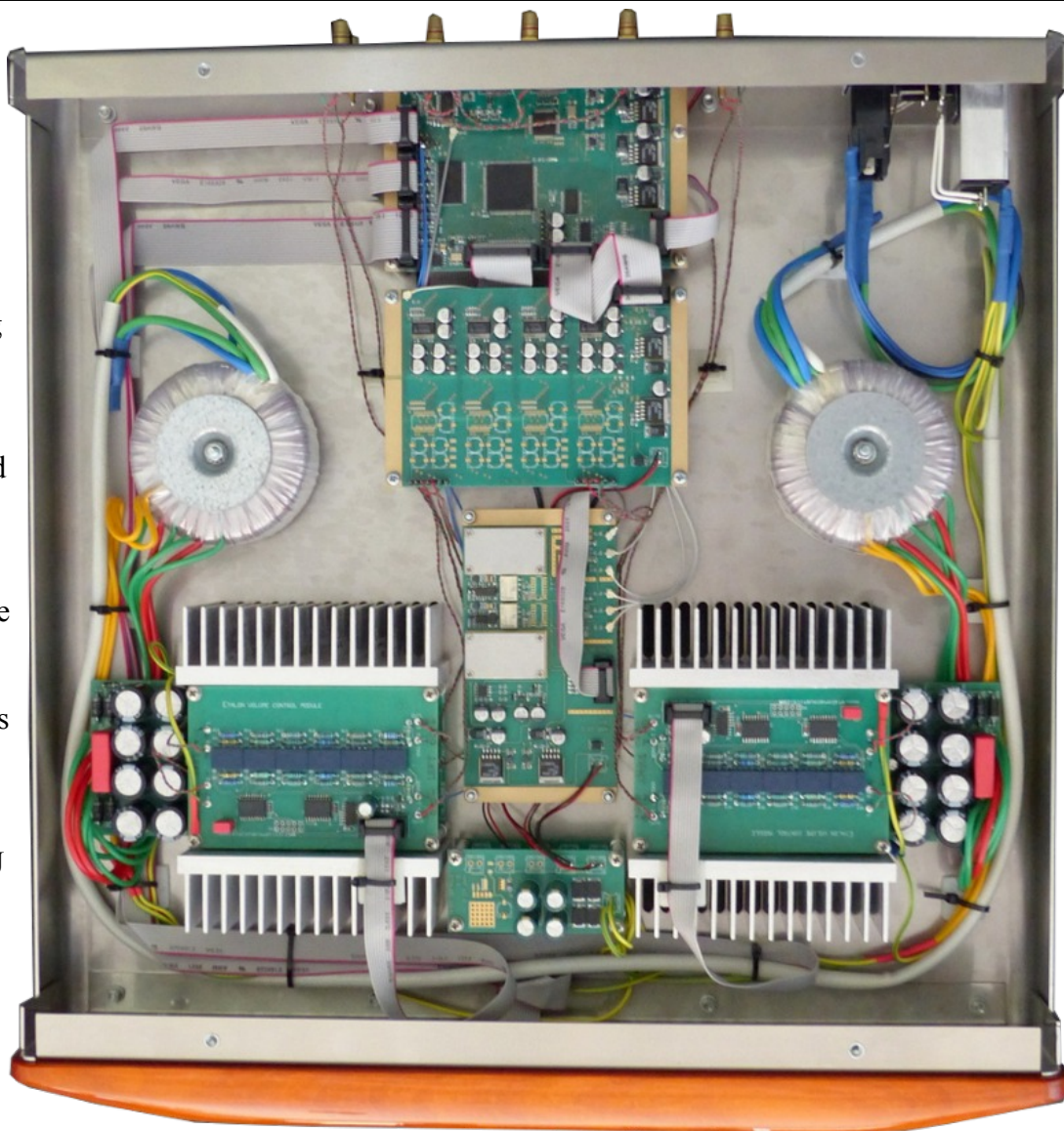
or twiddle with. All functions are activated via the remote control including power up/down, so a lonely single red LED in the display panel greets you when you switch it on. If the remote decides to play hide and seek behind the sofa cushions as they are wont to do, junior of the house tests to see if the remote will float in the WC, or if Fido decides to bury the remote handset somewhere in the garden, then dear reader the Etalon becomes rather ornamental until a



ETALON SOLO DAC/PRE

replacement handset is obtained. I think I have managed to persuade Etalon to include the programming code into the manual so people don't have to play Sherlock Holmes hunting down the code like I had to a few years ago with a very similar remote controlled device that had no external controls.

Around the back of the unit we find a very simple uncluttered rear panel, with an IEC mains input socket, an ON/OFF mains switch and fuse holder, 3 x RCA SPDIF digital inputs numbered 1, 2 and 3, a LAN connector to RJ standard and 2 x HDMI sockets, one of which is an I2S connection. We then come to the RCA analogue outputs which are labeled LEFT and RIGHT as you might expect, but a pair for each channel labeled plus and minus which rather confused me and there was no instruction manual to consult about the matter either. The word "balanced" is mentioned on the Etalon website and I have never known a balanced output being fed via two RCA sockets, 3 pin XLR connections being the norm and accepted industry standard. I emailed Etalon (*There have been lots of emails with Etalon*) about this and Laszlo Sallay informed me that it isn't a balanced connection as such, but a phase inversion connection using the two pairs of RCA sockets. This too baffled me as the average person wouldn't know when the sound they are hearing is inverted phase or not, so his explanation does not make sense I'm afraid. Etalon consider XLR connections to be inferior, although I wouldn't say that RCA connectors are the last word in connector integrity either. If it is indeed a true balanced output Etalon, then fit some XLR connectors and take away any ambiguity on the subject.



Internally, there is a pair of toroidal mains transformers, one for each channel. There is a set of PCB's mounted in a mirror image layout, with a central board used for input and output connections. There are some sizeable heatsinks mounted on two of the boards which are required for cooling as the pre-amplifier circuits run in pure Class A mode. Even in standby mode the case gets very warm to the touch. Price for the DAC is 6,960 Euros for the standard version and 7,530 Euros for the pre-amplifier version as tested here.

SOUND

In the absence of an instruction manual, I connected to the left and right "+" RCA output terminals to a power amplifier's inputs and a digital co-axial interconnect from the SPDIF out from my CD player into Input 1 on the Etalon, then powered it up. With a "1" in the front panel display and the volume level

ETALON SOLO DAC/PRE

set at “35” I could hear sound but not enough volume level. A few stabs on the remote control’s volume up button increased the volume, but only slightly, so I held the button down hoping for more rapid progress. Yes indeed the LED display showed the setting numbers increasing, but no actual volume increase. Took my finger off the remote’s button and suddenly up popped the volume. Most disconcerting the first time it was encountered, but soon got used to it. Even so, at maximum volume setting it wasn’t driving the power amplifier to decent listening levels, so obviously an impedance and level mismatch there and the solution was to connect the Etalon direct to an integrated amplifier’s line inputs treating the Etalon as a DAC only, setting the output level to “50” and ignoring the pre-amp stage altogether during the evaluation. Etalon say the power amplifier isn’t keeping up with the Solo in terms of quality, but I’m not so sure about that statement either.

Having it now configured ready for a listening session, the Solo was busy with a series of clicks coming presumably from an internal relay during the warm up period. While clicking away the sound was being briefly muted and it was rather distracting to say the least. Within a few minutes though the clicking ceased and from then on it behaved itself impeccably.

First impression of the sound was that it was “big” - not in volume terms of course, but just larger than life in the frequency extremes. I was rather impressed at how much detail it was bringing out in the music that I was playing at the time and the bass too was both weighty and insightful, having real gravitas and power to it. As we all know too well, first impressions are not a good way to make any

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judgments and it does take time to really get a handle on what any component’s real strengths and weaknesses are. And so it was with the Etalon Solo.

While the precision and clarity of the treble registers was impressive at first hearing, I began to notice that there is a downside to high definition sound quality. The Solo was managing to find errors and defects in the recordings that I wasn’t aware existed before. A couple of instances of microphone overloading in live recordings, a join in the recording stream pretty much like a magnetic tape splicing of old, guitar string and

fret squeals that used to endear themselves in the recording now would set my teeth on edge. If nothing else, it shows that those noises are well embedded in the recording and it takes something exceptional to uncover them. Some audiophiles may jump for joy at being given a passport to that level of high fidelity, but it annoyed the heck out of me because that’s where most of my listening attention was being diverted to, not chilling and enjoying the music as a whole entity – warts or no warts. I cannot recall any problems down in the bass registers, so we can regard that as more than acceptable.

Top and bottom end covered, I will now expand on the mid-range registers as I perceived them. It took a while mind, but I detected some fogging in the midrange. The best way to describe it to you is for you to imagine a summer’s day where the sun is visible behind very high altitude cloud, unbroken from horizon to horizon, yet still hot, deep shadows are being cast and you can still get burned from the power of the sun’s rays, even though it is being masked by that high altitude cloud. It seemed to sit

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above the music, not actually in it and it manifested itself by male vocals having what appeared to be the last vestiges of a head cold, even though the infection itself has since passed on, with the voice just having a tiny hint of rasp to it. Female vocals were similarly affected. It was very subtle and ordinarily I wouldn't even be mentioning it, but with the price tag the Etalon Solo has, I could not pass by on this comment. To confirm my findings, I connected up two other DACs to the system which did not demonstrate this trait.

Of course, I had to play my favorite "torture tracks" in the shape of Porcupine Tree's "Deadwing" CD. The better the system is, the worse this CD sounds I reckon and the Etalon just about trumped any other component I have installed into my system. It is a raw hard edged recording and with the Etalon it really was stripped out to the bare bones with nowhere to hide away from it. Some smoothing out is always beneficial with this CD to make it just about bearable without wincing and this playing of it was like sucking a Lime for the 90 minutes or so it plays for. Total faithfulness to the recording with high resolution playback can have it's drawbacks it seems.

Where the Etalon Solo did excel was imaging and sound staging. Just for once, there wasn't a clear demarcation of a defined sweet spot; you could sit or stand way off beam and you could still get depth of imaging and instrument placement which was virtually walk around. Great height too and extended well out beyond the speaker boundaries.

I didn't have the time or indeed the correct length of cables to put the Solo through all its' paces with a LAN or HDMI connection. I would imagine that sound quality would be very similar to that found with the RCA co-axial input that I used during this review, although Etalon state the best sound comes from the LAN connection.

CONCLUSION

All in all then, some fine points and some not so fine points in this review. Our first encounter wasn't exactly on the best of terms and the flesh wound has healed nicely thank you. I have made a strong case to Etalon to make some changes like including feet and/or spike shoes so people and racks suffer no harm from those lethally sharp spikes, then also including the remote control programming code and for a hard printed copy of the instruction manual to be included in the shipping crate with each new unit, rather than being downloadable from the website.

Whether the Solo is balanced or not balanced needs to be determined and appropriate connections fitted if it is balanced, failing that explain to consumers why there are two pairs of RCA analogue outputs marked plus and

minus. While having a cheap universal remote control included at this price level grates somewhat, having a specially made Etalon badged remote control would do nothing more or better than the one that is included in the box to be truthful. I am not playing God here, I am only expressing what the average consumer needs to know about this product before considering a purchase.

In terms of sound quality, my findings over the mid range and detail resolution issues was mentioned in the review because being priced at close on seven thousand Euros (*in the configuration I was using it*) I felt entitled to be that critical. Sometimes it might not be best to have super high-fidelity resolution playback and I met at first hand what that means and quickly became fatiguing, although some consumers may be in seventh heaven with hearing that amount of inner detail from recordings.

Build quality: 7.8/10

Sound quality: 8.0/10

Value for money: 7.2/10

Overall: 7.6/10

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Some Follow

others

Leedh!



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OPHIDIAN MINIMO LOUDSPEAKERS

Tiny Dancers

The Ophidian Audio Minimo loudspeakers are miniscule, but with some innovative technology inside. Ian Ringstead cuts a rug with them.



I love to discover new companies or products that I stumble across, whether it be by accident or word of mouth. One such company is Ophidian Audio whom I had never heard of before the recent North West Audio Show at Cranage that Hifi Pig is exclusive media partner for.

Ophidian is a classic example of a British cottage industry, where one man has a brilliant idea and then wants the world to hear about it and benefit from the fruits of his labour. Gareth James is a very pleasant, quiet and unassuming young man (*the sort your mum would like to meet*) whom I had the pleasure of



OPHIDIAN MINIMO LOUDSPEAKERS

meeting at Cranage. Gareth studied audio acoustics at University and first cut his teeth in the pro audio sector with PA equipment. After a few years in that side of the business he felt restless and wanted a change so he decided to design his own hi-fi speakers instead, which is why we are here today looking at his efforts.

For me hi-fi shows are a window for companies to show their wares off and if they sound good as well then it is a bonus. This is not a criticism of the manufacturers, but it is always very difficult in hotels or venues to achieve a good sound, unless the room happens to work with the equipment, or the manufacturer/dealer has a lot of experience in tweaking the room to perform at its best given the circumstances on offer.

Walking into the Ophidian room I was greeted by a very impressive sound and at first thought it was coming from the larger floor standing speakers until I realised it was these tiny stand mount units called Minimos. These are the babies of the M series range which comprises of three models - Minimo, Mojo and Mambo. The Mojo is a larger stand mount unit and the Mambo a slim floor stander.

Frequency response is 53 Hz to 28 kHz , sensitivity - 85 dB (2.83v) , recommended power - 30 to 60 watts , impedance - 4 ohms, dimensions - 178 mm H x 122 mm W x 144 mm D (plus 20 mm binding posts) and weight - 1.9 kg. As you can see they are tiny and look just like desk top computer speakers size-wise, but believe me they are a whole lot better sound-wise.

They come in a range of four finishes, satin white and black paint effect, oak and walnut real wood veneers. They look very smart and neat with clean square lines and remind me of the amazing Videotone Minimax speakers of the seventies, or the classic Wharfedale Diamonds of the eighties. They were both ground breaking designs back then for their size and so it is that the Minimo defies modern convention by producing a truly amazing sound given its diminutive stature.



The Minimo is a compact 2-way micro monitor suitable for use on bookshelves and desktops, wall mounted or on stands. Key to its impressive sense of scale is the combination of a midbass driver with a powerful long throw motor system and the unique AEROFLEX port system (*see designers comments at the end of this review*). The 3.5" midbass unit features a long throw rubber surround and a light but stiff aluminium diaphragm driven by a powerful balanced neodymium magnet motor system. AEROFLEX technology enables this tiny speaker to produce deeper and more controlled bass notes than its size would suggest by keeping port velocity to a minimum and ensuring the midbass unit is properly supported throughout its stroke. By building the port systems directly into the cabinet structure the outer walls are braced and strengthened minimising panel

OPHIDIAN MINIMO LOUDSPEAKERS



resonances. Complimenting the midbass is a 27mm tweeter with a Sonolex coated fabric diaphragm and low distortion neodymium motor system. The excellent dispersion characteristics, combined with close placement within the small cabinet, allow a seamless integration of the drive units and incredibly lifelike, realistic sound reproduction.

Designing speakers is not just down to physics but literally thinking out of the box, and Gareth James has used his degree and a lot of ingenuity to create an audio marvel. Many, many hours of experimenting and trying numerous combinations of drive units and

components for the crossover and cabinet designs have led to today's creation. Believe me I have seen and heard thousands of products in my life and great designs never happen without a lot of blood, sweat and tears. It has taken Gareth several years to perfect this range and his unique approach to controlling the airflow within the loudspeaker cabinet has paid off in spades. This, combined with drivers that work at their best in this particular cabinet, and experimenting with the crossover components have really paid off.

What first thing that hits you is the sheer scale of sound these little boxes can reproduce. The sound field is wide and open spreading way beyond their tiny dimensions. Bass for the size is pretty remarkable given the tiny 3.5" diameter and is testament to the control the AEROFLEX technology has over the cabinet resonances and airflow from the rear port. When you normally put your hand in front of the port on a loudspeaker when it is playing you feel quite a rush of air coming out, now with the Minimo it is there but at far less velocity, showing what control the design has in slowing down

and smoothing the flow out. Many companies have tried various methods of achieving this by altering the shape and size of the port(s) and changing the surface of the port and all have their merits, but I feel Gareth has hit upon something pretty unique here and all credit to him.

Of the speakers in the Ophidian room at the Cranage show, the Minimo's worked the best due to the poor acoustic nature of the environment and restrictions imposed. It wasn't because the Minimo's are the best in the M series, just that on the day they excelled and didn't excite the resonances of that particular room.

OPHIDIAN MINIMO LOUDSPEAKERS

We listened to all sorts of music including Mars from Holst's The Planets suite and Audioslave with Cochise a firm favourite of my wife's. Both tracks have a lot of bass and the Minimo's were very adept at controlling this without sounding at all strained or about to launch themselves into oblivion given their modest power handling specification. Credit must go to the drive unit manufacturer as well for such a remarkable feat of engineering.

This whetted my appetite no end so I couldn't wait to try them at home.

Would they work as well? I wasn't disappointed. The same sound emanated in my far superior sounding living room and once again Audioslave was used as a benchmark for my wife to judge their capabilities. She loved them. I do as well, but when I was on my own I listened to my personal favourite artists, Supertramp being one example who make great sounding albums and produce consistently good music. It's the snap and vitality of the Minimos that impress, as well as the scale on offer with a light airiness, and I feel nearly all types of music would sound good on them if used sensibly. Yes, extreme bass and some types of music might not suit and people's tastes vary so much that they won't fit everyone's brief. Positioning them was straight forward and you can of course use them on brackets or bookshelves if you so wish, but on stands I feel they excel.

Currently dealership is limited on this new range so if you are interested in listening, and I strongly urge you to audition them, contact Ophidian Audio direct or check their website out. Gareth already has a dealer in Spain so I hope word spreads internationally, they deserve to do well. I asked Gareth why the name Ophidian and he said when trying to think of one that was a bit different he came across this term

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which means serpent like, rather like the AER-OFLEX technology used in his speaker cabinets, describing the shape of the baffles used inside to control the airflow twisting like a snake.

Now to the price, £700 which for such a small box might seem excessive, but given the build quality which is very good and an amazing sound, this will be down to you the listener. My wife and I loved them and the reaction at the show was obvious from nearly everyone who said they were equally impressed. Given what is out there now have a listen to these, otherwise

you won't know what you have missed.

Now I loved these speakers as did my wife, but overall the high standards we have at Hifi Pig and the criteria we apply meant I couldn't rate them more highly given their price. The downside of being a small business is your buying power and cost restraints mean the end selling price is governed by many factors outside of your control. If Ophidian Audio like other small companies could have these made in China say and get reduced parts costs for buying large quantities, then you the customer would benefit from a lower retail price. As it is in the real world, if you wish to support British ingenuity and manufacturing then one must pay the price. We all love a bargain but these Minimo's are a bargain sound-wise. Quality invariably doesn't come cheap and I would rather pay extra for the satisfaction I have bought a product that will give me years of pleasurable listening than have saved a few quid.

Build quality	8.5/10
Sound quality	9/10
Value for money	8.7/10
Overall	8.7/10

WAY CABLES SILVER 2 AND 4 INTERCONNECTS

WAY to Go!

WAY cables hail from Serbia. Dominic Marsh checks out two of their offerings.



Goodness me, I bet you are thinking right now “Oh no, not another cable review”, but a major function of Hifi Pig is to show and highlight the latest products, it so happens then that cables are part of the rich pageant that all things Hi-Fi encompasses and their exclusion therefore is not on our agenda. As a reviewer then, you get to see a whole raft of cables appearing on the market and after a while you can become a tad blasé when an endless parade of co-axial based black meshed cables arrives on your doorstep to be evaluated, so when something different comes along that breaks the mould you are certainly intrigued. It doesn’t have to have a massive price tag either to pique the interest and that spurs you on to look a bit further into what the product does.

Cue then the WAY Silver 2 and Silver 4 (*above*) interconnects to be evaluated here.

WAY who? Indeed. This is a recently launched company headquartered in Belgrade in Serbia and like all new start up businesses they are bursting with passion and raw enthusiasm, so it was exactly that trait which I admired so much because they are happy to take criticism and appreciate praise where it’s due.

When the cables arrived they were in a sturdy wooden box with plenty of bubble wrap and each box was positively embalmed in cling film and I mean EMBALMED, so much so it took me 30 minutes for each box with a razor sharp craft knife just to remove it all. That’s what you call packing safely for transit. Incidentally, they were shipped

WAY CABLES SILVER 2 AND 4 INTERCONNECTS

from the Berlin branch and they have other distributors already established around Eastern Europe.

CONSTRUCTION

I have encountered some really flexible cables in my time, but never as flexible as the WAY Silver interconnects are. They are quite a chunky cable with an outside diameter of 12mm or so, but they drape across a finger like a dead snake or worm, with both verticals hanging perfectly parallel beneath the finger they are draped over. Both cables have cotton outer sleeving, the Silver 2 is dressed in a natural white, while the Silver 4 has a deep red colour coat.

Terminations are in the form of KLE Harmony RCA connectors, the Silver 2 having silver plated copper plugs, while the Silver 4 sports the 'Absolute' pure silver variant of this connector family. Between plug and cable we find silver corded whipping of around 2cm or so which makes no secret of the fact that these cables are made purely by hand with no machine involvement at all. This is further evidenced by tied on "name tags" of small rectangular strips denoting the model and serial numbers. Allowed to roam freely up and down the cable is a natural bamboo cylinder just a tiny bit larger than the cable's diameter which is carved with the name "WAY" on it, which you think is about to fall off an end but never does. If ever you had a vision of a bespoke cable hand built from the ground up instead of being

chopped off a bulk 100+ metre reel of the stuff, then this is it personified. This is further enforced by a hand written summary of the cable's, model, length and the builder on a leaflet inside the box and the box itself is also hand made with the WAY logo imprinted into the lid.

