

# Hifi Pig

## EXTRA



WWW.HIFIPIG.COM

November 2015  
Issue #4

## Hifi Pig Visit Haute Fidélité In Paris

**"We are setting off to visit the Haute Fidélité Show at the Marriott Rive Gauche in Paris. I'm not entirely sure how I am feeling, a mixture of anger and defiance, but also sadness and admittedly fear"**

## REVIEWS

**Great Columnists, Classic Audio, Behind The Brands with Bret D'Agostino and more....**

**VPI Prime Turntable  
Pro-Ject RPM3 Carbon  
Turntable  
Bespoke Audio Co Passive  
Preamplifier  
Kralk Audio BC30  
Loudspeakers and PAW  
Stand  
Ophidian Mojo  
Loudspeakers  
Leema Xen Loudspeakers  
Melodika "Purple Rain"  
Series Speaker Cables**

**PLUS** Album and Gig Reviews, The Classics - The Kinks "The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society"



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Blue USB

Black Power Cable

Black Diamond RCA

Black Diamond XLR



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HiFi World, Awards Edition Jan 2015

**HI-FI WORLD**  
VERDICT ●●●●●

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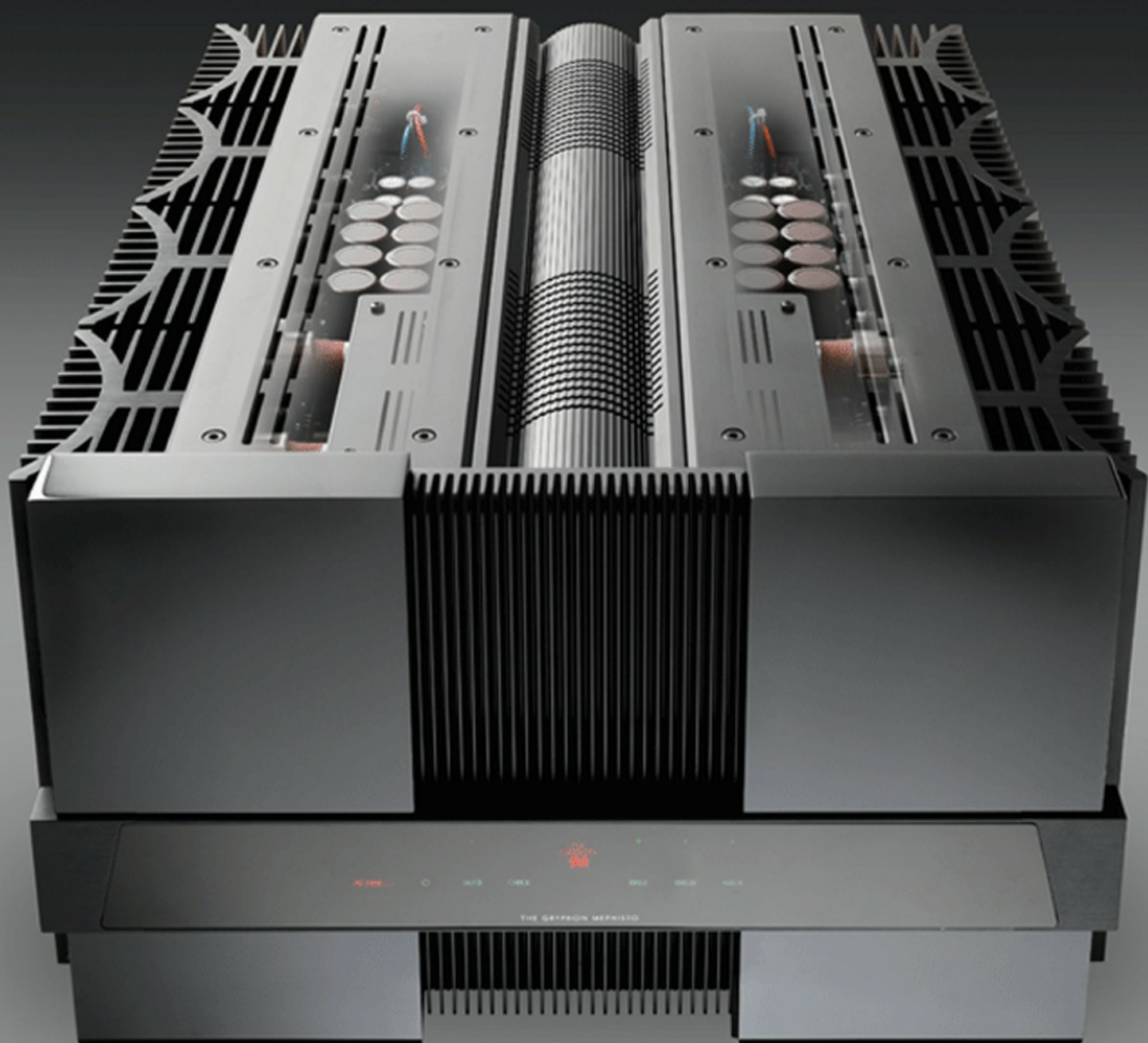
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# THE GRYPHON



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## VPI PRIME TURNTABLE

**The American built VPI Prime turntable has a novel 3D printed arm included in the £3750 asking price. Janine Elliot takes a few discs for a spin.**



**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**

One of the most exciting parts of reviewing is opening up the boxes when they arrive, though sometimes actually getting the boxes to my door with my busy life is more interesting than the review itself. The delivery company failed to knock long enough to give me a chance to put on my favourite slippers, so I had to do the often customary visit to the depot to pick it up myself. They even made me put on a visi-jacket and then fetch it myself from their stores.