As befits the model names, the Silver 2 has 99.99% pure silver conductors of 23 AWG or 0.26 mm² if you prefer, while the Silver 4 is wired with 99.99% pure silver at 20 AWG or 0.52 mm² conductors. Insulation and dielectric material is pure cotton fibre, said to be closest to the permittivity of a vacuum or free air, so the company says.

Prices at time of testing are Silver 2 for a 1 m pair with KLEI COPPER Harmony RCA: 199 € and the Silver 4 for a 1 m pair with KLEI Silver ABSOLUTE Harmony RCA: 499 €

Other lengths and connectors are available at time of ordering and I believe you can order by quarter metre increments too to save money.

SOUND QUALITY

I was informed by WAY that the Silver 2 cable already has some usage while the Silver 4 was straight off production so would need a burn in period of 200 hours or so. Gulp. Armed with that information I began the evaluation with the Silver 2



Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

WAY CABLES SILVER 2 AND 4 INTERCONNECTS

cable, while the Silver 4 was left cooking away slowly on another spare system.

When I initially connected the Silver 2 cables it sounded a bit shut in and cloudy so I assumed that the “some usage” WAY had mentioned wasn’t sufficient for full burn in, so that too got another 20 hours on another system. After that period the sound had opened up and the cloudiness had vanished so I began some serious critical listening.

The Silver 2 gave a good account of itself with nothing in the sonic palette I could level any serious criticism at. Sure, it couldn’t compete with other more expensive cable confections with its detail resolution, clarity and bass heft, but amongst similar priced and specified cables it could hold its head up, with pride too I might add. It had enough bounciness and vitality to hold the interest and it certainly didn’t spill over at any time into being bland or dull, so a cable that has my close scrutiny for several hours per day over a week or so for the evaluation, without offending or annoying, gets a good rating regardless. It had a commendably quiet low noise background so the details it revealed were not masked or blurred, but the extreme top-end was rolled off, as was the extreme lower registers. Midband was this cable’s real forte and female vocals in particular which had no congestion or fuzziness at all.

Moving on to the Silver 4 cable now and the sound quality moved upwards commensurate with its price differential to the Silver 2.

Whereas the Silver 2 never did engage me completely, the Silver 4 certainly did from the first bar onwards. Powerful solid bass, a sweet and mellifluous top-end with no shortage of nuances and insights, the sound just flowed freely from the speakers. It was that ease of listening that I enjoyed the most with the Silver 4 and many was the time the listening sessions went on way past my normal bed time, because that effect of drawing me into the music made the hours seem to just fly by.

Of course, I had to show the WAY Silver 4 cables a couple of my torture tracks to see where the limitations were in the sound, so into the CD drawer went Porcupine Tree’s “Deadwing” album, which although isn’t the last word in mangling the sound beyond recognition as some music classed as “torture

tracks” can be, nevertheless it presents a decent obstacle course for any system to traverse unscathed, because the better the system is, the worse it sounds I have found. With the WAY Silver 4 cable installed, it was actually a rather pleasant listen, which tells me that while the Silver 4 can reveal a plethora of details, they don’t suffer from turning the sound into a relentless, fatiguing, unforgiving kind of sound when they are severely provoked by a raw recording such as this.

CONCLUSION

So what can we conclude from this review? The Silver 2 cable offers very good value for its asking price. Neither the last word in detail resolution, nor the last word in plumbing the lower registers either, but for all that it remained constant in its performance with no shocks or surprises to be concerned over.

The Silver 4 cable was in another league entirely so its higher cost over the Silver 2 seemed justified. They never once offended; they did a grand job of drawing me into the music and the way they sailed their way through the Porcupine Tree album sums up all their strengths that they could provide a good rendition of what music was playing through them without spilling over into being analytical and harsh.

SILVER 2

Build quality: 9.0/10

Sound quality: 7.7/10

Value for money: 8.6/10

Overall: 8.3/10

SILVER 4

Build quality: 9.0/10

Sound quality: 8.3/10

Value for money: 8.3/10

Overall: 8.5/10

At the time of review an overall score of above 8.5 (now 9) meant that the Silver 4 cables had to go on for second review. Ian Ringstead continues.

I was asked to do a follow up review to Dominic's on these cables as he had been rather impressed by them. Now cables to me are obviously

WAY CABLES SILVER 2 AND 4 INTERCONNECTS

essential in a hi-fi system, but I have often felt they can be a Pandora's Box when it comes to evaluating them. I know another well known hi-fi reviewer who hates reviewing cables because they are hard to pin down. One of my best friends is an electronics and PA speaker designer who designs large PA rigs for a company and he eschews any fancy cables and power supplies etc. as utter rubbish. I write this review with his words

ringing in my ears and that he will ridicule me if I write something he doesn't agree with. He believes copper is copper and that as long as it is pure which nearly all copper should be, then it makes no difference what fancy designs are made, and sold at extortionate prices, as he sees no justification in it and that companies are just profiteering.

You have to be an enthusiast to even consider spending a lot of money on hi-fi and especially bits of wire to connect the components together. I started out 40 years ago using just decent copper leads and gold plated connections sometimes and thought nothing more about it. Then magazines started to pick up on the importance of good connectors and cables. Some companies like Linn and Naim insisted on only using their cables as they worked best with their equipment and wouldn't recommend other manufacturers. In fact they warned customers and dealers that they wouldn't be liable for damage or problems if other cables were used. Now this might seem rather puritanical these days, but it was a serious issue back in the eighties.

Way use the highest purity silver (99.99%) they can obtain, sourced from here in the UK as we are the only country in the world to guarantee its purity and have stringent quality controls and regulations. Way cables currently feel silver is the best conductor to use, but are open to other materials if they find them to be better in the future. They use pure cotton as the only dielectric and outer jacket material for all their cables. This cotton is produced to their specification (*density, thickness and structure*). They are proud of their Unique extreme damping system™ from sound

vibrations, noise and RFI/EMI interferences, and Way cables are very flexible despite the fact that they have solid-core conductors. This flexibility I feel is unique to their cables and they feel nothing like any other cable I have come across before. Like my colleague Dominic said they are like a worm when you handle them being incredibly flexible and light in weight.

I listened to CDs I thought I knew inside out, but was amazed at the extra detail and clues in the recordings I had previously not heard, or had been disguised in some way.

The cables take at least eight hours per cable to manufacture by hand, I'm told and then they are fully tested and checked out..

I initially tried the cheaper basic model Silver 2 between my CD player and passive pre amp, and then the Silver 4. The Silver 2 was very good and certainly opened up the sound of my system with what appeared to be a much lower noise floor. The Silver 4 built on

the qualities of the 2 and was even more refined and clearer with a beautiful presentation and incredible detail. I listened to CDs I thought I knew inside out, but was amazed at the extra detail and clues in the recordings I had previously not heard, or had been disguised in some way. I then used the Silver 4 between my CD player and the passive pre and the Silver 2 between my pre and the power amp.

I tried several CDs of differing music and they all sounded superb. My ears were not lying to me and my wife also commented on how good they sounded in comparison to my usual cheaper cables. This is not a criticism of these other brands which I find to be very good value at under about a £100, but the Way cables were in a different league.

Compared to any other cable I have heard in my system the Way cables are definitely the best I have come across and offer real value for money. I reckon they are the Way forward! (*Pun intended*)

Silver 4
Sound Quality: 8.9 /10
Build Quality: 9/10
Value for money: 8.5/10
Overall rating: 8.8/10



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TRIANGLE TITUS EZ LOUDSPEAKERS



Ian Ringstead reviewed the Triangle Titus loudspeakers some time ago, concluding that “At £600 I can’t recommend these speakers enough and feel they are one of the best small stand mounts under a £1000 at this current time “ and gave them an overall score of 9/10 meaning that they warranted a second review to see if they would get the coveted Hifi Pig Outstanding Product Award.

Stuart Smith takes up the reins for this second review.



I do like Triangle loudspeakers but the reaction they illicit when any French audiophiles come to the house is mixed. Some will say they are a great brand whilst others bemoan that they’ve lost their way in the last few years. I find this interesting and I’m sure the latter camp’s prejudices are born out of a sort of snobbery that dictates that any “mass market” (I hate that term) product is inherently bad build and bad sound.

Let’s get the first of these misconceptions out of the way first shall we? The little Titus (our sample was in brilliant white) had a very good, if not exceptional, build and the fixtures and fittings were good too. The single set of binding posts’ plate sits snugly and slightly recessed into the back panel of the speakers as does the bass reflex port, though it should be added that this tube is only about an inch or so deep with the rest of the “port” being made out of the cab material. There are no screws to be seen on the front panel and of course the horn tweeter on top stands

the design out from the more conventional looking competition.

SOUND

I’ve got a soft spot for smallish standmounts and these were no exception. From the opening bars of Deep Dish’s Yoshiesque 2 the first thing that struck me was the really great stage that was being thrown by these little speakers. There is depth and there is height and a pretty convincing 3D image too. Bass was never going to be trouser flapping (and it isn’t) but what is there is tight and taut making for a foot tapping listen.

The top-end is clean and airy with plenty of space around the instrumznts and whilst some may criticise the upper frequencies, it has been said Triangles can be a bit screechy, I have never found this. Yes the treble feels extended but to me this just adds air and

TRIANGLE TITUS EZ LOUDSPEAKERS

Lovers of a laidback yet open sound will enjoy them immensely I reckon and they have that “Sunday morning” vibe to them if you get my drift...nice, not in your face and dead easy to listen to.

detail to the listen in the same way a good pair of super-tweeters do.

On vocals the Titus’ do a pretty good job and Gregory Porter’s “No Love Dying” has a silky quality to the vocal track that is really very enjoyable. Lovers of female vocals (and the likes of

Mr Porter) will really enjoy these speakers and for the audiophile type music that gets played at a lot of the shows and dems these speakers will show a clean pair of heels to many at this pricepoint.

Of course you are never going to get a fully “balanced” or full range sound with a pair of speakers this size, but they represent a good overall compromise. There is good mid-band, great treble and a nice tight bass.

CONCLUSION

With a speaker of this size there are inevitable compromises, but accept this and with the Titus’ you have a damned fine speaker for the six hundred quid asking price.

Lovers of a laidback yet open sound will enjoy them immensely I reckon and they have that “Sunday morning” vibe to them if you get my drift...nice, not in your face and dead easy to listen to.

As mentioned, bass is a bit compromised but you can play with positioning and put them nearer the back wall to reinforce the lower end. Personally I’d rather have them a good deal out into the room and experience that lovely soundstage and space that these speakers afford – it becomes a little closed in and constrained when moved too close to the back wall. The long and short of this is drum and bass heads may want to look at getting a much larger speaker but that’s always going to be the case.

For the money these are certainly a speaker to add to your audition list if you are looking for a very detailed speaker with the ability to let you get on with enjoying the tunes without wanting to over analyse it all the time. These are definitely a speaker I could live with long term and even on the end of some seriously pricey electronics they didn’t embarrass themselves one little bit.

Build Quality: 9/10

Sound Quality: 8.75/10

Value For Money: 9.25/10

Overall: 9/10

I have no hesitation in awarding these a second set of outstanding scores and have great pleasure in giving them the Hifi Pig Outstanding Award.

FLARE AUDIO R2PRO & R2A EARPHONES

Janine Elliot reviewed the Flare Audio R2Pro and R2A earphones and thought very highly of them, saying that « As a sound engineer and musician, and as a listener, it hit all the right boxes for me, whether at £200 or £400 » and awarding them 8.97/10 and 8.77 respectively. They were then sent to Linette Smith to see if they would be awarded the Hifi Pig Outstanding Product Award.

As this is the second review I won't go into all the background of the development of these tiny IEMs as Janine has already told you all about them. I have never been a fan of IEMs, finding them generally uncomfortable, and sometimes downright painful. However, I recently reviewed a trio of high end IEMs and was especially happy with the Sennheiser IE-800s. This had helped address my 'in ear fear' so I was happy to take the Flares on for their second review.

I did try on the Flare R1 headphones but never got over my feeling of discomfort whilst wearing them, so I was a little concerned what IEMs from the same company would be like.

Both pairs arrived in a little 'jewellery box' cube and, on opening the box, it was easy to see why Janine had got so excited about them. They looked like earrings or cufflinks in the box without their ear tips on, beautiful and solid with the titanium (Pro)



pair being a slightly darker shade of silver than the R2A. They were very tricky to get out of the foam in the box (some kind of tab or ribbon to pull it out with would solve this) but once I did, I found a neat little drawstring bag for them, the ear tips and the cable all stored underneath. They were so tiny and felt so light that my fears of ear discomfort vanished, especially when I found that the ear tips supplied were memory foam. Popping them into my ears they felt very comfortable, really like having nothing your ears at all....indeed the only problem I had was working out left from right, which was just a bit hit and miss as I could find nothing to tell me which side was which.

I listened to a wide selection of tracks, swapping between the R2A and the R2Pro. Most tracks were Flac and played from my FiiO X5, here's my thoughts on a few of them. The first track I played was Todd Terry's 'Time to blackout' from his 'Resolutions' album. I do love a bit of jungle and this track is a classic, dark vocals, hefty sub bass and fast beats. I replayed it a couple of times because it sounded strikingly different to how I had heard it before. Please note that I say 'different' which is not necessarily 'better'. Everything seemed much more separate, sounds from the background were brought more to the fore and there was a stunning level of

FLARE AUDIO R2PRO & R2A EARPHONES

For me they are too analytical for me to actually enjoy the experience of listening to the music but I can appreciate that some people will absolutely love them for this.

detail. The problem for me was, rather than sounding like a complete track it sounded somehow dissected to my ears. I found I was focusing more on little noises like background clicks, pops and bubbles than the music as a whole that I was analysing rather than listening for pleasure.

Overall I preferred the Pro Flares, there seemed to be more oomph to the bass, the R2A were a little on the light side for my ears and, the way that the music was presented, I felt that more bass was needed to make it sound more whole. Someone who was looking for a more neutral and less bassy sound would, I imagine, prefer the R2A.

The Prodigy's 'Their Law' singles collection gave both pairs a workout and confirmed my thoughts on the difference between the two models...I preferred the Pros but really did I prefer them over £200 as much? I'm not sure. Josh Wink's 'Higher State of Consciousness' is a seriously 303 laden track and it did sound pretty incredible on both pairs, again more bass using the Pro. I ran through a whole load of old skool dance classics....this being the kind of music that I listen to on my FiiO when I'm travelling, so I am really familiar with these tunes from an IEM perspective. That's when it really clicked for me, these IEMs are not really designed for the casual listener who wants to pop their IEMs in on the train and zone out from generally annoyances. They are much more for music professionals to analyse tracks. Generally you would look to a really analytical monitor speaker or professional headphone rather than an IEM for this but with these IEMs, why not? They are really isolating with the comfy tips and very small and portable, for a bedroom DJ or music producer these would be excellent paired with a laptop and a portable DAC/headphone amp. I would be really interested to hear what our eldest son, a student and techno producer/DJ, thought of them.

A few niggles re the packaging and general finish. Whilst the little 'jewellery box' cube that they come in is fine for the cheaper versions, I would like to see something a little more luxurious for the more expensive ones. (I am told the R2PRO come with a carrying case but I didn't have one with the review pair). Likewise it would be nice to have the tips in a choice of sizes. Another thing that cheapened the offering was the cable, which seemed no different to what I've encountered on a £40 pair of IEMs, it tangled every time I put them down and I would much prefer either a flat rubberised or a braided cable at the price the Flares are selling for. I also could not find any indication of left and right on either pair, so I was obviously missing something or it just was not there. Really though, any gripes about accessories and packaging do not actually make a difference to these IEMs. People who buy them will be looking for an analytical, professional grade of IEMs, people who are sound engineers, musicians or producers and who want to get the most accurate playback of their music that they can. While the level of detail is perhaps going to be too much for some people like me, for others it will be exactly the reason that they buy the Flares.

CONCLUSION

These really are Marmite IEMs, you will either love them or hate them. For me they are too analytical for me to actually enjoy the experience of listening to the music but I can appreciate that some people will absolutely love them for this. The units themselves are beautifully made but lack of attention to detail with accessories and packaging lets them down, especially the more expensive model.

R2A Natural: £175

Sound: 7.5/10

Comfort: 9 /10

Fit and finish: 6 /10

Value: 6/10

Overall: 7.13/10

R2Pro: £400

Sound: 7.75 /10

Comfort: 9/10

Fit and finish: 6/10

Value: 5/10

Overall: 6.94/10

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RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



Philips DCC900

The Hillman Imp was an amazing invention for 1963. This was the answer to the Mini, doing everything that Alec Issigonis's baby could do, but adding some extra features that were revolutionary for the time; preceding hatchbacks this car had an opening back window to put in your shopping on the rear seat (or your kids heads) just in case you hadn't any more room under the front bonnet, and it had more space inside. The light aluminium engine was novel, too, and helped make the car quite nippy (when it worked). What let it down was being a quickly thought out idea and badly made in Scotland. Shame, as I loved it. It could have been an amazing car.

Really Quite Clever

The Philips DCC (Digital Compact Cassette) has many comparisons with the Imp. No, I'm serious. Both continued an old idea, but added new features you could use, if you wanted to. Rather than inventing a Sinclair C5 (Sony's MiniDisc), which would mean getting rid of your car jack,

This clever machine meant that a new technology was backward-compatible so you didn't need to eject (permanently) your old recordings of Des O'Connor, and you could now listen with good signal to noise without missing some of the tops, as Dolby B did.

fluffy seats (and steering wheel), antifreeze and probably your garage, too, you could quite happily continue as you were and take advantage of a few mod cons, like adding luggage. The new DCC allowed you to still play all your wowy and hissy cassettes

(with amazingly good clarity) but also to play and record digital recordings using an audio compression codec based upon MPEG-1 Audio Layer I (MP1) and termed PASC (Precision Adaptive Sub-band Coding). PASC lowered the

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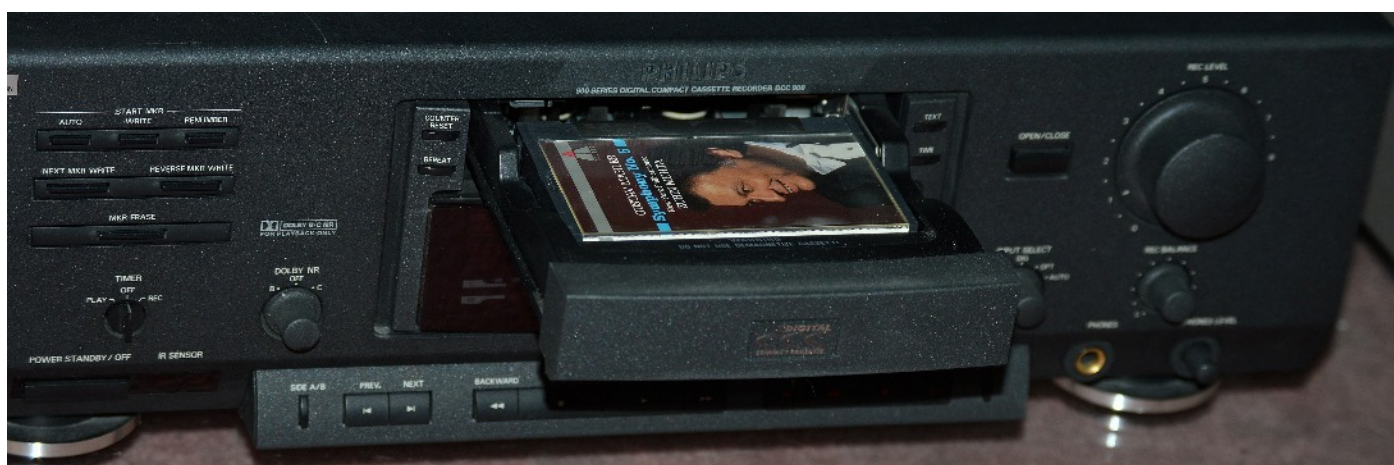
typical bitrate of a CD recording of 1.4 megabits per second to 384 kilobits per second, a compression ratio of around 4:1. This clever machine meant that a new technology was backward-compatible so you didn't need to eject (permanently) your old recordings of Des O'Connor, and you could now listen with good signal to noise without missing some of the tops, as Dolby B did. What's more, the PASC system compared favourably with the competing Sony MiniDisc, which used ATRAC compression at around 5:1. If you remember the (still new, but still large) CD was developed by both Sony and Philips, but now they were head to

head in creating a smaller system to replace the humble cassette, and one that allowed Walkman sized portable players as well as larger mains units. Sony could make the MiniDisc into an amazingly small box, with a miniature CD rotating at speed inside its individual housing. That was not far removed from the red-book CD. Philip's idea was something quite different, something quite unimaginable in the beginning of the nineties. How on earth could you get all that digital data onto a 1/8" magnetic tape travelling at 1 7/8 inches with a stationary head! All the years of massive VHS and Betamax tapes roaring away with their helical scan heads made this

new DCC all the more amazing. The stationary head, though, did have an advantage in that it wasn't so susceptible to vibration as was my Sony D3 DAT recorder, which wouldn't play too well in the train on my way to work. And if you remember, portable CD players needed a built in memory to keep them playing when the laser bounced about on the 1806 out of Farringdon. DCC also had less moving parts so cheaper to make, too.

How It Worked

So, how did it all work then? Well, the head assembly contained a combination of two



record/playback heads. One was a conventional two-track block contained left and right channels to play your analogue recordings, and the other consisted of no less than 9 mini tracks. When the cassette was set to play the other side then the whole head assembly just switched over. Obviously this wasn't possible on the few portable units that were made, where indeed the analogue cassette was also played on several tracks on the "digital" head. There was also a conventional erase head. The digital cassette was the same size as the analogue version, though with tape used in video recording. The tape had better protection from sticky fingers and a sturdier box to put it in.

The reason for 9 "tracks" was paramount; eight contained the main PASC and error correction data, plus the system information. The ninth, "Auxiliary Data" track holds mainly track and time information, similar to data on a compact disc, plus extra tape markers for easier operation, for initiating things like start and reverse. This auxiliary data can be scanned during high-speed search, making operation faster and more straightforward, though I didn't like doing this on my Philips DCC900 in case it wore out the head or the tape! To allow 9 tracks across the 1 7/8 inch tape DCC uses magneto resistive (MR) technology. At the time this was a major advance in

thin-film head design. MR's hi-



gh-read sensitivity allowed narrower tracks to be used for digital coding, so that overall tape data density is increased. Indeed, each head was 185 µm wide with the track width required for playback at only 70 µm wide. That meant that there was much reduced sensitivity to azimuth error. All information recorded onto tape was grouped into self-contained tape frames separated with little gaps, and each tape frame contained 12,288 bytes of information, of which 8,192 was PASC data. This PASC data was spread across the tape in a checkerboard pattern, with the intention of preventing dropouts caused by damage to the magnetic tape, similar to interleaving on CDs.

The CIRC (Cross Interleaved Reed Solomon Code) system found on CD's and DAT tapes is also employed here, which allows for correction of drop-outs, and this means it can cope with 'data holes' of up to 1.45mm in diameter (about 0.03 seconds) and could even compensate for a completely missing data track. The final bit rate to tape is 768 kbps, which is recorded in the eight 96 kbps data tracks.

With PASC coding DCC achieves up to 18-bit resolution (A/D converters on DCC730, 951), 5-22,000Hz frequency response and up to 108dB dynamic range (on the DCC175, 130 portable players) producing 'superb digital sound of Compact Disc quality', to quote Philips, and not me obviously. To accomplish this, Philips designed PASC to ignore quieter sounds hidden by those that were louder, and also to ignore the very quietest of sounds, which we wouldn't be able to hear anyway. The similarities with ATRAC and MP3 are for another day.

There was no problem with azimuth error because the Fixed Azimuth Tape Guidance (FATG) mechanism and the Azimuth Locking Pins (ALPs) fitted to the DCC head assembly ensured not only improved wrap-around tape-to-head contact (much better than on the compact cassette), but also ensured consistent azimuth alignment. You must never demagnetise the digital tape head, and mine has never needed head cleaning (not that it is easy to do that without unscrewing the box). The only temperamental part on the failsafe DCC technology was the micro-switch sensing whether the tape was a DCC or normal cassette.

Entering information (album, track etc) wasn't as easy on the DCC as on the MD, something we did regularly when recording inserts for sports on news programmes at the BBC in the 90's. On the DCC you needed to 'wind' to the beginning of the tracks to get that dot-matrix display. Tapes theoretically came as large as 120 minutes, though these weren't easily available, and were the

RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY JANINE ELLIOT

same size and used the same chromium dioxide or ferric tapes. All DCC recorders used the SCMS copy protection system which utilises two bits in the S/PDIF digital audio stream and on the tape to differentiate between "protected" and "unprotected" audio, and between "original" and "copy".

Doomed To Fail?

DCC was developed in conjunction with Matsushita, and various models were produced by Panasonic (a brand of Matsushita), Grundig and Marantz (related to Philips). Its failure was not only its limitations (track ordering and naming) but the fact that customers wanted instant access to all tracks, something they now had with the CD. Sony could happily rest on its reputation with the Walkman and because their MiniDisc was smaller. My Philips 900, introduced in 1992 at the same time as the MiniDisc began selling machines, has never let me down since the first time it was pulled out of its box. It allows analogue and digital SPDif/Toslink, with quiet running and a cute remote control.

A Multi-Million Pound Flop

Don't laugh, but I seriously think the failed Philips Digital Compact Cassette was one of the best examples of how the hi-fi industry should have gone forward. Not only was it amazingly clever (I mean, how on earth could you get digital audio from a stationary head with a 1/8" tape passing through at 1 7/8ips!), but more importantly it was backward and forward compatible. As well as

Not only was it amazingly clever (I mean, how on earth could you get digital audio from a stationary head with a 1/8" tape passing through at 1 7/8ips!), but more importantly it was backward and forward compatible.

being able to play your analogue cassettes its digital output facility permitted copying cassettes them onto an external digital format for future storage. The PASC (Precision Adaptive Sub-band Coding) sound compression far surpassed that of MiniDisc, but like most things, success was led by the consumer. I was brought up to believe that the consumer was always right, but I don't think that is actually the case. Just 4 years after its inception, Philips gave up with DCC, having been a multi-million pound flop. Remind you of the 8-track tape, or my favourite, the Elcassette (not a holiday resort in Spain), a large cassette by Sony

playing at 3 3/4ips? No, Philips should have persevered with their clever baby, in which case waste mountains of discarded audio cassettes wouldn't have been created quite so soon. Sometimes we are financially led to give up on an idea too soon, like the infamous APT Tilting Train back in the 70's which was put to bed soon after it failed to bend over a few times. It's hard to believe, but only nine of the original Espace MPV's by Renault were sold in the first month it was released. Thank goodness they had the hindsight to continue production otherwise we'd still be driving Hillman Imps.

THE VOICE OF DOM!

**THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF
AN AUDIOPHILE AT THAT TENDER
AGE...BY DOMINIC MARSH**



During one of my reviews about cables a while back, I recall saying that one day I should write a blog about mains cables explaining my interpretation of how and why they work the way they do with regards to sound quality. Hifi Pig has given me the opportunity to do just that and I hope it entertains you and perhaps stimulates your own thought processes about the subject, rather than attempting to explain it in purely objective terms... or rather, how the world of science sees it. Better still than either of those is a light hearted mick-take of the whole thing. I write this piece with no intention to argue or debate with anyone, you can either see some sort of worth in what I write, or you can dismiss it if you wish and I have no qualms if you do.

Objectively Speaking

Looking at it from the purely objective viewpoint then, any cable can only demonstrate three scientific characteristics - resistance, capacitance and inductance, which singly or in concert with the other

So then, the basic minimum criteria for a mains cable's performance is that it must get the old juice from the wall socket to the input of my hi-fi component without spilling any of it on the carpet.

parameters, can change slightly the tonality of a cable - if at all. You can either agree or disagree with that statement and either way it will not affect my views, which are based purely on what I have heard and observed over many years. Empirical evidence it may be, but these observations have been both consistent and, more importantly, reliable to me personally.

Bad Goldfish...BAD!

So then, the basic minimum criteria for a mains cable's performance is that it must get the old juice from the wall socket to the

input of my hi-fi component without spilling any of it on the carpet. I had a cable once that had this nasty trait and it took hours of scrubbing with a stiff brush and plenty of bleach and still the stain wouldn't come out. People still say to me even today when they see the stain that I should have house trained my pets better and my riposte to that is the Goldfish was severely reprimanded and put on the naughty step for such a filthy act in my home.

Moving on to the mains input plug - By taking off the cover if I find a short cylindrical thing in there that

THE VOICE OF DOM!

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF
AN AUDIOPHILE AT THAT TENDER
AGE... BY DOMINIC MARCH

says “fuse” or some such on it, it must be wrapped in the silver foil and paper from a cigarette packet, otherwise it won’t work (*Don’t try this at home folks – Ed*). So many times have I seen this in the past that I thought it was quite normal for all fuses to be similarly attired, until one day I saw fuses in a shop being sold in a clear blister pack and I complained to the shop assistant they were defective without the silver foil covering. I was soon put right on that score. Anything other than Benson & Hedges foil had no audiophile credentials whatsoever, or so I am told (*No really, only use fuses that are suitable for the job and rated for the appliance they are used in. Anything else is dangerous/life threatening and will void insurance – Ed*).

Size Matters

Size matters... or not. I have seen and owned huge diameter mains cables, one of which was two parallel cable runs of around 16mm each and how on earth they were wired them into a standard 3 pin UK mains plug is anyone’s guess, and I wasn’t brave/foolish enough to peek inside either. They were thick enough to keep an ocean liner firmly secured to the dock believe me. Conversely, I have owned mains cables less than 5mm in diameter which could have been used as shoe laces.

Which had the better sound? They were pretty much on a par with each other, so the outward size itself appears to have little or no relevance.

Beauty is only skin deep and that really does apply to mains cables. Ignore the fancy outer jacket, it is merely camouflage that

hides what

it’s inside and if you follow that to its logical conclusion then plain black should suffice, but one of my latest gripes is too many of them are cloaked in plain black shrouding which makes identification and differentiation rather difficult. Contrary old so and so, aren’t I?

The Tension Mounts

At the other end of the “volts pipe” we usually find an IEC connector of some description, ranging from poor to less poor and I will qualify that statement. The conductor design of the IEC connector isn’t ideal in my view, but it is a generally accepted standard, so we can pick up any IEC plug and connect it to any IEC socket of the same family and type. I put that last part in because some wag

will probably say “Hardeyhar Dominic, you cannot plug a 2 pin IEC plug into a 3 pin IEC socket, nor a 10 amp into a 20 amp one” ... Yes I know, I am trying to be as concise as I can without misleading or boring the pants off my readers. The issue that I have is that there is a relatively small contact area of the connector pins inside the female IEC socket once mated with the male connector (*not talking about sex here by the way*) and the propensity of the terminals to lose their springiness and grip after repeated insertions (*you lot must have some filthy minds*). I have had several IEC connectors that crackled and popped with only the slightest touch on

the body and it meant I had to take the socket apart and add some tension to the connector pins to make them grip better and provide a reliable connection. That aside, it is good that we do have a standard in a world where “compatibility” is fast becoming a four letter word.

Complications

Next we move on to what the blessed things are made from and this is where it gets both interesting and complicated at the same time folks. I will start with copper conductors and kick off with saying that not all copper cable is created equal. A large percentage of it these days is actually recycled copper formed into ingots and sold on the world market...and the copper in these could be blended with



anything; aluminium, zinc, steel, welly scrapings, you name it, it might be found in there. Of course some of it is virgin sourced from mined ore and that has a price premium applied to it, especially so the high purity copper that has been additionally refined a stage or two further than the standard material. Annealing and tempering adds an additional cost to the wire once it has been drawn through the die and some cable manufacturers even polish the surface would you believe? The jury is still out on that one as far as I am concerned as I have not evaluated similar cables where one has polished conductors and another one remains unpolished. And before you even think it, I am not going to be sat here for hours on end with a tin of Brasso and a rag either shining one up to please you lot. No sir.

All That Glitters

Silver too has similar origins to copper, with more and more originating from recycled materials. Again, it may contain all sorts of impurities and even the Sterling Silver standard guarantees the amount of silver content within the metal, not what the rest of it is comprised of. Apart from Sterling silver, it is generally classified as a purity rating in percentage terms, so a "Four Nines" rating is assayed at 99.99% purity and when we are talking about "Five Nines" purity that means it is 99.999% purity which has a frightening price tag even for a mere ounce of it, so if you see a cable

with a claimed "Five Nines" purity advertised for sale at £8.99 including delivery dear readers, you certainly aint getting no five nines silver content that's for sure, not even four nines, not even two nines I would say. Quite a few vendors will include the word "silver" in their marketing, but read the small print and they have hidden the word "plated" in there somewhere, so don't be fooled.

Next we move onto Gold, Platinum and I will lump the rest in as "exotic" for the purposes of this article, with no disrespect for the vendors that use different precious metals in their construction. Gold is generally described as a poor conductor and is less efficient at conducting electricity than copper or silver so I wouldn't class it as "poor". A pure gold conductor is not only expensive, but it has certain traits that in isolation do not make a good hi-fi cable on it's own, but alloyed with other metals bestows some unique properties which I will detail in Part Two of this article.

Until Next Time...

So then, to conclude the first part of this epic tome I will leave you with two thoughts to mull over until the next thrilling episode: The first is to get your head round the notion that there is no such thing as the perfect cable. This is

Quite a few vendors will include the word "silver" in their marketing, but read the small print and they have hidden the word "plated" in there somewhere, so don't be fooled.

important to grasp because that is your starting point for understanding the whole aftermarket cables scenario and that includes all interconnects and speaker cables too for that matter.

The second thought is to ask why would anyone splosh out on an (*expensive*) aftermarket mains cable (*or interconnects and speaker cables*) when a cheap one is more than adequate for the job and proves it by not spilling any electricity onto your carpet? The clue there is the word "adequate" and although it is a word open to interpretation by some people, it has a deep meaning for me and it has a baseline of INadequacy that an aftermarket mains cable will address, because you are not actually introducing a BETTER mains cable into the system, you are in fact TAKING OUT the inadequacies that a cheap mains cable fundamentally carries with it and that subject is what I shall be writing about in Part Two next month.

Dominic Marsh

FIDELITY MATTERS

A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY IAN RINGSTEAD



Boxing Clever (and how to dodge the punches)

What is it about this hobby of ours that makes so many audiophiles restless about keeping the same kit for any length of time? I started buying hifi from an early age, 16 to be precise, and from the very first moments of excitedly going to Comet (*readers in the UK will remember them!*) and buying a Metrosound amplifier, BSR HT70 turntable with Goldring G800 cartridge and Koss Pro 4AA headphones I was hooked... but already wanting better units.

Round One

I had to patiently wait about a year until my next summer holiday job in an office to save enough dough to buy my next turntable, a Thorens TD165 with Shure M75ED type 2 cartridge. You see, I already saw improving my source components as an important stepping stone and chose that over getting speakers, much to my parents relief I am sure. I went to University at

Never content to rest on my laurels, upgrade after upgrade followed and when I got a full time job the floodgates were opened to many new adventures in quality equipment.

eighteen briefly but never settled down there, I did though do the typical student trick of blowing £40 (*a small fortune back in 1974 and a lot of my first terms grant*) on an SME 3009 tone arm to put on my TD165. That was fun but fiddly as it required tediously filing out the metal sub chassis before I could fit the new arm board and SME arm. However, I was in seventh heaven for quite a while and the SME was beautifully engineered and never let me down.

Never content to rest on my laurels, upgrade after upgrade followed and when I got a full time job the floodgates were

opened to many new adventures in quality equipment. I could fill a whole article on my system changes over the last 43 years, but that would bore many of you I am sure and would only serve as an exercise in my memory's ability. The reason for this article is to hopefully guide you, the reader, through a less costly way of upgrading (*or fancying a change*) process that our hobby instils in us.

Fancy Footwork

Invariably I have spent thousands over time on upgrades/changes of equipment which although I don't regret (*no point crying over spilt*

milk), my bank manager and long suffering wife haven't agreed with. I recall the time I decided to upgrade my CD player to a Yamaha CD1000 a few years ago. Now this was a beautifully made and very heavy piece of kit. I bought it at a good price off the internet and expected it to arrive soon after I placed the order. Unfortunately the carrier delayed the delivery for some reason and my Friday's plans of it arriving whilst my wife was at work were blown out of the water. Anxious to ascertain the problem and get it in my greasy mits I contacted the company, only to be told they would deliver on the Saturday morning and apologising profusely for the delay. This was not ideal as I had to go out Saturday morning to an important meeting and so had to tell my wife a new CD was arriving and could she be so good as to receive it? Well, when I said CD she simply, and quite logically, thought it was a CD disc and not a large 16 kg box. The worst bit was I had taken my door keys with me and she couldn't find hers, so when the carrier arrived she had to open the window to the living room and manhandle a hefty heavy box into the living room.

On The Ropes

The other funny incident was when I was 55 and cashed in some of my pension. Now having a large sum of money was a dangerous thing for an addict like me. I constantly look on the internet for equipment and every so often you see a bargain that just



can't be missed. This time it was a Burmester 069 CD player for just £4000 which normally sell for over £8000 new, but this was a mint part-ex deal with a dealer I was friends with. I had lusted after Burmester kit for years and the chance to own some for what I felt was a bargain was simply too much for someone as weak willed as myself where Hi-fi is concerned. I made the call and duly received my audio delight. It was fantastic, but how do you sneak such a chrome plated piece of audio jewellery into the hi-fi without my wife knowing. Well you can't! I left the receipt for it lying around and she found it by chance, which was bad news!! Very bad news!!! The fact I had for years just bought and changed kit regularly without often mentioning the actual price I had paid for it couldn't go unnoticed. It wasn't so much the fact she didn't like the look of it (*I personally think it was gorgeous*), it was how could I possibly justify spending that much money when I had no good reason whatsoever, especially with my daughter getting married in the then not too distant future. Needless to say it

had to go. The dealer I bought it off was prepared to take it back in exchange for other kit but at a loss to myself (*of course*) and this was leaving egg on my face. I decided to advertise it and as luck would have it a Chinese gentleman in London bought it from me leaving me with a 25% loss. "Caveat emptor, buyers beware". I had to take the hit and be thankful I sold it quickly for cash. The moral here is fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Boxing Clever

So if you want to indulge but not affect your bank balance too much, box cleverly. The way to do this is simple. First be patient. Secondly do your homework, make sure you are fully aware of the true market value of an item and check the kit's pedigree out. An item is only worth its value to you if you want it enough and are happy with the price. If there is a demand the price will be higher and mint condition units, especially with original packaging and instructions, command higher residuals.

I recently bought some old Quad units, a 33 pre amp and 303 power amplifier. I got them off a well known auction site and took a chance on the pre amp being ok as the seller was being quite honest about it in the write up and the pictures didn't lie. I paid a reasonable price for it and a lot less than they are currently going for if in good condition because I

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EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY
IAN RINGSTEAD

was going to have to refurbish it and replace old parts past their best. I got an upgrade kit from a well respected internet company and started my venture in restoring it. The 33 was an early example at least 45 years old and had been well used in a dirty environment and exposed to damp at some point. This meant a complete strip down and many hours of fiddling. Now I enjoy this, but it is not for the faint hearted, or those who lack the skill to fault find. One of the issues of its age was that the front panel and controls were scuffed and the case cover was badly re-painted. I replaced the controls and front panel with second-hand buys, but couldn't get a spare cover. I thought about getting the cover re-sprayed with powder coating, but this is not cheap and you try getting a

company to do a small one off job for you. The god's must have been shining on me because a few weeks later I saw another 33 on eBay which had a slight fault with it but otherwise was immaculate with full packaging and instructions. I duly bought it for less than the poorer unit I had already gambled on and it is like brand new. A late production unit, it was as if it had only just come out of Quad's Huntingdon factory. Needless to say I was delighted and I will now sell the older unit in due course and recoup its cost.

It's A Knockout

Now buying on auction sites is not without its perils, but if you are savvy then bargains can be had. I have learnt the hard way and like most of us I can't afford to throw

money away all the time. Priorities in life change and circumstances dictate our audio path more often than we like to admit. A colleague of mine has a mantra about this, rather like Martin Lewis (*English money saving expert/guru*) on money matters – "If you can't afford it don't buy it and make it a golden rule to self fund if at all possible". There is nothing wrong in changing your kit whenever you wish to as long as you don't waste that hard earned cash.

Hi-fi and music are fun and meant to be enjoyed like any hobby, so if you use some common sense and don't let your heart rule your head always then audio happiness can be achieved without breaking the bank. As a famous police series from the eighties said every week, "People, be careful out there!".

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THE VIEWS OF STU!

COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE
OCCASIONAL TEMPER
TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH



In August 1982 the very first CD disc was pressed and for the record (*pun intended*) it was apparently The Visitors by Abba. The technology however didn't go on sale, in Japan first of all, until later that year and later still in the UK.

The Future's Shiny

I, like many I suspect, remember the presenters of Tomorrow's World (*for those not in the know, this was a program that highlighted how our world may be in the future – think flying cars, hoverboards and the like*)

demonstrating and bleating on with great enthusiasm about how fabulous these new-fangled little silver discs were and how they would replace all the vinyl records in the coming years. I even recall one very animated presenter smearing jam, or was it marmalade, over one of the discs, wiping it off and then playing the disc...revolutionary to say the least, particularly given the number of breakfast time vinyl incidents reported in the eighties. As an absolute rule I still ensure that I NEVER have sticky preserves anywhere near any of

I even recall one very animated presenter smearing jam, or was it marmalade, over one of the discs, wiping it off and then playing the disc...

my music collection...better safe than sorry I always say!

Birth Of The Fool

A few years later (*probably 1988/9 as the first CD I bought was Masters Of Reality's eponymous debut album*) I bought my first CD player, a cheap little thing I got from a second hand shop in Newcastle and I, like many, thought it was an absolute revelation over vinyl reproduction.

Gone were the pops and clicks associated with vinyl and I could even sling the little discs around the room in drunken abandon without fear of damaging them...or so the theory went. Consensus over the format was not universal it has to be said, and one particularly vocal detractor came in the form of Keith Richards, he of prodigious excess and high-living fame (*he's also in the Rolling Stones I understand*) - if I remember correctly he said they

THE VIEWS OF STU!

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TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH

sounded vastly inferior to vinyl records and too hars

h....I'm paraphrasing here. I on the other hand went mad and thought that this was most definitely where my musical path lay and so it was with great gusto that I sold all my rock-oriented vinyl, with the thought that I'd replace it all over time with the CD versions of the albums. Oh the folly of impetuous youth... I got rid of some rare gems in that sell off for an absolute pittance and haven't a hope in hell's chance of ever replacing them... though I am trying with varying degrees of success.

Around the same time that I got my first CD player I also embraced the new phenomenon that was dance music and started DJing and so it was back to the black stuff for a few years for me... until I decided to sell it all and my record shop to boot. There's a theme of stupidity becoming apparent here I know, and I realise at this juncture that I can no longer declare my foolhardiness in these matters a factor of inexperience or age. The rare vinyl is long gone and all but irreplaceable, but I do still collect vinyl records and I do keep an eye out for stuff I have imprudently got shut of. But I digress...

The Futures So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades

CDs became the norm for me for many years thereafter and, as they were virtually indestructible I thought I'd save some valuable house space and get rid of all those pesky jewel cases and pop the collection (*and their covers*) in a series of CaseLogic style holders. Now, let me make one thing perfectly clear here, CDs are certainly not indestructible and a few years of sliding them in and out of their pockets (*in various states of sobriety*) scratches the little buggers to pieces, to the point that many became unplayable and I had to go out and buy new ones. I also really hate the jewel cases CDs come in and I've lost count of the number of times a new parcel arrives in the post and I open it with great excitement only to find the case is cracked, or, pretty much invariably, the little spindle thing in the middle of the case (*designed to keep the CD in place*) has shattered and the disc is rattling about in there. The gatefold packages that sort of mimic vinyl albums only Lilliputian in stature, are better it has to be said, but I find it hard to read the spines of

these

when they are on

the shelf. Surely, if

we can land a box the size of a fridge on a comet millions of miles away and travelling at unfathomable speeds, then some design genius boffin can come up with a storage system for my CDs that is both user-friendly and tough enough to endure the ravages of the postal system...not to mention a Saturday night chez us.

I feel cheated and not a little lied to by those soothsayers of future technological expectations it has to be said; not only am I not popping down to the shops in my hovercar, but it also turns out that those silvery discs themselves are actually far from imperishable. I even remember a sign in the studio of the radio station where I did a show stating "Hand Acid Kills CDs". So it turns out that you actually have to handle a CD with as much care and attention as you would a vinyl record...now who would have thought that?

The Peel Sessions

So we've established that the discs and cases are not as sturdy as we



have been led to believe but there's the small matter of how they sound. OK, Mr. Richards reckoned they're harsh and it's well documented that Neil Young thinks the whole digital process is flawed at source, and I agree to some extent, but I reckon you can get exceptional playback from straightforward Red Book CDs. There are broadly two camps in audiophileland and both are equally vociferous in their claims that their particular media is sonically superior ; in the blue corner we have the vinylistas who claim that it is only through use of the black stuff that you can get truly close to the original recording and the emotional response this causes in the listener, whilst in the red corner you have an equally fervent group that decries all things vinyl as being anachronistic and inferior. I've given up entering into discussions about this particular component of the vinyl/CD argument as both sides shout equally loudly and both are similarly unyielding in their opinions. Personally I have both vinyl and CDs and I'm even embracing digital downloads as a valid source of musical enjoyment, and I swip and swap between these as the mood takes me. I've invested heavily in my digital playback system and love the way it sounds, appreciate its convenience and, despite my ranting on about CDs not being as tough as they like to think they are, value their relative robustness. However, I've also invested righteously in my vinyl playback and love the way this sounds. Yes the two are sonically different but both have their merits – vinyl feels more organic and natural, whereas CD, to me, is more analytical and colder sounding...but then it

There are broadly two camps in audiophileland and both are equally vociferous in their claims that their particular media is sonically superior...

doesn't have the clicks and pops associated with vinyl...yes I know the famous John Peel quote about life having pops and clicks, but I have to be honest here and say that they do on occasion get in the way of the music...I'm hoping the new all singing all dancing record cleaning machine I have on order will go some ways towards reducing poppage and clickage.

Die Young, Stay Pretty

There are many out there decrying that CD is a dying format, which for me is actually a great thing; while ever folk are disposing of their CD collections in favour of downloads (*legal and illegal*) or streaming, I, and people like me, will benefit from a surfeit of cheap, used CDs. Currently I have a supplier who sells donated CDs

at a couple of Euros a pop which means I can take a punt on things I've never come across before. Yes there's the occasional lemon and yes there's the odd disc that has been through the wars, but in the main they're mostly usable and sound very good. I also collect vinyl and looking over at the current crop of used discs I note that two out of the ten discs I've just bought are unplayable, despite having had a good wash. Yes, the sales figures on new CDs are undeniable, and yes streaming now makes more money (*in the US at least*) for the record companies, but that does not get in the way of the fact that music reproduced on CD (*and played on a good system*) is still enjoyable, still valid and still very much alive and whilst ever I can I will continue to use them.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM
THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY
LINETTE SMITH

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Why Are There So Few Women Into Hifi?

Now there's a question, its one that I hear pretty often too. It usually comes up like this...I will be on Facebook and something catches my eye, probably someone has posted a picture of their hifi set-up, new speakers, cables or amplifier. I'll make a comment along the lines of 'Wow, that looks serious/I heard these at a show/I have the same one'. This then prompts a load of comments from guys along the lines of 'Hey, a woman who likes hifi...that's a novelty, why are there so few of you?'

The thing is, there are loads of us actually, but we tend to keep ourselves to ourselves and just get on with it...so, to the average male hifi nut, it may just seem that the female of the species doesn't really give two hoots about the glorious and crazy world of hifi. There are a lot of females that

There are a lot of females that either work in the hifi and audio industry, or are enthusiasts and these are women that know their stuff, every bit as well (*and often better*) than the guys.

either work in the hifi and audio industry, or are enthusiasts and these are women that know their stuff, every bit as well (*and often better*) than the guys. The question doesn't seem to get asked about music, I think it's generally taken for granted that males and females both equally love to listen to music, and hifi equipment is

just what one uses to listen to music on, why would we be any less interested in it than you?

What makes us, more often than not, less likely to put our hands up and say 'me...over here! I love hifi!' Well, from my point of view, there are several reasons.

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**BIRD'S
EYE VIEW**

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM
THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY
LINETTE SMITH

'White Wine For The Lady?'

One of the biggest things for us to overcome is that hardwired attitude that a lot of guys have that we are incapable of choosing some things for ourselves. We are fairly safe with 'girly' subjects such as shoes, handbags and make up, but put us in front of anything more challenging, and traditionally male dominated, like tech, hifi or cars and we obviously need the assistance of a big strong man to help us decide what we like...even getting drinks at a bar will often result in pint of real ale for the guy and a nice white wine for her. If you can get beyond this, there are actually a lot of men that say that their wife/girlfriend/partner is the person in their house that can make the best judgement of how things sound when they are trying out new hifi components. Don't just assume that because we are a female we are starting from nowhere...we may have a bit of knowledge; we may have a lot more than you on certain subjects. I read recently a story from the female Vice President of a well known and long established American hifi company. She was at a hifi show and went over to



look what cartridge was being used on the deck in a system, she was informed that what she was looking at was a turntable.....yes really! Please don't be so condescending, we are perfectly capable of sitting down and listening and if we have any questions, we will ask!

WAF (Wife Acceptance Factor)

I really hate this term, most people use it without really thinking about it to describe an item of audio equipment that has undergone some kind of beautification or

been wrapped in an invisibility cloak to make it more acceptable to our feeble and easily offended female senses. 'It's got really high WAF' No, it's a beautiful looking and incredible sounding piece of equipment that any audiophile/hifi enthusiast of either gender can appreciate. Please note that all women are different and we all have different tastes, what I think is attractive the next woman (*or man*) might not...I happen to have a soft spot for really big horn speakers and electronics with valves sticking out of the top. Just as I can look at art or architecture I can look at hifi and see the beauty in its form, it doesn't have to be disguised in any way to make me accept it. Many people (*men and women*) want their hifi to look as good as it works, just like they would their car or kitchen, but that's a decision that is not based on whether they have a penis or not!

'Mine Is Bigger/Better/Louder/More Expensive Than Yours!'

While we are on the subject, if you guys really want us women to join in more on audiophile/hifi forums and groups, please, just put it away will you? I remember being at school in the 70s and the boys would be frequently shrieked at, by irate teachers, for having competitions to see who could wee

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

the highest up a wall. This obviously proved that they were highly masculine so when they grew up they continued to apply this 'rampant masculinity' and 'willy waving' technique to their hifi. Having the best/biggest/loudest/most expensive hifi in the group and shouting about this whilst belittling everyone else's choices OBVOIUSLY makes you seem manlier. Errr...no it doesn't, it makes you boring and a keyboard warrior. Please grow up and have an educated conversation with your fellow audiophiles and you might learn a few things...in the meantime us women have better things to do, like listening to music on, rather than showing off about, our hifi. There is nothing wrong with being proud of what you have; you just don't need to slate what others have to confirm how good yours is.

Cables

What is it with you guys and cables? To me, they are just the things that you use to connect the bits of your hifi together. I didn't think that they could make much of a difference...then my ears told me different. You can, like for every other hifi component, pay a little for cables or lot, it's up to the individual. However, if you dare to even mention the 'C' word a fight will ensue, between the '20p a metre bell wire' camp and the 'my speaker cables cost more than my house' camp and it will probably get very personal and

nasty. Just chill out, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, there is no need for death threats, the world will not end nor the sky fall in just because someone prefers to use a power cable with a telephone number price tag rather than the one that came free with their amp...its their choice.

Hifi Hookers

Now this really is a bit of an odd one. To be fair to you blokes, this is more of a female thing. Social media is a great way to connect with fellow hifi enthusiasts, I have loads of friends all over the world who share my interest and a high proportion of them are male. These friends are much more interested in finding out what I think of the latest pair of high end headphones, or what I thought of the hifi show that I've recently been to. They like to see pictures of our listening room...basically they want to know about the hifi, not me personally, I'm just another 'one of the guys'. However, their wives and girlfriends seem to think a bit differently. I once had a tirade of abuse (*I was accused of being a hooker!*) from the wife of a guy that had sent me a friend request on Facebook, despite the fact that we had a few hundred mutual friends (*including my husband*); she thought that I was after her man! I have fellow female audiophile friends who have had the same experience, its some kind of warped sexism from other women that think the only reason

a woman would be into something traditionally 'male' is because she is after a man...really it is just not the case!

Image Is Everything.

Lets be honest here, 'Audiophile' or 'Hifi Enthusiast' conjures up a certain stereotypical image of a lonely middle aged guy, hiding in his 'man cave' listening to obscure vinyl imports of noodley jazz or weird prog rock and spending all of his money on strange system tweaks, or building his own speakers or amplifiers in a shed. No wonder us women tend to be a bit backwards about coming forwards and saying we are part of the gang too...we don't want everyone to think that we are just plain weirdos! Thankfully though, the Audiophile and Hifi Enthusiast demographic is changing. Go to a show and you are much more likely to see younger people (one thing we do have to thank beats by Dre for!) couples, women and even whole families. More and more people are getting into the hifi hobby and it is losing its 'freak show' stigma. Vinyl is cool again and high-res streaming and downloads are everywhere in the media...the whole audiophilia/hifi scene is getting pretty trendy.

So you see guys, there are women out there who share your passion for all things audio and hifi, we are just sometimes...for the aforementioned reasons, a little bit less vocal about it than you are.

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DEALERS VIEW

**HIFI AND AUDIO FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF A DEALER...BY
MIKE TWOMEY**

The Internet Shopper And The High-End Dealer

It's interesting in society we tend to avoid difficult conversations. My partner asked me if I liked her new hair style. I thought about the answer. "If I tell her the truth I would get the "silent treatment" for a day or two. (*If you want to know what the silent treatment is like ask any married man and you will get litany and verse*) Or do I take the easy way out and say "It's wonderful. I like the ringlets."

This is a philosophical dilemma that all of us have faced. Usually it involves in-laws, clothing and all manner of cars. So it's with this background we'll talk about a subject that is the proverbial elephant in the room (*in Canada substitute moose or other large mammal for elephant*). It's a vexing problem...the internet shopper who uses the local dealer as a showroom. It's a problem that people tend to avoid in polite company, much like sex and religion, which of course as we well know are closely related to high fidelity audio. (*say hallelujah brother!!*)

**He shrugged and said
he just wanted to
make sure he liked
the speakers before
he bid on them
online.**

I had an interesting conversation with a would-be customer last Saturday. He spent three hours here listening to a high performance system. This was his second time here. The first time he sat here for two hours. At the end of Saturday's session, he informs me that he can get a used pair cheaper on the internet. I understand the concept of leverage in negotiation...it's not lost on me. I did the usual things explaining that he actually got to hear the speakers and that they come with a warranty and we set them up as part of the cost. I didn't bother

mentioning that he drank our beer. He shrugged and said he just wanted to make sure he liked the speakers before he bid on them online. Ethics are not definitely not spoken here. Brazen? Yes. Rare? No.

But what really got me were the stereotypes (*sorry*) that came out during this discussion:

1) "You dealers make a fortune". Well it looks like the gig is finally up!!!! Yes people one of the larger problems we have is a proper investment strategy from the *millions* of dollars we make weekly. And we won't even talk

DEALERS VIEW

HIFI AND AUDIO FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF A DEALER...BY
MIKE TWOMEY

about all of the accountants and marketing types who want to hang out with high end dealers for the street cred' they bring to the party.

I know *many* dealers across the US, Canada and Europe. I do not know many "making a fortune". There is a couple to be sure, but they are blessed with a great local economy, good location and they work their asses off and they've been retailing for a very long time.

Most dealers I know are creative, hard working people who go out of their way time and again to please their customers. Becoming part of the proverbial 1% is not part of the equation. There are faster ways to the bank than being a high end audio dealer.

2) Stereotype number two

"there's not much danger buying used speakers off the internet". This is an interesting view. It's similar to saying there is not much danger playing with a Black Mamba. (*"Oh don't be a baby it's just a small bite"*). Here's reality...dealing with a total stranger on any of the internet sites without having heard the speakers is a total crap shoot, with your hard earned money on the table. You never know how the speakers were treated and if there is any damage to them. And if there is...what is your recourse? ...not much.

3) "You dealers don't have to pay for your gear on display. These are free to you" This is patently false. Every dealer that I know has had to invest a considerable amount in demo gear. Are there exceptions? ...perhaps, but none that I know of. The manufacturers do not dole out free gear to the dealers. That's called the expressway to bankruptcy.

people can ask questions and enjoy the visit the business aspects will take care of itself. The dealer must be part missionary today. We don't have the luxury of not treating our customers like highly valued guests. In the states, every kid past age 11 has some form of smart phone with the ubiquitous ear buds attached jammed into his or her skull. When you sit them down in front of good gear the

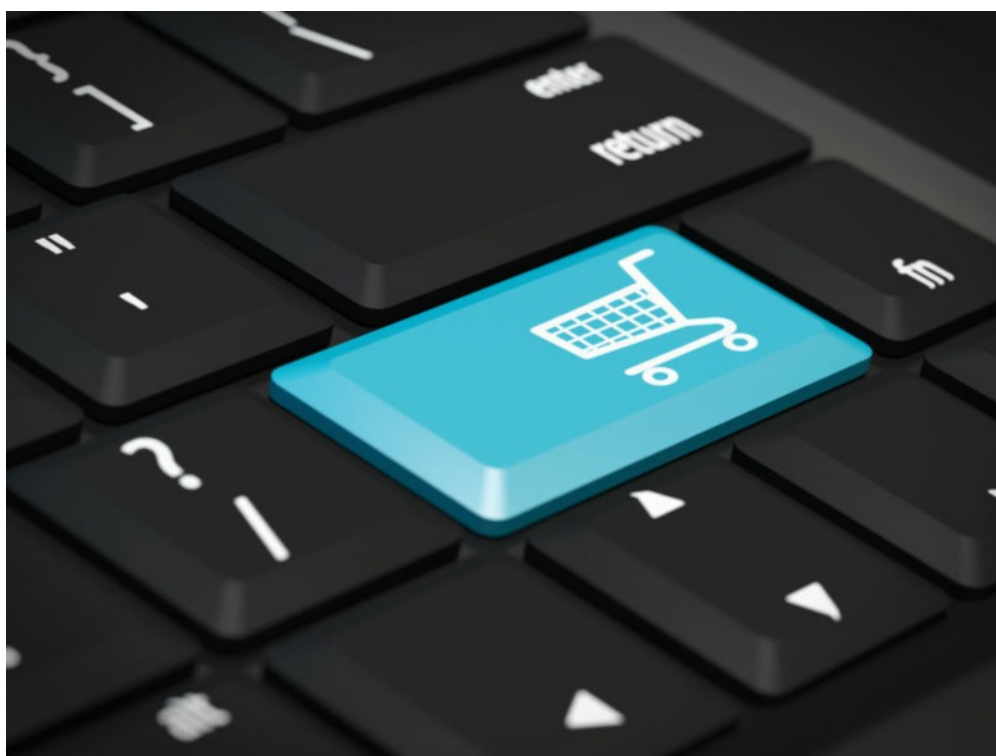
reaction is immediate "Wow...this is amazing". Yes the dealer network needs to change. We need to be missionaries and creating new disciples is our most important job. Stay tuned for tomorrows gospel.

So your good and

aware local dealer is an asset and should be rewarded with your business, but only if they earn it and add true value to you and the entire listening experience. Their stores should be fun places to shop.

Have a great month.

Mike Twomey owns Big Kids Toys AV in Greensboro NC. Mike's guitar teacher recently has encouraged him to consider bowling as a hobby.



Bad Dealers Hurt All Of Us

I'm the first to agree that there are bad dealers. All of us know who they are. They ignore you when you walk in the door or worse talk down to you with a smug "I know better than you" attitude. Hard Truth: They *need to leave the business* and are not worthy of your money. If you ever come to our little establishment you will notice a sign on the wall that covers our philosophy...."the most important person in this business is YOU the customer." If we have a fun environment where

Generations

Hifi Pig Extra readers, Father and Son duo David (Dad) and Rob (Son) Stevenson share a love of music and a passion for vinyl reproduction. Here they tell their story of what they believe to be the key factor in music reproduction and replay.

David's Hi-Fi Beginnings

It started with a cake delivery from my mum to my older cousin in 1960. Speech was not feasible in his room due to the volume of the music playing. He waved at the shaking sofa, motioning me to sit down. I obeyed and sat with the basses and a trumpeter on my nose as the Radford valve amp pounded his 12" coaxials in huge transmission line loudspeakers. A Shure V15 on Garrard turntable put the singer on my knee.

I was transfixed.

My initial set-up was a Garrard SP25 turntable with a Goldring

600 cartridge, a linear amp and DIY cabinets sporting 10" Fane coaxials, add a light dusting of Hendrix and the illusion was starting to take shape. Times, however, moved on and I got older and wiser, my tastes changed and widened and I had more cash to spend...but still not a lot.

After the Garrard SP25 I moved my way through various turntables, eventually ending up with a nice Heybrook TT2 and a trip to the 'perfect sound forever' promise that was CD, ending that era with the mighty Pioneer PD-91 CD spinner.

On my son Rob's advice I paid a visit to the Technics SL1210Mk2

turntable, which readers will know was originally designed for Japanese audiophiles and adapted to take the money in the plonk it anywhere and play DJ scene. Basically, what I (*aka Dad/navigator/is this broken music?*) wanted was the 1812 that I'd just attended at Symphony Hall, right there in my room - just a 60 piece orchestra with cannons and bells and, to my mind, impossible for a small collection of wiggly cones and sundry electronics...a stupid expectation on my part really!

There's no esoteric or exotic kit here, just attention to the factors that matter when thrift is master - Ears, the measurement tools that outsmart and out-perform any dials, computer programs or LEDs in my opinion. The 67 year old ears hear up to 10,000hz (on a good day), but at +/-5 dB that's not exactly very high-fidelity! Thankfully the younger ones' go much higher. My hifi education was honed at commercial shows, home demos, bake-offs and, importantly, through the demands of exhibiting at enthusiast shows and events. After years of listening and comparison I've come to the conclusion that these ears prefer the combination of art and science that is involved in music

David's line-up:

Technics SL1210mk2
modified with a DIY
outboard mains
transformer and
sorbothane feet mounted
on a wall shelf
Funk Achromat with
500g brass weight
Goldring Eroica LX
LOMC cartridge with
Stevenson alignment
Rewired Rega RB300 arm
Origin Live steel arm plate
with constrained
layer damping
underneath
Rothwell MCL step-up

reproduction by good old vinyl...
CD, streaming et al is sonically
good, but vinyl means luxury "me
time" and I believe worth the time
and effort.

My idea of reproducing sound is
of fast transients (*as live*), solid
body to notes and interesting
decays with clear harmonics. Big
scale musical presentation with
width and depth, lively dynamics
and stop/start phrasing, clarity,

subtlety and agility throughout.
Well that's easy then? Not really!

This hobby is a great way to meet
like-minded folk, male and
(increasingly) female, and have an
in-depth, philosophical discussion,
put the world to right and basically
eat cake – why else would an
informal gathering of music lovers
and audiophiles be called a bake-
off? Of course finding consensus
amongst the gathered throng as to
which bun is best is a challenge,
but it's also really interesting (*and
often contentious*) when
Whitesnake or Beethoven is
cooking the air at 90dB+. Through
these meets it is possible
to leave armed with information
for educating one's next hifi
purchase decisions and for
formulating the necessary
rationale with which to lure any
partner or significant other into
saying "YES!" (*To the purchase - I
mean!*).

into an EAR 834 valve phono
stage via low capacitance leads
and a shielded mains lead
Yamaha PC4002M power amp
with built in attenuators and
updated circuits
Epos Epic 5 loudspeakers with an
internal deflector modification
behind the mid/bass driver and
sorbothane pads between cab and
stand
REL Quake sub woofer which
operates lightly down from just
below the Epics' port output.
Cables by Wychwood Audionics/
Canare/Supra/ DIY
IKEA low mass furniture on
bouncy floor and ceiling in heavily
furnished 5 metre room

Rob's Story

The first memory for me of
meaningful music reproduction
was of Barbara Dickson singing
'January February' via my Dad's
aforementioned Heybrook TT2



with a Linn Basik arm and cheap moving coil cartridge into a Lentek step-up transformer, Sansui AU-317 amp and JBL L50 loudspeakers that had adjusters for mid and treble!

My first realisation that changes in quality could be made was aged 12 years old when Supertramp's Breakfast in America benefited from Dad's platter-mat experiments, I could tell the difference between felt and rubber...it turned out a combination of them both was best! Becoming a teenager also meant gaining my own room along with Dad's now unwanted Heybrook TT2. Dad had discovered CD in the form of a Marantz CD873LE so I quickly jumped at the chance to nick the TT2 away and spent hours getting it 'just right'.

Dad was shocked to hear the results of my 'expert' setting up of the Basik Plus and Linn K9 as Jean Michael Jarre - Rendezvous Houston shook the door on its hinges.

My musical taste was deeply influenced by my Dad (*how could it not have been?*), with Bruce Springsteen, Dire Straits, Fleetwood Mac, Supertramp, Elton John, **Judie Tzuke** (*amongst many others*) all making appearances in my listening repertoire...and they still do to this day.

Our family's combined building skills extended to creating a music room from the large attached garage with its concrete altar for the TT2. Dad took on mobile DJ work for local community, charity fund raising, weddings etc. playing 60s and 70s tunes and I partnered with 80s and 90s using



Sony minidisks, home mixed TDK MA metal tapes and CDs. I recall one New Year's Eve event for a Farmers Association being totally epic right up until 3am, but then packing up to leave was messy in 12inch of recent snow. Farmers had to resort to tractors clearing a track and pulling us out!

I developed my line-up, the TT2 was fitted with DC motor and modified RB250, and this increased performance massively. This stayed until I discovered the bass, dynamics, pitch and image stability of direct drive. The picture is of my third direct drive, pitch stable Technics and has a RB 301 (rewired by Dad) running into a Rega Fono Mk2. At bake-offs that source proved very competitive, but now carries the super Rega Exact (*a tricky setup but worth the patience*) to great effect.

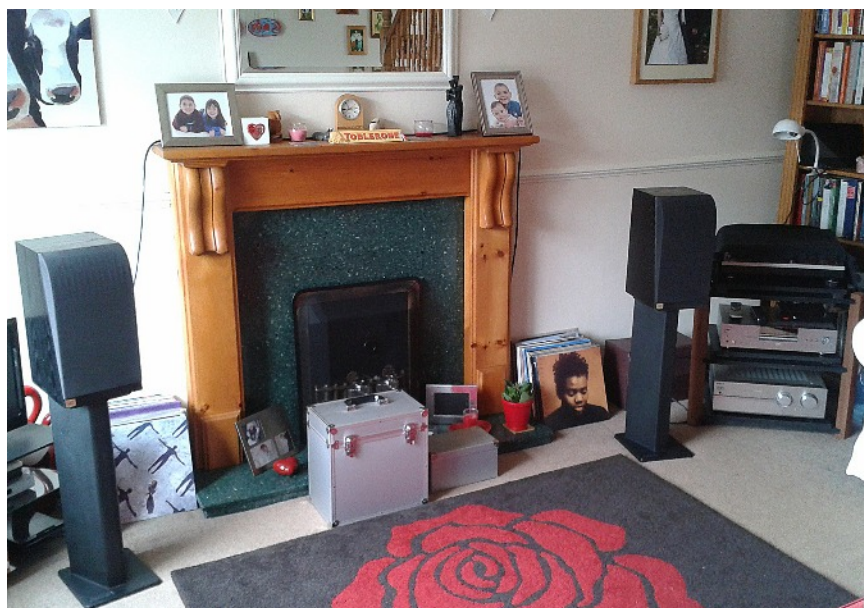
The internet made a massive impact on me with previously unheard of knowledge waiting to be tapped at the mere click of a

mouse button, with people sharing the same interest in music and hifi as Dad and me. Things to buy, things to sell, things to talk about and debate, future friends to meet in real life. I've met and made so many good friends via the internet and I owe a great deal of gratitude to a large number of them with their kindness and trust really opening my eyes to the better side of humanity!

As Dad has already mentioned, we have pooled our resources and collected knowledge and taken part in shows for enthusiasts where we play what we feel is a great system to other audiophiles and music lovers. Two highlights from these shows spring from memory, the first being a packed room of full seats, lines of listeners standing and the area in front of speakers squashed with people squatting and kneeling. The music? Dire Straits - Telegraph Road, reproduced on a Heybrook TT2, RB300, Goldring Eroica LOMC, Cambridge Audio 640P and a simple Rotel RA-04 amp into Epos M12i. The second being

READERS' LIVES

IF YOU'VE GOT A GREAT STORY TO SHARE WITH HIFI PIG EXTRA READERS THEN GET IN TOUCH



a crowd spontaneously clapping a vinyl copy of jazz piano; Actually, even we were impressed with the reproduction seriously hot and 'live' by early afternoon. On this occasion we'd hidden the speaker brand very carefully...maybe

some would not have applauded knowing there were little JBL L1's powering the room! It was a great shared moment for father and son, our team work had brought this about and we were glowing!



Rob's Line Up:

Handmade wooden rack on a solid concrete floor

Modified Technics SL1200mk2 turntable

Rega RB301 with internal one piece rewire

5mm Achromat /original mat

Rega Exact MM cartridge

Supra Lo-Rad mains cabling

Rega Fono Mk2 phono stage

Canare LV 61S low capacitance interconnect

Sony TA-FB940R Mosfet integrated amplifier

Supra Rondo 2 x 2.5T speaker cable

JBL L1 loudspeakers (*internally modified with back wave deflector*)

Atacama speaker stands filled with cat litter (*unused I might add*)

As I sit here typing this article I'm listening to Fun Lovin' Criminals – 100% Colombian, Eric Clapton – Me And Mr. Johnson, Goldfrapp – Supernature and Placebo – Sleeping With Ghosts, all on vinyl and I wonder.... what my eight (nearly nine) year old Son Sam will be listening to when he is 40? Will he listen to what I do? Will he be influenced by my music as I was by my father's music? What will your Son or Daughter be listening to and by what media I wonder?

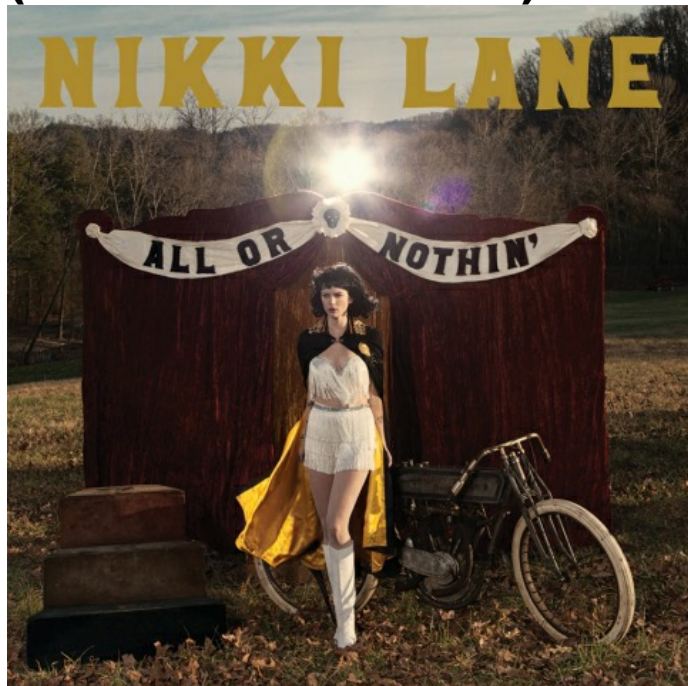
Sam has already gone Technics Direct Drive and is accumulating his own LP and single collection.

The *next* generation, vinyl lives on!

Do YOU have a great story to share? Contact Hifi Pig by clicking [here](#) or telephone +44

MUSIC REVIEWS

Nikki Lane - All or Nothin' (New West Records)



30 year old Nikki Lane caused a bit of a fuss when she said she wanted to be the next First Lady of outlaw country. Some over-sensitive country fans misinterpreted this as her suggesting that she actually *was* the next First Lady. “On one of my first interviews, someone asked me who I would like to be and I said I would like to be the first lady of outlaw country” said Lane. “Obviously Jessie Colter—Waylon Jennings’ widow—is the first lady of outlaw country, but I was supposing there’s a new era and I would get to be the next her.” Well, if outlaw country does ever need a new First Lady, Nikki Lane will get my vote.

All or Nothin', released last year, is Lane's second album and was produced by Dan Auerbach from The Black Keys who also plays guitar and duets with Lane on Love's On Fire. Auerbach keeps the music rooted in country traditions but mixes it up with a variety of rock and pop influences, from sixties girl groups through Muscle Shoals soul to indie rock.

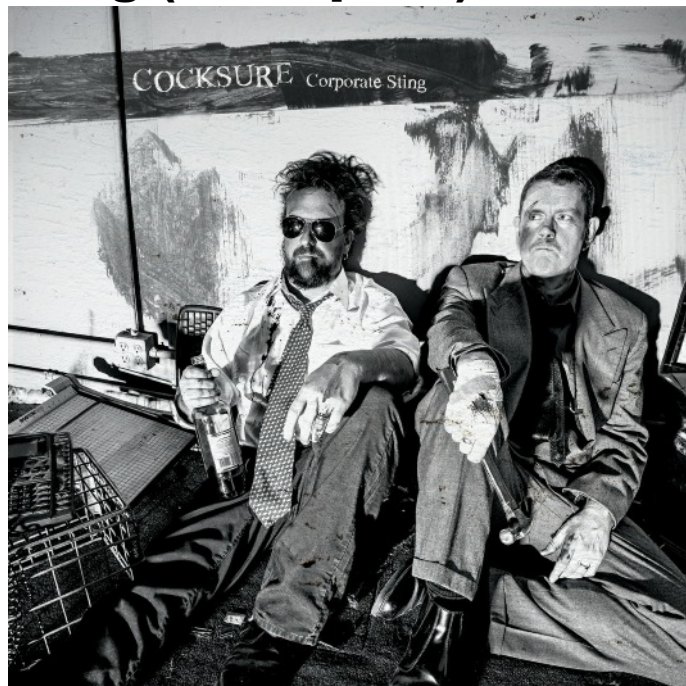
Lane sets out her agenda with Right Time. “It's always the right time” she sings, “to do the wrong thing”. A soaring pedal steel assures us that we are in country territory but slamming drums and pounding bass put us on a far rockier footing. The chorus's handclaps could come straight from a 70's

glam rock classic. The next song Good Man opens with Be My Baby-style drums, Lane channeling Ronnie Spector rather than Ronnie Milsap. Again, the steel guitar is the only straightforward country element. Third track I Don't Care wrong foots us yet again with what sounds like the opening chords of The Clash's London Calling but just when you think you are going to hear that familiar bassline, the song lurches off to an almost Two Tone beat. This is country Jim, but not as we know it.

Title track All Or Nothin' brings a dirty, funky electric piano and stinging guitar to the mix, a touch of Southern soul. Over the course of 13 tracks Nikki Lane shows that country music has a future, it's not just music for your Ma and Pa. The deluxe version of the album adds 6 live versions of tracks from the album, showing that Lane and her band can cut it live as well as in the studio. Lane is due to release another album later this year and I can't wait. All or Nothin'? I'll take it all.

John Scott

Cocksure - Corporate Sting (Metropolis)



This is the second outing in about a year from Christopher J Connelly (Ministry, Revolting Cocks, Sons Of The Silent Age) and Jason C Novak (Acumen Nation, DJ?, Acucrack, Czar) and can be summed up in one word (pretty much) BRUTAL !!!

MUSIC REVIEWS

It's a dirty, heavy and industrial kick in the nuts with a lyrical content that lays waste to corporate America. Not a record to play when the Mother-in-law pops round for afternoon tea, Corporate Sting is uncomfortable, distorted and disturbing, but at the same time fresh, unsullied and honest. It reeks of a punk aesthetic and, whilst it may not be a snug-comfort-blanket of a listen, it actually has something to say and communicates this in a visceral and "real" fashion and for this Cocksure should be applauded.

Music has many roles to play and Corporate Sting plays the part of agent-provocateur in a world of bland, manufactured, saccharin-sweet existence and for that it is worthy of recommendation ...just not for the faint of heart!!!! Out 14th September.

Stuart Smith

Leon Bridges - Coming Home (Columbia)



It seems that nearly all the new music I've been listening to lately has had a distinctly retro feel. None more so than Coming Home by Leon Bridges. Twenty six year old Bridges from Fort Worth, Texas had been working as a dishwasher but due to chance meeting with Austin Jenkins from psych-rock band White Denim – they struck up a conversation about clothes- he soon found himself in the band's studio with Jenkins and his bandmate Joshua Block.

The studio was kitted out with vintage analogue equipment, and this retro recording approach has no doubt added to the album's authentic feel, but it is Bridges' voice that is the undoubted star here. Any review of this album – in fact any mention of Bridges at all – is going to reference soul legend Sam Cooke. Bridges' vocals are almost spookily similar to Cooke's smoky-yet-smooth tones.

On the whole however, this is a highly successful attempt at capturing a familiar, comforting and engaging sound that pays tribute to its influences without being derivative.

Production credits are attributed to Niles City Sound – the name of the studio – but whoever it was that placed the mics and twiddled the knobs has captured that classic sixties sound fairly faithfully; occasionally, as on opening track Coming Home there is maybe just a little too much emphasis on the drums, knocking things just slightly out of balance. On the whole however, this is a highly successful attempt at capturing a familiar, comforting and engaging sound that pays tribute to its influences without being derivative.

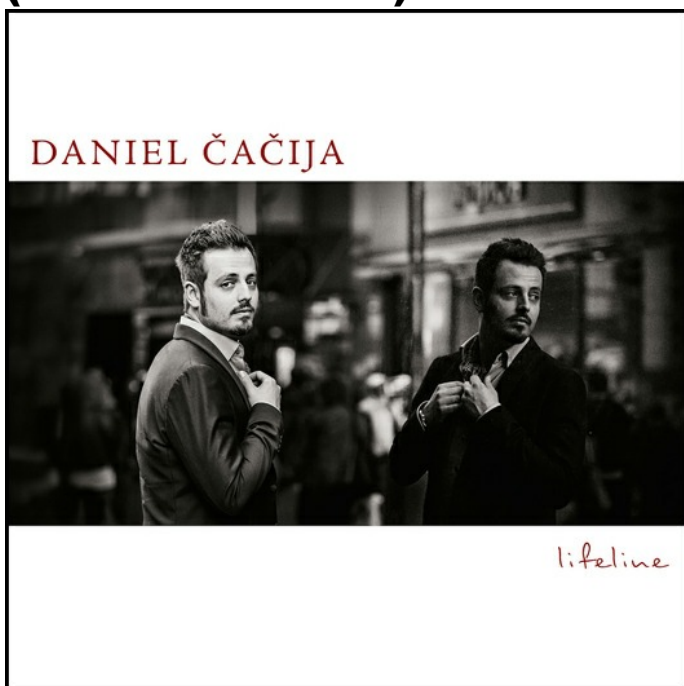
Bridges' songs also hark back to simpler times. There is subtle sense of morality underpinning these tender love songs. On Lisa Sawyer, Bridges pays tribute to his mother and grandparents who didn't have much but were "rich in love". That love shines out of every word that Bridges sings. Final track River sees Bridges pleading for redemption to the simple accompaniment of acoustic guitar, tambourine and gospel backing singers.

With a total running time under 35 minutes Coming Home is over before you know it, it's 10 songs range from 2:20 to 4:11 and never outstay their welcome. Coming Home leaves you wanting more and I don't think we will have to wait too long; Leon Bridges is set to be a big star.

John Scott

MUSIC REVIEWS

Daniel Cacija - Lifeline (Mons Records)



Croatian Cacija fled that war torn land in the early 90s to seek safety with his family in Frankfurt, Germany where aged just six he began professional music lessons and received a degree in classical piano from the city's conservatoire.

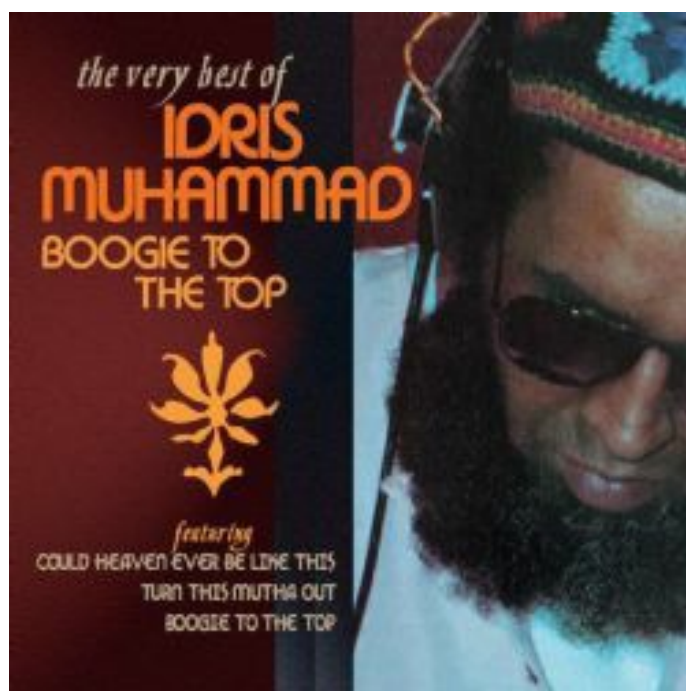
Cajica gained both a Bachelors and a Masters Degree at the Kunstuniversitat in Graz, Austria and has collaborated with the likes of Kurt Elling, Sheila Jordan and Michael Abene as well as being vocal soloist for the German Jazz Orchestra.

Lifeline is a showcase for the vocal talent of Cacija and it's understandable why Downbeat Magazine named him best young singer way back in 2013. There's a smooth, unforced silkiness to his voice that never seems strained or that he trying to too hard but he still manages to convey an emotional element.

I don't know all the tunes here, but there enough variety to keep the listener hooked until the very last note of the album fades. This is his first album and if this is anything to go by a bright future beckons for Cacija. He's accessible, he swings and just very entertaining...which is what I want when I listen to this kind of music!

Stuart Smith

Idris Muhammad – Boogie To The Top. The Very Best Of (Robin Songs / Cherry Red)



Jazz funk is not a genre I've explored a great deal but this album suggests it may well be having a bit of a deeper delve...

Idris Muhammad was born Leo Morris in New Orleans in 1939 and says that he's a "natural drummer" whose gift came from the "Creator". He made his recording debut aged sixteen on Fats Domino's Blueberry Hill and so his credentials are certainly impressive.

Boogie To The Top is a collection of the best of his recording for Creed Taylor's Kudo label between 1974 and 1978 and there's some cracking tunes herein. It's funky (of course), it's jazzy (needless to say) and it's very dance floor friendly. Bass lines and guitar chops provide the funk, but there's horns and keys that lend a jazzy bent and on Power Of Soul (the second track on the album) there's an absolutely blistering lead guitar line.

There's some impressive names on Boogie including Grover Washington Jr, Eric Gale, Bob James, Ralph MacDonald...and loads more with all the tracks

MUSIC REVIEWS

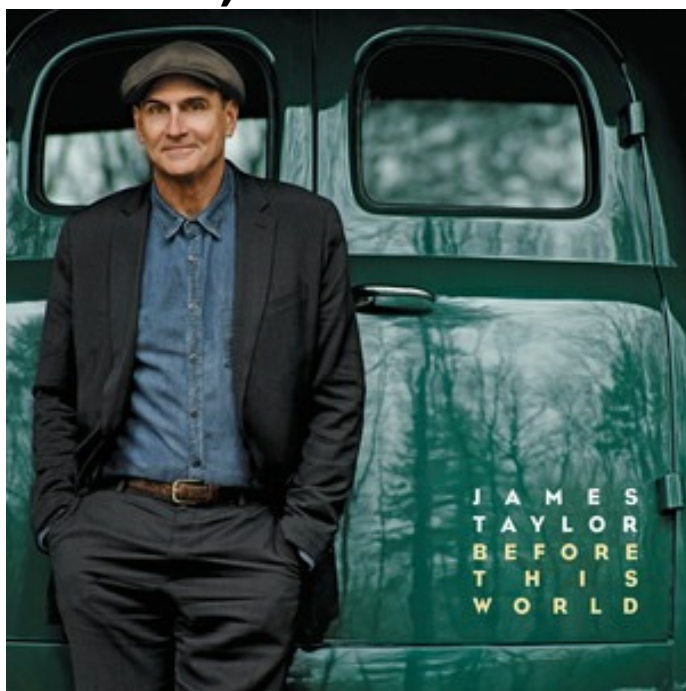
being produced by Creed Taylor and Dave Mathews, but it's the music that shines out as being really superlative...could it be anything else with these guys involved...and it's not a little disco tinged (in a very good way).

House Of The Rising Sun is an absolute classic tune of course, but here it is given a funky workout that elevates it above and beyond...could this be the best version of this I've heard to date?

If you like a bit of funk, love a smattering of jazz or are a bit of a disco bunny then you'll love this record...I certainly did!

Stuart Smith

James Taylor - Before This World (Concord Records)



Released in June "Before This World" is Taylor's seventeenth studio album and represents the artist's first album of original material since "October Road" of 2002 - for that reason alone it represents something quite interesting and I imagine partly why it was a Billboard number one album in the States.

Broadly speaking the tracks herein could be labelled as being "country"...but it's a bit more grown up than that and I'd prefer "singer-songwriter-country-Americana" ...much more easy to get a grasp of!

The tracks on the record were born out of a project in 2010 when Steve Gadd (Drums), Jimmy Johnson (Bass) and Dave O'Donnell joined Taylor to lay down some demo tracks in the barn next to his home. Lyrics came later in 2013 and recording (in the same barn converted to a studio) started in early 2014.

It's hard to believe that the lyrics and the tunes were written disparately as they just seem to gel so nicely together...but then I suppose that's the test of a songwriter.

There's a relaxed and yet confident feel to "Before The World" that is in keeping with Taylor's reputation and stature as a musician. He keeps the same "country" feel throughout, other than a bit of a foray in to folksiness with the final track "Wild Mountain Thyme" and there's even a bit of a protest song in the form of "Far Afghanistan".

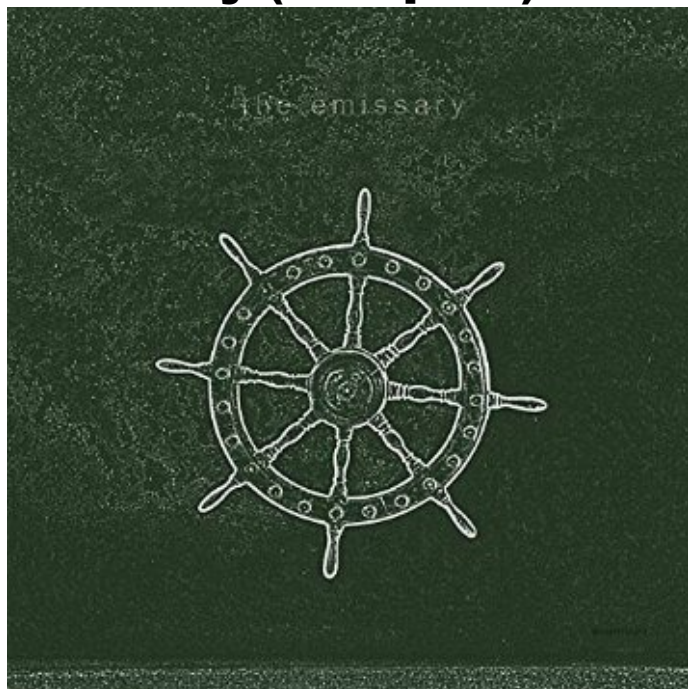
It's hard to believe that the lyrics and the tunes were written disparately as they just seem to gel so nicely together...but then I suppose that's the test of a songwriter. There's not a lot to challenge on the record and readers are probably best as seeing "Before" as just a very good record that is of its type.

Well put together, well produced and a wholly enjoyable in its hi resolution format (HighResAudio), I can see "Before" becoming a bit of a staple at hifi shows as well as on our home system.

Recommended.
Stuart Smith

MUSIC REVIEWS

Jens-Uwe Beyer -The Emissary (Kompakt)



I first came across Jens-Uwe Beyer with one of his tracks on the excellent Pop Ambient series on Kompakt and The Emissary marks the artists first full length outing under his own name.

The Emissary opens with St.Pop which sounds like a spastic spaceship communicating with earth, and whilst it's a little jarring at the beginning, it builds into something quite wonderful and beautiful, yet somehow disjointed...in a good way...and is completely at odds with the second tracks haunting solo treated piano-lead piece.

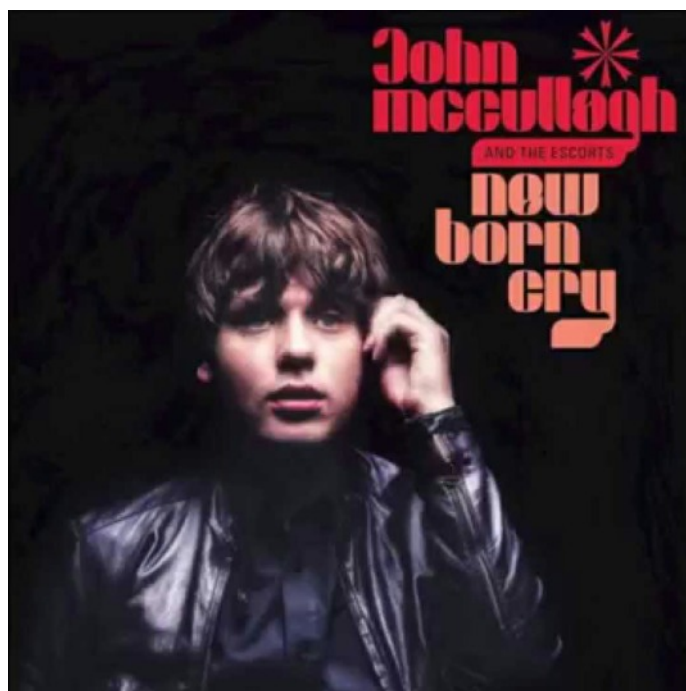
Track three (Tangering Moonshine) is a masterpiece in drones and pads that draw you into their textural quality so that you find yourself listening to the tiny nuances in each tone and sound, until the beginnings of a beat begin and take over. I'm reminded a little here of the absolutely Brilliant Dust Kid III album in the way the reverbs build to create whole new sonic landscapes of their own. And so The Emissary continues in this vein for the remainder of the album.

This is the point of this kind of music I think - to create aural landscapes and atmospheres in which you can get lost, pick up on a theme and then lose it again when you find a new path to follow.

The Emissary takes you on an inner journey and allows you to interpret the music as you would wish. There is structure and there are rhythms of sorts on your journey, but in the main the listener is free to explore their own inner-space. There is an other-worldly feel to The Emissary - OK, it's well trippy - and I felt that it had more in common with a majestic classical opus than its "pop" tag would suggest.

This is serious and intelligent electronic, ambient music of the highest order and is highly recommended. Out 11th September on Kompakt. **StJohn McCullagh & The Escorts – New Born**

John McCullagh & The Escorts – New Born City (359 Music)



New Born City is the follow up to McCullagh's 2013 North South Divide record and has been out in the UK since early May. The record is produced by John Power (Cast) and includes the singles Towerland Lullaby, Box Of Tricks and She's Calling.

McCullagh says his influences include Donovan, Bolan, Weller and Johnny Cash and he has been playing guitar and harmonica since he was twelve...he's still a youngun.

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You can hear his influences laid bare in the tunes, but McCullagh's music isn't derivative, though it is familiar in the same way Oasis' tunes always were...you get a sort of "do I know this tune" kind of feeling.

There's a nod to The Byrds and a bit of a sixties feel to the whole of New Born City with jingle jangle guitars, catchy hooks and harmonica aplenty... Patterns is pure Dylan.

This to me is what good pop music is missing; proper songs, played and sung well and with passion and it would be a shame if a talent such as McCullagh's was to be watered down to fit in with the corporate pish that seems to pass for chart music these days.

Given his relative youth, McCullagh has a maturity in the way his music comes across and New Born City is a bit of a breath of fresh air.

Recommended.
Stuart Smith

Kevin Borich - Totem (Self Released)



Hands up, this is the first time I've come across this sixty six year old "stalwart" of the rock-blues industry, but apparently he's responsible for founding

New Zealand's La De Das and Australia's The Party Boys. Missing Borich out of my music may well have been a bit of a mistake!!

This is sort of what I expect Red Hot Chili Peppers would be doing now had they not gone all crap and lost their groove.

Totem (Here from HighResAudio) has two distinct parts to it. The first fourteen tracks tread a heavy-blues road and it's blistering stuff with funk and attitude aplenty. SoapBoxBitchinBlues slows things down a little five tracks in with a more laidback groove to it but then your back to the scorching guitar riffs for the remainder of this section of the record. This is sort of what I expect Red Hot Chili Peppers would be doing now had they not gone all crap and lost their groove. There's funk, boogie and that good down-home honest blues-rock that just refuses to go away and that can only be a good thing.

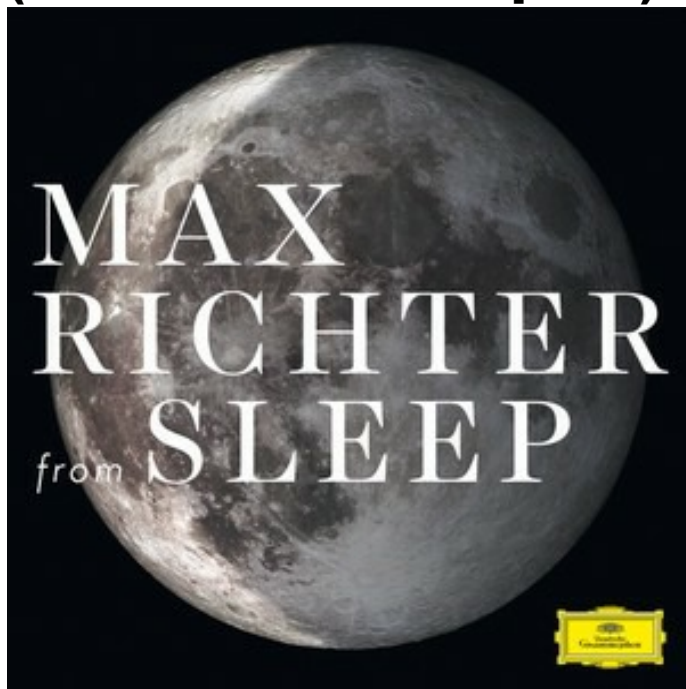
The last three tracks on Totem are a little different and take a different course. Gone is the harder edged feel, replaced instead by a more blues-jazz tinged outing. The guitar work is still exemplary, but rather than five minute outbursts of energy, we are treated to a more meandering and technical workout. Yes it's still very clever blues but it's different and in a live setting I'd imagine an absolutely glorious experience.

Totem is a very good record in two parts ...and these two parts make you feel you've got damned good value for money. Borich is without doubt a very talented musician and guitarist, but Totem isn't some navel gazing exercise in one-upmanship and virtuosity - it's vital, fun, clever and rocking!

Highly Recommended!!!!
Stuart Smith

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Max Richter – ‘SLEEP’ (Deutsche Grammophon)



Let's start at the beginning – Max Richter is one of my favourite post-classical composers who you might say has literally been around the block. He currently records on the German classical label Deutsche Grammophon, but many of his earlier releases were via the imprint '130701', an offshoot of the indie label FatCat Records, one-time home to Frightened Rabbit and current residence to The Twilight Sad and C Duncan, whose album we recently reviewed here on Hifi Pig.

It's difficult to classify Richter's work as being simply 'classical', because of the way that he blends instruments, sounds, noises and whatever he lays his hands on, into his music. I picked up on Max's work around a decade ago, shortly after he'd released the sublime 'The Blue Notebooks', his second album. With its strings, synthesizers, field sounds, typewriter keys, muddled conversations, and female storyteller, it transfixed me. You've probably heard tracks from the album without even realising it. 'Vladimir's Blues', for instance, has popped up in various commercials over the years.

'SLEEP', is an altogether different proposition from Richter's previous work. It's impossible to approach listening to it in the same way as any of his other work – or indeed anyone else's for that matter.

That's because the full version of 'Sleep' is some 8 hours and 24 minutes in duration. And I quote – "It's my personal lullaby for a frenetic world," he says. "A manifesto for a slower pace of existence." Furthermore, Richter genuinely intends the work to send the listener to sleep.

It's worth noting that two different versions of 'SLEEP' will be available upon its release – the full 8 hour version can only be purchased via download (since it's impractical to change a CD whilst sleeping), whereas an edited one-hour adaptation will be released on both CD and vinyl.

Given that I've been asked to write about 'SLEEP', I first approached it just as intended and climbed into bed with my headphones on, pressed 'play' and afterwards remembered precisely next-to-nothing as I fell silently and quickly to sleep. Since then, I've done the complete opposite and listened to it throughout the day on a number of occasions. We already know that Richter set himself not just a challenge but a task which would, by most people's standards, be impossible to achieve. How does one even contemplate writing a piece of music with the intention is that it lasts for the full duration of a night's sleep? In doing so, Richter had set himself a huge mountain to climb.

What I can say at this point is that Richter has delivered a piece of music which is both incredibly moving and hugely engaging. I normally find listening to music at night difficult because I've never understood the idea of 'background music' – music that blends into the very fabric of the walls, music so vapid that it's just there, hovering, lingering like cigarette smoke. It should be said that this is definitely not 'background music'. I guess that for me, the music is been successful in achieving its aim of sending me to sleep, but this is actually highly unusual as I find that I tend to get caught up in listening to the very music which is attempting to send me to sleep, and, as a result, it keeps me awake.

The beauty of much of this music is that it's perfectly possible to take elements in isolation. "Who's [sic] Name Is Written On Water", for instance, commences with a ghostly angelic voice, layered in reverb and digital effects, creating an almost drone-like sound. The result is mesmerising. The vocal melody line on this track transcends across

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several other parts of the album. There's also a general 'theme' in place across the recording, described best by the slow piano in 'Dream 2 (entropy)'. It crops up in various guises across the album and works well as the fabric which knits together the various pieces. 'Patterns (cypher)' is the shortest track here, at just 2 mins 46 secs; It's also possibly the track which I would most envisage playing to a post-classical fan before asking them to guess the artist. I imagine that many would correctly guess the answer.

As a Richter fan, there are no major surprises here, but that's not really the point of this recording. Nothing feels rushed, nothing feels diluted; notes are extrapolated, developed and they slowly then morph into something else. Take 'Chorale / glow', for instance. This track, over the course of 25 minutes or so, takes the listener on a journey loosely around a single note. Its position, appearing roughly half-way into the album, feels neither right nor wrong. Its charms lie in being able to take a musical note which drifts, as if stateless, where even the smallest of changes are thought-provoking.

I personally love 'Space 17 (chains)'. It's a track which I can easily imagine waking to. Richter's strings, familiar from earlier recordings, serve to break through the clouds and allow the sunshine in. This track alone, at 18 minutes, would be worthy of the whole of one half of most artists' albums. Here, it's simply one piece from 31 segments. It's a piece which offers optimism and yet serves only to break your heart.

A special mention should be made of the incredible female voice throughout 'Path 3 (7676)'. I found it literally impossible to concentrate on anything but this voice. There's little in the way of instrumentation which serves to show how incredible the human voice is as an instrument in its own right.

With 'SLEEP', Richter has achieved the impossible. Not only has he delivered what he originally set out to achieve, but in doing so has produced a living legacy. 'SLEEP' is an incredible piece of work which manages to be captivating, intriguing and, at times, bewitching. Night time will never be the same as a result.

Paul Lockett

Neil Young And The Promise Of The Real - The Monsanto Years (Reprise)



OK, hands up, cards on the table....I'm a huge Neil Young fan and genuinely can't think of a record he's made that I don't love, even the much maligned Trans really does it for me and I reckon Daft Punk et al may well have been taking a listen to that particular record...then again perhaps not.

The Monsanto Years is Young as I like him best – electrified, rocking, belligerent and rallying against all that he sees wrong in the world.

This is, unsurprisingly, a full on assault if big-agri, a call for us as consumers to take a stand against GMO and to take back control of what we eat. It's not just Monsanto that get a kicking; Starbucks, corrupt politicians (are there any other kind) Chevron and others also get it in the balls. Young rallies against the apathetic "roll over and accept it" culture that seems so engrained in today's society on the track "People Want To Hear About Love"

Of course Young is privileged, rich and lives the rarefied life of an international rock star and so it would be easy to dismiss his rants as little more than

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the vitriol of the pampered, but wasn't music always supposed to be about rallying against "the man"? I say good on Young for getting the issues as he sees them out there!

Musically *The Monsanto Years* is never going to go down as a classic Young album, but that's not to say that it doesn't have musical merit; Young and Promise Of The Real are in full-on grunge mode for the majority of the record. There's the over-driven, classic Young solos and that country feel that is his trademark and this will be familiar fare to fans. Newcomers to Neil Young would probably be best looking elsewhere, but then this record isn't about pleasing people – it's about protest, real rock and roll and Young being able to make a record that doesn't have to sell millions.

Personally I agree with a lot of what Young has to say on *Monsanto* and it is good to see someone with some clout getting up and saying these things.

You get a DVD with this record to...but then I never watch these!

Stuart Smith

Pixx – 'Fall In EP' (4AD Records)



A nice release, this, from the ever-reliable 4AD label. Pixx is a new signing – and it's immediately

obvious why she's piqued 4AD's interest. The music will please both 4AD purists and listeners new to the label. Pixx is a pseudonym for 19 year old Hannah Rodgers from London. I've been intrigued by comments which I've read comparing Pixx to fellow 4AD band Cocteau Twins and the likes. For me, they're not the greatest comparison, though there's a faint whisper of the Cocteaus' sound here. Moreover, there's a Mick Karn-esque bass on lead track 'Fall In', but the vocals have more in common with Dido than Elizabeth Fraser. Musically, the instrumentation is more similar to Dif Juz.

So what does it sound like? When I first played the EP, I was immediately entranced by the aforementioned bass – but it's actually the chord sequence and the haunting melody which captivates my attention. Overall, it's vocal-heavy with some nice harmonies, synths which drive the sound, a drum machine and a gorgeous sounding guitar doused in chorus effects. 'Fall In' has an eerie subtext which sounds unlike anything I've heard in quite a while. Post-Florence Welsh, it's rather gratifying that female singer-songwriters don't feel that shouting as loud as they can into a microphone is the way to develop their music; the stripped-back nature of Pixx's sound leaves lots of room for vocal dynamics and it's wonderful, for instance, to hear breathing between the lines of some of the verses. 'Fall In' also has some ghostly otherworldly voices at the start of the track, like hushed conversations in a room full of echoes.

I think one of the really positive things about this EP is how I'm consumed by it when I'm supposed to be writing about it! It has that effect – the almost ethereal sound simply makes you stop what you're doing, put down your pen and simply listen up.

'A Way To Say Goodbye' continues the theme laid down by 'Fall In', but here the chorus is dominated by multi-layered vocals and a wonderful synth hook. I also love the sudden ending. 'Flee' is possibly the most 'normal' sounding track on the EP – those harmonies and the vocal delivery are sensuous. It's actually a sad song, which wouldn't sound out of place in a late-night jazz club. "I would offer us some time apart, but you know you'd only go and break my heart", she proclaims.

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'Deplore' takes us back into the minor-chord territory which dominates this EP. It's a nice bookend to an excellent record. I'd love to hear what Pixx does next, particularly across the length of an album. A future star in the making? Make up your own mind, but I think we'll be hearing a lot more of Pixx.

Paul Lockett

Ranagri - Fort Of The Hare (Stockfish)



Ranagri are Donal Rogers, Eliza Marshall, Jean Kelly and Tad Sargent who bring together a whole host of instruments (flutes, whistles, harp, guitar and bouzouki) to create a Celtic tinged folk music that has a modern, some may say poppy, feel to it.

There's a good deal of folk music that seems to be right up its own Kerfeunten, but Fort Of The Hare manages to fuse great musical talent with a more contemporary touch to produce a whole that is accessible and entertaining. Yes it's all very clever and a bit "World Music", but it's very beautiful too with gorgeous melodies and a bit of an attitude coming through.

I've been listening to a lot of British folk music from the late sixties and early seventies on the Dust on The Nettles record and Fort Of The Hare is right up there with the best of what that era had to offer, only

brought bang up to date and with a much more accessible and approachable feel to it..sort of Pentangle with a fashionable haircut.

As well as the great musicianship, what holds this record together is the fantastic song-writing on display and I'm reminded here a bit of The Beautiful South and Paul Heaton...which again is a very good thing!

If you are a folk-phobic-but-curious type then you should give this record a whirl and it may well just cure you. Out now on Stockfish through HighResAudio.

Stuart Smith

The Bird and The Bee – Recreational Love (Rostrum Records)



THE BIRD AND THE BEE
RECREATIONAL LOVE

I first became aware of The Bird and The Bee through their 2009 album Rayguns Are Not Just The Future, an enjoyable collection of dance pop songs. Much as I liked the album, I eventually forgot all about the band until I discovered their new album Recreational Love. In my defence, the band haven't exactly been flooding the market with product, only releasing one album, the self-explanatory Interpreting The Masters Volume 1: A Tribute To Daryl Hall And John Oates in 2010. This apparent

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lack of activity is probably due to the fact that one of the band, Greg Kurstin is a busy producer and keyboard player who has worked with Lily Allen, Kylie Minogue, Little Boots, Beck, The Flaming Lips and The Red Hot Chili Peppers amongst others. The other half of the band, Inara George – daughter of legendary Little Feet guitarist Lowell George – has been busy too, releasing albums as part of The Living Sisters.

Recreational Love is George (“The Bird”) and Kurstin (“The Bee”)’s third album. Like Rayguns Are Not Just The Future, it is clever, quirky, well-crafted pop for grownups. Some might say that pop for grownups is an oxymoron, but Recreational Love proves otherwise.

If I say that the first track Young and Dumb made me think of Miley Cyrus, David Bowie, Shakespeare’s Sister and avant-garde pianist Keith Tippett within the first couple of minutes, that may give some indication of the playful nature of the album. Co-written by George and Kurstin, The Bird And The Bee’s songs are primarily based around Kurstin’s keyboards and beats with George’s expressive, soulful vocals layered on top. Title track Recreational Love is reminiscent of Hall and Oates’ AOR pop.

The duo seem to have perfected a neat trick of turning relatively sparse backing tracks – drums, bassline and a minimalist approach to keyboard bleeps and whooshes – into fully rounded productions by filling the spaces with George’s vocals. Less becomes more.

Doctor reminds me of some of the Steely Dan-like slickness that Daft Punk achieved on Random Access Memories, George outlining a desire for a doctor/patient relationship that surely violates the Hippocratic code in a number of fundamental areas. Final track Lovey Dovey is a lovely, summery ballad that wouldn’t have been out of place on Sarah Cracknell’s recent album of lovely summery songs.

The Bird And The Bee really should be much better known that they are. And I really need to go back and revisit Rayguns Are Not Just The Future. They are not going to take over the airwaves like Daft Punk did with Get Lucky but they deserve to.

John Scott

Rhoda Dakar Sings The Bodysnatchers (Cherry Red)



RHODA DAKAR
sings **THE BODYSNATCHERS**

I remember the 2 Tone explosion well and The Bodysnatchers' Let's Do Rocksteady is very much a part of that memory.

Rhoda Dakar joined The Bodysnatchers in 1979 after Shane McGowan introduced her to bassist Nicky Summers and after their second gig the band signed to UK record label 2 Tone. Gigs alongside Madness, The Selecter, The Specials, The Go-Gos and Toots & The Maytals followed, as did the hits; Let's Do Rocksteady b/w Ruder Than You in March 1980 and Easy Life b/w Too Experienced in July of the same year. These were The Bodysnatchers only commercial releases.

To celebrate The Bodysnatchers 35th Anniversary, Rhoda has assembled an all-star cast to record The Bodysnatchers "debut album". 2 Tone label mates Lynval Golding and Sir Horace Gentleman of The Specials star alongside members of Pama International, The Sidewalk Doctors and Intensified, who admirably capture the spirit of the times.

There are ten tracks on this record and all follow the 2 Tone formula that proved to be so popular, though Private Eye kicks off as a much bluesier number before it gets going. The aforementioned Easy Life

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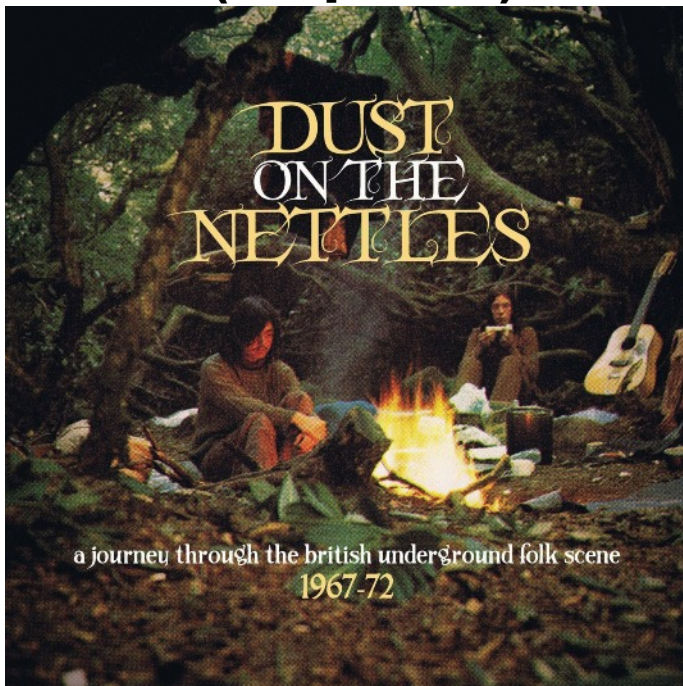
starts proceedings and for all intents and purposes you are back in the heady days of 1980. The next tune is Ghost Of The Vox Continental and is as entertaining lyrically as it is musically and should raise a smile or two. The recording sounds live and this is a good thing... it really does bring the memories of a bygone age...OK, not that far bygone, but you get my drift.

Many of the tracks on this record have only ever been heard at gigs or on Peel sessions and so important in that respect. Perhaps more important is to look at this as a musical account of what it was like when 2 Tone exploded onto the scene. It was a revolution in some ways and for many their first exposure to reggae basslines and ska sensibilities.

Dakar's vocal is authentic and perfectly suited to this kind of music. Time to dust off your Harrington jacket, your Fred Perry Tee Shirt and your pork pie hat. Out November 6th. Perfect!

Stuart Smith

Various - Dust On The Nettles (Grapefruit)



Dust On The Nettles is a glorious trundle through the British underground folk scene between 1967 and 1972 and as a record of the "scene" it is difficult to think of a collection better suited to chronicle this interesting (and very British) musical movement.

The music herein (across three CDs) is folk of course, but it's folk that has been informed by the psychedelic experience and as such, somewhat acidified.

Yes, some of the music is lyrically a bit twee and airy fairy, but for a period in musical history most associated with the acidic histrionics and electronics of Hendrix et al, Nettles serves as a historical document of what else was going on at the time.

There are bands you'd expect to find on this kind of anthology (Steeleye Span, Incredible String Band, Fairport Convention, and Pentangle) but Dust ventures a little deeper (OK a LOT deeper) and here you are treated to bands that were much more obscure (read unknown) and some tunes that have possibly never seen the light of day before.

Dust is nothing if not comprehensive and with the excellent booklet it comes packaged with, is a must have for anyone interested in this period of music, or indeed for those looking to hear something they may be unfamiliar with. Yes, some of the music is lyrically a bit twee and airy fairy, but for a period in musical history most associated with the acidic histrionics and electronics of Hendrix et al, Nettles serves as a historical document of what else was going on at the time.

I was born in '67 and between the ages of 17 and 20 listened to a lot of this kind of music, wore bells on my jeans and had a somewhat rose tinted (read mushroom tinted) vision of a "life on the road...man" and so I can do little but admit that I absolutely loved this album; even if only for the nostalgia it sparked.

Out now.

Stuart Smith

LIVE

John Otway – The Voodoo Rooms, Edinburgh

John Otway used to base much of his act around being a one-hit-wonder. Until he became a two-hit-wonder. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

In the the early Seventies Otway and his on-off musical partner Wild Willie Barrett were carving a rut in the road to obscurity until a legendary moment of TV history turned Otway into the pop star that he was always destined to be. In 1977, Otway and Barrett's decidedly DIY approach to music meshed well with the punk aesthetic and led to them being asked to perform a couple of numbers on BBC

Television's Old Grey Whistle Test. During one of these, Really Free, Otway jumped onto Barrett's guitar amplifier which was balanced on a chair. In one of those slow motion moments, Otway teetered briefly before landing astride the amp and almost emasculating himself in the process. Check it out on YouTube, it's well worth a look. The happy result of Otway's misfortune was that Really Free shot to number 27 in the UK singles chart and gave Otway and Barrett a Top Of The Pops appearance, a five-album record deal and a sizeable advance. Otway bought a Rolls Royce, unhampered by the fact that

Demonstrating the talent that we would expect from a multi-hit producing pop star, Otway breaks out his 12 string guitar to give us a rendition of The Sweet's Blockbuster.



LIVE

he didn't know how to drive and the kitchen sink, in the form of a massive orchestra and an epic guitar solo, into a follow up single, Geneve. "Let's make this the big one for Otway" read the inscription on the single's run out groove, but it was not to be. I told Otway a few years ago that I had bought the single; "Ah, you were the one" he replied ruefully.

Further chart success may

have been elusive but Otway, with and without Barrett, built up a loyal fan base, attracted by Otway's gymnastically enthusiastic live performances where the possibility of serious and possibly permanent physical injury was never far away. In the early eighties, Bono was fond of climbing up PA stacks and waving a flag from the top. Otway was equally fond of PA climbing but generally fell off before he got anywhere near the top.

Otway opens tonight's show with The Hit, replacing Wild Willie Barrett with a distortion pedal, then going on to play the B-side Beware Of The Flowers (Cos I'm Sure They're Going To Get You Yeah) which, as he points out, was released in the same year and sold just as many copies. The song also has the distinction of having been voted the seventh best song lyric in an online poll conducted by the BBC in 1999, making it not quite as good as Yesterday by Paul McCartney but better than anything by Bob Dylan, Paul Simon or Leonard Cohen.

Otway soon realised that exhausting his supply of hits after the first song was putting his shows at a bit of a disadvantage compared to some other artists and

threw

so a 25-year search for a second hit began, eventually coming to fruition in 2002 with Bunsen Burner, a song inspired by his daughter's chemistry homework, which reached number 9 in the chart,

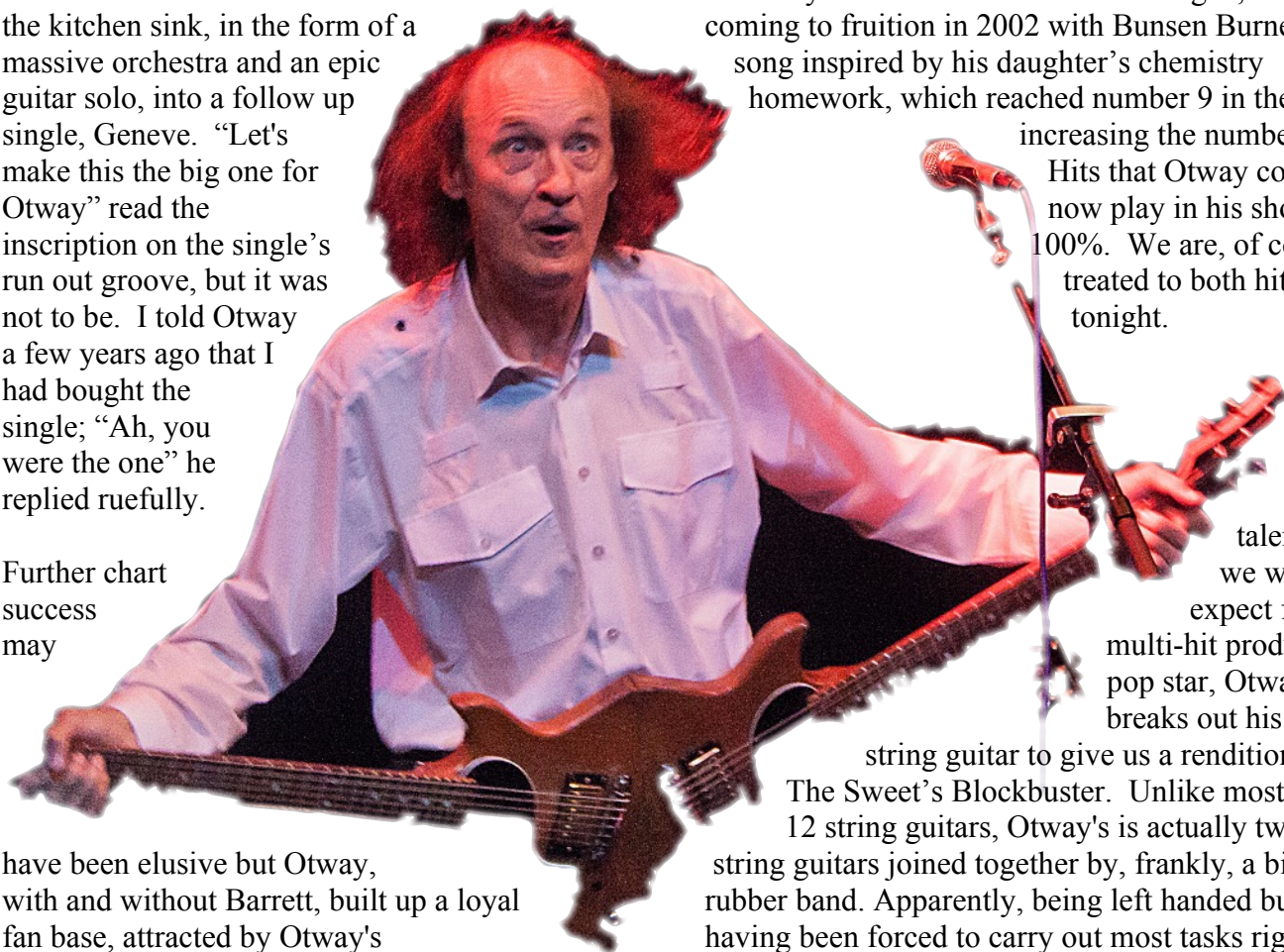
increasing the number of Hits that Otway could now play in his shows by 100%. We are, of course, treated to both hits tonight.

Demonstrating the talent that we would expect from a multi-hit producing pop star, Otway breaks out his 12

string guitar to give us a rendition of The Sweet's Blockbuster. Unlike most other 12 string guitars, Otway's is actually two six string guitars joined together by, frankly, a big rubber band. Apparently, being left handed but having been forced to carry out most tasks right handed as a child, Otway realised that he could not only play guitar right handed but could also play left handed just as badly. Another epiphany on the Otway road to stardom came at the age of nine when his sister brought home a Bob Dylan record. "Ooh" thought Otway, "I could do that". He proves this by giving us an uncannily accurate impression of Dylan singing Gloria Gaynor's I Will Survive. Uncannily accurate, that is, had Dylan been born in Aylesbury rather than Minnesota. Otway comes slightly undone at this point when a pitch perfect Dylanesque harmonica solo by Deadly The Roadie steals the show. Otway's career-spanning set ends with his version of Bob Lind's Cheryl's Going Home, featuring another cameo from Deadly who surely can't be too far away from a Top Of The Pops appearance of his own.

John Otway is a pop star, a two-hit-wonder and a national treasure. Last year's campaign to provide him with a third hit in the form of a Christmas number one didn't quite gain the traction it needed. Let's make this Christmas the big one for Otway.

John Scott



LIVE

Tubular Bells For Two – Pleasance Courtyard, Edinburgh

“Iconic” is a much overused word but when it comes to Tubular Bells, its use is entirely justified. From its cover art to its multi tracked instrumentation, the album embodies the early seventies just as Sergeant Pepper did for the late sixties a few years earlier and Never Mind The Bollocks would do for the mid seventies a couple of years later.

Daniel Holdsworth and Aiden Roberts have adapted Tubular Bells as a piece for two musicians and it is a testament to both their musicianship and the continuing attraction of the music that they perform to sell out audiences all over the world, recently completing a three-week residency at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Multi-Instrumentalists Holdsworth and Roberts have their own equipment set ups on each side of the

stage. Both based around keyboards, guitars and effects pedals, Roberts’ is augmented by a bass drum, floor tom and cymbal. A full drum kit is located to the rear of Holdsworth’s gear and at rear centre stage, a set of tubular bells.

Holdsworth and Roberts take the stage and position themselves behind their equipment. They exchange nods to confirm that they are ready to go and Holdsworth starts that familiar opening piano figure with his left hand, doubling on glockenspiel with his right after a few bars. This is then looped with a tap on a foot pedal, allowing him to build up further layers on top. Roberts provides the bass line, using a guitar and octave pedal. This too is looped so that Roberts can add additional guitar work.

Looping and layering are the key to a successful performance and it is fascinating, and a little nerve wracking, to watch both musicians constantly switching between instruments, adjusting keyboard and pedal settings and switching connecting cables. Some of the changes are really quite frantic and there is a palpable sense of tension and relief from the audience as the changes are made just in the nick of time.

Almost before we know it we are approaching the climax to the first side of the album. Holdsworth sets up the bassline that underpins this section then jokingly sits back to take a breather and a sip from a wine glass as Roberts adds further touches. This respite is short-lived however, as he is soon back behind his keyboards feverishly making adjustments.



LIVE

Aside from the opening, this is arguably the most well known part of the album. Roberts solemnly announces the entry of each instrument, culminating of course in those tubular bells. It would be amazing if a performance of this complexity was not subject to some sort of technical glitch and tonight there is a problem with the pick up in the Spanish guitar that ends the first part of the piece. Holdsworth immediately acts to overcome this by repositioning one of the vocal mics to amplify the guitar.

The duo take the opportunity to have a brief chat with the audience while setting up for the second part of the show. While a good few of the audience have seen the performance before – “I hope we played a completely different set of mistakes for you this time” Holdsworth jokes - perhaps surprisingly there are a handful who have never heard Tubular Bells before.

The relaxed opening to the second half gives the pair a brief chance to recover from the rigours of “Side One” but it's not long before we things heat up again with the Bagpipe Guitars section leading into the Piltown Man section. Holdsworth rushes to the

drum kit and sets up a solid rhythm while Roberts performs the “caveman” vocals and thrashing guitars. No matter how good Roberts and Holdsworth may be, there is only so much they can do with four arms and legs and so a key guitar line is ingeniously replicated on kazoos - and it works! This section is extended into a furious drum battle between the pair before Holdsworth rushes back from the kit, takes a much-needed gulp from a bottle of water, and straps on his guitar for the finale during which he delivers some really fine emotionally-charged soloing. We end on The Sailor’s Hornpipe, giving both musicians a final chance to shine. The Spanish guitar is still playing up but once more some ad hoc ingenuity saves the day.

Roberts and Holdsworth take a bow to a well-deserved ovation. If you like Tubular Bells then you really need to see this show. If you don't like Tubular Bells but want to see two musicians work their bollocks off to produce something extraordinary then you really need to see this show. Just see the show, you won’t regret it.



LIVE

I caught up with Aiden and Danny during their Edinburgh run to ask them about how they put the show together and some of the challenges they face in performing it.

Hifi Pig: Hi guys, thanks for taking the time to do this. Can I start by asking you a question that I'm sure you've been asked many times: Why Tubular Bells?

Aiden: Why Tubular Bells? We were living near to each other in the Blue Mountains and we'd been friends for many years. We hadn't really seen each other for maybe two years and I thought: "Why don't we start hanging out again?" So Danny would come over to my house every week or so and we'd just hang out, start playing guitar, have some drinks and just listen to records. We had Tubular Bells on the record player one night and got really interested in it, having known it as teenagers and we started playing it on our iPods and stuff. I can't remember when it really started but we got interested in trying to learn how to play it on a couple of instruments. And then we got carried away and thought why don't we try and turn it into a performance with lots of instruments and try and make it sound as much like the record as we possibly can. And that's where it began.

Hifi Pig: How long did it take from there to the point where you were ready to play it in front of an audience?

Danny: it was about a year. The initial idea was just us having fun and then we thought maybe we could just play in a café down the street on a couple of guitars but then, as it grew, it was about a year before we thought we were brave enough to book a show and that then gave us a timeline to get it into shape. It was really difficult, trying to get each bit right section by section, and then trying to work out how to cross between sections.

Aiden: And there were sacrifices to be made as well. Obviously we can't play absolutely everything, so it's: How can we give the impression of all these

layers? Sometimes you have to play two things at once on one instrument or try and cross thing over.

Danny: But the show keeps evolving. We're still changing it, we're still adding more. We've been doing it for six years and we are still adding more and more every time we do it. There was a little thing we added just last night, so it's an evolving beast.

Hifi Pig: What was that change?

Aiden: Oh, it was a just a tiny little thing. It's in one of the organ sounds. We decided to play it an octave down and then loop it to make it an octave up as well because on the record there is two doing the same thing. And so that's another little detail that makes it sound more like the record.

Danny: Sometimes we come up with little problem-solve sections to make a transition easier like: "Oh! I've just realised that if I loop the three notes that I play in that section about a minute before they appear again, then I can trigger them just as I have to put my guitar down and get up." Just tiny things like that that just took a lot of live performance to work out. Every time we do something like that we have to practice it at the next show and if it works you keep it. If it doesn't, you go back to how you were doing it before. The whole thing is just a patchwork of problem solving and it's become second nature to a degree. On top of all that we then have to play it so it sounds good; play the notes correctly. It's really hard! (Laughs)

Aiden: We've got some recordings of early performances and that beginning – because we were so stressed in the early days - it sounds so angry and aggressive on what's meant to be a gentle piano thing.

Danny: It took a lot of concentration and practice to just calm the music down whilst still having to run around really quickly.

Hifi Pig: I suppose your worst nightmare is looping a section with a mistake in it and it comes around again and again to haunt you.

Aiden: Oh yeah, it happens and it's really annoying. There's maybe just one note that pops out. Sometimes you can hear the audience laugh when it

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comes round again. Luckily, it doesn't happen all that often.

Hifi Pig: How do you decide who plays what? Is there room for you to switch things around a bit or is it defined by the technical set up?

Aiden: We base the show around our own strengths. It might be that for one section Danny's more the kind of wizardy guitar and I'm more the bottom-end stuff. And we analyse each section to see what's going to work best. The Piltdown Man section was one of the hardest things to solve. Originally I was just banging around on piano and growling, and Danny was on drums but I thought, we've got to make this more dynamic.

Danny: We originally thought we were just going to have have to sacrifice all those layers because there is so much in it but over the years we've come up with ways to solve it.

Hifi Pig: the kazoos are genius!

Danny: it's a wonderful melody, it's got to be there! When we started in Australia we had a guy who used to open for us and he did a song with a kazoo with a big reverb on it to make it sound like an electric guitar solo and we thought: What a great idea!

Hifi Pig: Do you ever switch around your parts or does the technology prevent that?

Aiden: Not so much the technology, but it's based on what has to happen next – if I play this then you can move on to doing that and then that lets me do this next thing. We have switched things around over the years to make the changes easier. And we want to get the sound as close as possible to the record so there are some very odd little guitar tones and funny little organ sounds that we've tried to get right and all that added to the authentic flavour of it. It's a lot of fun picking it all apart. Every now and again we sit down and listen to the album and we spot something that's missing – a little sub-melody and we work out how to get that in there. Still doing that!

Hifi Pig: Yesterday, there was a problem with the Spanish guitar...

Danny: Oh yeah, what a shame! The battery went flat in the pickup.

Hifi Pig: Have you ever had any showstoppers where the performance has ground to a halt?

Danny: I can think of two times. The scariest one was at Sydney Festival in 2012, we were about halfway through the bagpipe section on Side Two and I lost power to my entire side of the stage – everything just went PHUT! – Gone. I'm looked at Aiden and its like, what are we going to do we've got to keep going so I went over to Aiden's side and we shared a piano and a guitar and we got to the end. Once you start, you have to get to the end.

Aiden: We've always said that once you start, you can't stop. But there was one show where we had to stop. The digital piano did some freaky thing where it decided to go into an arpeggiator mode [Danny makes arpeggiator sound] and it just wouldn't stop it. It was really important for the following sections that we had a well behaving piano so we just had to stop. It was only for about 30 seconds while we reset the piano but it really interrupts the flow of the music.

Hifi Pig: It must be scary when that happens.

Aiden: Yeah but you just have to make a joke of it and move on.

Hifi Pig: is there any particular part of the piece when you think: Shit, it's this bit now?

Danny: There's a couple. In the first half, the whole section leading up to the guitar duet [sings melody] – it was good last night. There are rapid changes, you've got to put one guitar down and pick up another, and there is so much...*choreography* to that bit. Plus, it's a very peaceful, lovely piece of music. If it's sounding frantic and clumsy then it really loses its effect. That bit's really delicate. It's really hard to get right. And the bit that follows it is really tricky. Once we get to the Side One finale and we've got that in the loop, it's really easy from there. Visually, watching it, that's probably the biggest spectacle for the show, all the running around, but it's actually the easiest part for us to play as it's just one melody over and over again on different instruments. That said, it's amazing how easily you can screw up!

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Hifi Pig: Have you ever thought about having guest Masters Of Ceremony to introduce the instruments? Edinburgh would be perfect for that, you could have a different celebrity every day.

Danny: Yeah, we've thought about it. That would be fun, wouldn't it? But that would go against the code of Tubular Bells For Two. We do our best to do it all ourselves.

Hifi Pig: Have you had any feedback from Oldfield – any hints and tips?

Aiden: We were lucky enough to have a Skype session with him about two years ago and he was really lovely. He's watched the DVD and gave us his stamp of approval. He said: "I can't believe you got all those parts in there, I can't believe you worked it all out. He said: "You play it all perfectly." and I thought, well...not quite.

Danny: *He* doesn't play it all perfectly!

Hifi Pig: You'd probably spend quite a lot of time in the toilet if you got the call to say Mr Oldfield would like to come to the gig tonight.

Aiden: [Laughs] Yeah, the other thing he said was : "Are you going to do Amorok for Two next, which was cheeky.

Hifi Pig: Well, one of my questions was going to be have you ever thought of doing Ommadawn?

Aiden: I'd be lying if I said we'd never been asked that before.

Danny: I think we gave some people some false hope the last time we were out here and did a big tour. Part of our contract was that the show had to be 90 minutes long and ours only lasts for an hour so we ended up doing this encore where we played kind of a shortened version of Ommadawn and I think that got people thinking that we were going to do Ommadawn next. Our show is Tubular Bells For Two and I think if we tried to do the same thing again with Ommadawn, I don't think it would be successful, it would be like a bad sequel. This works because it developed naturally and it works because of the cyclical nature of the music – it makes it quite easy to use loop pedals to run the show. And also, it

The initial idea was just us having fun and then we thought maybe we could just play in a café down the street on a couple of guitars but then, as it grew, it was about a year before we thought were we brave enough to book a show and that then gave gave us a timeline to get it into shape.

works because of the cultural place Tubular Bells has in the music world. It's a unique thing.

Hifi Pig: It definitely has that pull that none of the other albums would have.

Aiden: People have so many stories about it. But we are musicians in our own right as well, we do our own stuff and we don't just want to be "those guys who do the Mike Oldfield albums."

Hifi Pig: Have you found since you started doing this that the technology has moved on and enabled you to do things that you couldn't do before?

Danny: It has actually. Particularly the loop pedals. But we were very aware when we started that we didn't want to have a computer on stage because we didn't want people thinking that we had backing tracks going on; we were still doing everything live. Because we could do the show with, say, Ableton Live – a programme that would allow much better looping and give our sound engineer better control over levels but then we would have laptops on stage and I think that would ruin the performance. I think

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it's primarily about what we are doing with our fingers and our toes and the instruments, using the little tricks that we have like top quality loop sampling, it's a blessing to be able to have that. It just makes the details better. We've got one computer on stage – the iPad.

Hifi Pig: For the big whoosh sound.

Danny: The taped motor-drive organ, yeah. At the first shows we had a tape deck underneath my keyboard, cued up with the little rolling counter and you'd get it to exactly the bit where you'd recorded the organ and go – Unpause – and then make sure that you paused it again. Old school.

Hifi Pig: Too much technology would take away from the musicality.

Danny: Exactly. And there's a lot there already when you think about all the effects pedals – octave pedals to make Aiden's guitar sound like a bass, and the pianos we've got now are really good but we've had some really bad sounding digital pianos in the past. These ones actually sound like pianos. It's only in the last few years that they have got really good.

Aiden: We've talked in the past about doing the show with two grand pianos on stage, so when we say "Grand piano" it actually would be. We did a show for ABC radio and they had a beautiful Steinway grand and we thought, well we can't not use that!

Hifi Pig: Thanks guys, that's been great. Good luck with the rest of the run.

John Scott



LIVE

Dean Friedman

– Sweet, Edinburgh

Hifi Pig readers of a certain age will know Dean Friedman from at least two songs – Lucky Star and Ariel. Readers of a younger vintage may know him from Half Man Half Biscuit's song The Bastard Son Of Dean Friedman. On a previous visit to Edinburgh, Friedman was in the audience at a Half Man Half Biscuit gig and he has been plotting his revenge ever since.

Ariel doesn't get an outing tonight which is a shame as I'm sure it would have got a great reception* but we are otherwise treated to a selection of songs from across Friedman's career, including some from his new yet-to-be-recorded album. Friedman is a fine songwriter and I was looking forward to hearing his songs in a live context but I'm sorry to say that this evening's performance didn't really work for me.

The main reason for this was a poor sound balance: when Friedman played piano, his voice was almost drowned out. This was also true, but to a lesser extent, when he played guitar. I really wanted to come away from the show with a better appreciation of Friedman as a songwriter but unfortunately I was unable to do that as many of the lyrics just didn't come over.

From the chat amongst the audience before the show, it seemed that most people had seen him play before

and were familiar with his material. I was surprised, therefore, at how reserved they were during the performance. Each song was met with polite applause but any attempts by Friedman to engage the audience between songs were fruitless.

That said, the Dean Friedman songbook is full of gems. Whether the songs come from early in his career; Woman Of Mine, Shopping Bag Ladies, Lydia or later; the lovely Saturday Fathers, this is top-class songwriting. Under The Weather has one of those tunes that allow you to sing along even though you've never heard it before. The only songs that didn't really ring true with me were the "comedy for adults" songs from Friedman's Squirrels In The Attic album, and that was only because I think it's impossible to beat Loudon Wainwright III at that kind of song.

A Baker's Tale sees Friedman finally exacting his revenge on Half Man Half Biscuit's Nigel Blackwell by telling the perhaps-not-entirely-true story of Nigel's far from immaculate conception. The show ends of course with Lucky Stars. Had I known that I and the rest of the audience would be required to provide the

female half of the duet I would have brushed up on the lyrics beforehand. Given the diffidence of the rest of the audience, what should have been the show's climax ends up as a bit of a damp squib.

This was the first night of a two-week Edinburgh run. An evening with Dean Friedman ought to be something special. It wasn't tonight and that is a great pity. Hopefully he got the sound problems sorted out, and a more responsive audience, for the other shows.

*I'm here all week.
John Scott

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CLASSICS

Love - Forever Changes

For this month's Classic Album, John Scott revisits Love's Forever Changes

Arthur Lee began his musical career in a variety of high school bands with his friend Johnny Echolls. Both Lee and Echolls were natives of Tennessee who moved to Los Angeles as children and would find themselves at the heart of the psychedelic vortex that was 1967's Summer Of Love.

Lee's first recording, *The Ninth Wave*, was released on 1963. He went on to record a number of other tracks including *My Diary*, which featured a pre-Experience Jimi Hendrix, before forming the first incarnation of Love with Echolls on guitar and vocals, Bryan McLean, also guitar and vocals, Ken Forssi on bass and Alban "Snoopy" Pfisterer on drums. During the recording of the band's second album *De Capo*, Pfisterer was moved to harpsichord and organ, being replaced on drums by Michael Stewart. Tjay Cantrelli was brought in on saxophone and flute to expand the band's sound.

Although Love had some success with their first two albums, released in quick succession in March and November 1966, a combination of drug abuse issues and ego clashes, mainly between Lee and McLean, had left the band in pretty bad shape and Pfisterer and Cantrelli quit the band soon after the release of *Da Capo*. When it came time to record their third album, it was clear that Lee and McLean had the songs but that the band was in no real shape to record them. Neil Young had been slated to produce the album but called off due to other commitments. Lee took over as producer along with Bruce Botnick who had engineered the previous albums.

When the recording sessions began in June 1967, the band was in a barely-functioning state and so LA session musicians Billy Strange, Don Randi, Hal Blaine and Carole Kaye were brought in on guitar,

Forever Changes was reputedly named from a story that Lee had heard about a friend of a friend who had broken up with his girlfriend.

piano, drums and bass to start work on two songs, *Andmoreagain* and *The Daily Planet* which the Love musicians then added some overdubs to. The use of the session musicians, known collectively as The Wrecking Crew, on these two cuts apparently gave the band a bit of a shake and they realised that they needed to get their act together if the band was going to continue. After extensive practicing, the band came back to the studio in August and worked through to September to produce the remaining nine cuts on the album. Don Randi was retained to play keyboard parts and a final session on 18 September saw the addition of the string and horn parts after Lee had spent three weeks singing these to arranger David Angel.

Forever Changes was reputedly named from a story that Lee had heard about a friend of a friend who had broken up with his girlfriend. "You said you would love me forever" she said. "Well, forever changes" he replied. On release in November 1967, the album stalled at number 154 in the *Billboard* 200, doing far worse commercially than its predecessors. Over the years, however, it has been reappraised and is now regarded as the band's masterpiece and one of the defining albums of its era.

If Arthur Lee's name is the one most closely associated with Love, it is. Bryan McLean's song *Alone Again Or* that is arguably their best known

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LOVE



forever changes

song. Alone Again Or opens the album with a Flamenco-influenced acoustic guitar, followed by rising, staccato strings and rousing brass. A trumpet solo adds a mariachi feel to produce something that is definitely of the sixties but sounds like nothing else.

A House Is Not A Motel opens gently with 12 string guitar, bass and drums but ends in a stinging electric guitar battle between Lee and Echolls. Lee's lyrics are abstract but turn into an apoplectic, apocalyptic vision where bathtubs run with blood. Forever

Changes may have been written during the Summer Of Love but it is no hippy dippy peace and love fest.

Andmoreagain, one of the Wrecking Crew cuts, is on the face of things a gentle love song but Lee's later comments on the song hint at a dissatisfaction with the mundanity of every day life. "You wake up in the morning and watch I Love Lucy, eat your breakfast and do more of the same thing every day, same as yesterday only a day later."

The Daily Planet is the second Wrecking Crew song featuring a tight driving bass but the overall sound is

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not out of character with the songs produced by the actual band. Musically upbeat, Lee's lyrics again hint at something darker. The darkness deepens on *The Red Telephone*, a reference to the Presidential communication that would precede the commencement of a nuclear strike. The lines "They're locking them up today and throwing away the key" were eerily prescient for Lee himself who would be sentenced to a 12 year prison term in 1996 for the negligent discharge of a firearm. He served five and a half years. The lyrics of *The Red Telephone* were also parodied by The Bonzo Dog Band who turned "we're all normal and we want our freedom" to "we are normal and we dig Bert Weedon".

On *Maybe The People Would Be The Times Or Between Clark and Hilldale*, Lee omits the last word of every line, leaving the listener to choose a word for themselves. That word, provided the listener, chooses the obvious one, starts the next line; suggesting that we really never had a choice at all.

Live And Let Live once again juxtaposes gentle instrumentation with dark lyrics. "The snot has caked upon my pants" Lee sings. "It has turned into crystal. There's a bluebird sitting on a branch, I guess I'll take my pistol. I've got it in my hand, because he's on my land." Lee intended this as a commentary on the removal of land from the Native Americans.

If Bryan McLean holds claim to *Forever Changes*' signature song, it is Lee's vision of alienation and disassociation that characterises the album as a classic and made it retrospectively such an influential and popular album. Love would never better *Forever Changes*. The line up split and subsequent Love albums were basically just Lee and a succession of session musicians. Following his release from prison, Lee toured as Arthur Lee and Love. A live concert, recorded at London's Royal Festival Hall on 15 January 2003, was released as *The Forever Changes Concert* and was enthusiastically received. Johnny Echolls would join Lee for later performances. Lee contracted leukaemia around 2005 but did not disclose this at the time. His illness caused him to pull out from further touring and he died of the disease on 3 August 2006. *Forever Changes* will forever remain as his legacy.

John Scott

AT A GLANCE

VITAL INFORMATION

Released -November 1967

**Recorded -June to September, 1967
at Sunset Sound Recorders**

**Genre - Folk rock, Psychedelic pop
Length - 42:51**

Label - Elektra, Rhino.

Producer - Bruce Botnick, Arthur Lee

TRACK LISTING

SIDE 1

- 1. Alone Again Or - 3:16**
- 2. A House is Not a Motel- 3:31**
- 3. Andmoreagain - 3:18**
- 4. The Daily Planet - 3:30**
- 5. Old Man - 3:02**
- 6. The Red Telephone - 4:46**

SIDE 2

- 1. Maybe the People Would Be
the Times or Between Clark
and Hilldale - 3:34**
- 2. Live and Let Live - 5:26**
- 3. The Good Humor Man He Sees
Everything Like This - 3:08**
- 4. Bummer in the Summer - 2:24**
- 5. You Set the Scene - 6 :56**

BEHIND THE BRANDS

Frederick Davies, Creator of the AXJET Loudspeaker system talks to Hifi Pig



Your History

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

I had the WEM PA in our band when I was 16, I was a lousy drummer and a worse singer but they needed the PA!

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

Professor Jack Dinsdale who wrote 3 articles in Wireless world on Horn speaker design in 1974.

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

Pedal power PA for Greenpeace and 4-way AXJET chill-out Glastonbury 1998

You and your system

What was your very first system?

EMI mono radiogram, then 2xQuad II and 22 with VHF and AM radios plus Goldring Lenco turntable with Shure M75 cartridge and Goodmans 12" dual cone drivers in plywood boxes and 3" ex navy aluminium cone compression drivers with high pass caps for tweeters.

Tell us about your system history.

Source: various tape players inc. Elizabethan, National, Yamaha, Sony, Phillips, Decks: Goldring Lenco turntable, BSR then Garrard SP25 followed by AR XB and then Linn Sondek LP12 with Ittok and Asak. Plus Technics 1200 and 1210. Various cartridges: Sonotone, Nagaoka MP11, Ortofon, Pickering, Goldring, Stanton 680, and numerous Shures M55, M75, WHTL. CD players, Aiwa, Sony, Phillips

Amps: many ... Armstrong, Marantz, Trio, Yamaha, Quad II and Quad 405, Hafler pre, Leak, Bang and Olafson, Pioneer, NAD, Croft X series and pre. HH, Crown, C-Mark, and numerous other PA amps.

Speakers: Wharfdale Diamonds, B&W, Mordant Short, Heybrook, and a few other small boxes plus many, many drivers (mostly full-range) in self built enclosures... Goodmans, old Wharfdales, Volt, Bandor, Jordan, Jordan Watts, Tannoy, Lowthers ..PM 2,6,7, DX3, Audio Nirvana, Voxativ, Vitavox K12s and S2s amongst others!

Which component/product do you miss the most/wish you had never got rid of?

I had my Linn LP12 stolen and it had an Audio Technica OC9 on it with an Ortofon phono stage....miss that!

BEHIND THE BRANDS

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

Kiso HB speakers... coming from the opposite end of speaker theory to me, they are built like Stradavarius violins and they sound like it!!

Tell us about your current system(s)

I have a couple of little systems we use for DJ monitoring or in the house as background for dining, but the main systems are the chill-out PA and the lounge home system. The PA has two AX custom Basstages which are 40hz compound horns, each is 600mm high x 1200mm deep x 3000mm. The Bass drivers are 1x500W Eminence drivers per side. We used to use 2x100hz Axhorns that were part of the

pedal-powered PA for Glastonbury, each of which has a 6inch PD mid driver and the Vitavox 3x5 Multicell horns with S2 drivers as tweeters, but now I just use 2 AXJETS on each Basstage. I use a custom amp-rack with 650W bass amp and I use 450W C-mark mosfet PA amps for the AXJETS, although they only need 30W... with the power attenuated the big amps deliver about that in pure class A before they go into AB mode which gives the speakers a wonderful depth of undistorted power. Home system is the old Aiwa CD transport with fantastic Chord Hugo DAC and an old Thorens SME combo that I got after the Linn was nicked! I have the old Asak on it at the moment. The speakers are the latest AXJETS with AER MD3B and I use various amps. I still have the Quad IIs but they sound

wooly in the low end. For most purposes the Pioneer that has been tweaked by Tom Evans is just fine as is his Eikos Pioneer CD player.

For demos I use Tom's amazing Vibe pre-amp and Linear A Hybrid valve amp along with his Master-groove phono stage and either a Nottingham Analogue Space deck or Max Townshend's Rock with a Lyra cartridge. I supply the AXJETS with 10m x 4mm Klotz cable with Neutrik Speakons for outdoor use and I do that with the PA, but I also provide 5m Atlas Hyper2 with crimped Z-pins into Muntdorf 4mm sockets which I use for home and shows. I use the Tom Evans Pioneer equipment with a Behringer DJ mixing desk and a pair of Technics also at demos to show how big the speaker contribution is and what a difference it makes to take mid-priced quality kit that lots of people are familiar with and put a really good speaker on the end of it. It is amazing, and it is very nice for playing out in the garden with a few people round too!

The state of the industry

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

Valves, nice, often mellow but fuzzy down low. The resurgence ... well fashion mostly, and the illusion that horn speakers inevitably work better with



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valves. This is just because lots of horns are badly designed and shouty and this is moderated by the wooly valves. Now that we are starting to get astonishing levels of efficiency with the new AER BD4 it will make small 3watt triodes a real possibility at last, which is where valves work best. A good transistor amp is usually better than a valve, but the hybrids like Tom's are the best of both worlds.

What are your 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 whole music industry has been in a decline because of corporate greed. Turbo was the zeitgeist for the 80s and Digital has been the word for the 2000s. It is mostly meaningless and often retrograde against analogue options, but now everyone expects some absurd digital connection with every part of their lives. I think that we will see a more pragmatic approach to everything, with a return to enjoying quality sound reproduction. Stadium rock with line array PA and digital mixes and speaker management has turned itself into a bland shadow of its former self. Smaller live gigs will have a comeback and someone will figure a way to sell hi-res sound files on memory sticks or something to allow us to buy music again. Even with digital it is nice to own a CD... I see kids playing their music off computers at gigs and it is like reading the phone book... soul-less.

Mid-level systems will stay cheap and be acceptable for the majority as they are now, but with fewer silly buttons and options, a resurgence in real volume control pots! I think the high-end will expand with the spread of wealth at the top. The best consumer option is still buying very high quality equipment second_hand when it is not so fashionable.

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

Biggest con ... selling an MP3 for 99p at Apple and allowing whole CDs to drop to pennies on Amazon. The failure of the audio DVD format has left us with



barely acceptable parameters for CD and nowhere to go for higher resolution files without big hard drives and fast internet... and luck as to whether the music you want is available.

Clearly the inmates have taken over the music biz asylum!

The way you work

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

Being there. Shut your eyes and you are there. Once you have a system which does that, you just get more

BEHIND THE BRANDS

and more discerning about what recordings you can listen to!

Your sound preference -

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

It must be engaging, it needs to go loud if the music is loud, it needs to be fast and dynamic with no woofy hangover. I don't want to hear the system at all, just the music or with a movie, the effects and dialogue. People often talk about rock sound or classical sound or dance systems ... the truth is that if the system is good enough it will play anything. It is only with reggae or dub types of music where the sound system is an instrument in itself that it can't be effectively reproduced.

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

Full-range horns...AXJETS.

It's all about the music, man...

What is your favourite recording?

Electric Ladyland.

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings

Sia, Ry Cooder, Sa Ding Ding, Timo Mass, actually Booker T- Green Onions, Johnny Cash – Hurt, Joe Satriani – Echoes , Dave Brubeck-Take 5 live, Tracey Chapman – The Promise, Jennifer Warnes – Way Down, John Martyn – Solid Air, Oui Three – We Love You, Leftfield – Storm 3000. Sorry 3 is impossible!

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures



Kylie -On a night like this, Dolly Parton/Whitney Houston - I will always love you.

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?

Jimi live at Randalls Island on Vinyl bootleg... his last recording just after I saw him at the Isle of Wight.