Then a jobsworth security OAP at the gates even made me drive around the massive site on their one way racetrack carefully missing the lorries, rather than allowing me to reverse 10ft out of the front entrance! Beats daytime TV any day, believe me, as this was all very entertaining. Whilst I had wanted to be a VIP picking up my VPI, I soon felt very very important once I assembled the unit. You see, I have always wanted to review a VPI deck, having heard one many years back with a Lyra cartridge and loving what I heard.

# VPI PRIME TURNTABLE

## SET UP

As a reviewer, I mustn't let previous knowledge or experience influence my writing, so my reviewing is therefore always taken as if I had never seen or assembled the products before. Setting up this extremely well packaged and very heavy unit was actually an interesting experience. First of all, the manual tells you what to remove from the box at the start, but misses out one essential item, that being the USB stick that has a video to show you everything you need to do. So, whilst I found some of the wording in the manual confusing, particularly when talking about the alignment jig, watching the video enabled me actually to set it all up in very little longer than the length of the video itself. Whilst VPI are not frugal in supplying all you need for the job - I mean, it even comes with an electronic stylus force gauge, as well as a very able Stainless Steel/Delrin record clamp, something that some manufacturers can charge extra for - it misses out one of the most important accessory items, a spirit level.

Luckily I have several at my disposal. Having experienced more expensive VPIs in the past I was quite excited to see how this product would compare. The 10 inch arm itself is revolutionary, being created by a 3D printer, and it looks significantly posher than I would have expected. The VPI Prime is therefore an interesting phenomenon. Is it VPI trying to be a good turntable with a 3D printed arm thrown (or printed) in, or is it seriously trying to compete with mid-fi all-in-onesies. Whatever, it certainly warrants its place in the heart of the medium hifi set up. The wand, in the form of the JMW 3D tonearm, is by no means an afterthought, and when set up well works well, too. I have been wondering for ages when a printed arm would hit the shelves. After all, you can even make guns from printers, and so creating an arm which is considerably heavier than I imagined (largely due to the 140g counterweight and adjustable side weights for fine azimuth adjustment), was not an impossible



task. Reminded me of the plastic “ruler” arm by NAD (model 5120) many, many years ago, but this tubular plastic printout was on another level. VPI also supply an aluminium rod to place behind the mounting screws on the headshell which should appear parallel with the record surface when adjusting azimuth. To get this to be perfect one firstly needs to rotate the 140g counterweight (different weights are also available) with finer adjustment made from turning the aluminium side weights on the 3D arm.

Anti-skate is similarly DIY, from either twisting the lead-out wires from the arm into its Lemo-connection point on the base of the arm board, or by using a more traditional nylon wire and weight anti-skate mechanism by the RCA sockets and ground connector at the arm-board base. With the former method, if the wire isn't twisted the arm won't “spring” back to the arm-board, and with it twisted I did find it a tad too excited, especially when playing a few test discs at my disposal.

Whatever method you choose, the arm is an excellent design, and anything that is solid and therefore isn't a ringing metal tube is good news.

Similarly, creating a one-piece arm-come-headshell has been the goal for many years, done well by most arm-makers for years. I built one when I was studying metalwork at school, with the headshell formed from cutting a slit in the tube at one end and then unrolling it to form the headshell. It wasn't very strong, but it was a first. This one-piece printout was far more resilient and made any cartridge feel both at home and protected. My Kontrapunkt *b* had a lot more control than connected to my Rega arm. Interesting just how an arm does make a difference to the sound.

The arm itself is a unipivot design of the simplest structure, and despite it being essentially a print out, looks considerably more professional and stronger than I could have imagined, and further, its sound far outweighed (sic) its looks. I have to say that unipivot arms are my least favoured form, often feeling fragile, and meaning that using the finger lift device to



# VPI PRIME TURNTABLE

change tracks makes the arm waver from side to side. For that reason I didn't attach it to the headshell for review purposes, rather using the cueing lever for up and down, and my finger tapping the arm for horizontal. Similarly I didn't use the enclosed record mats, rather sandwiching the record on the 20 pound aluminium platter above a small enclosed rubber washer all held together with the record clamp.

The motor is a separate hefty beast that sits within the indentation on the left-hand side of the plinth, and a single rubber belt pulls around the platter, like nearly every other turntable worthy of a listen. I

wondered why there weren't two or more belts, like in their HRX or Avenger. But then, all of their "production" range of turntables work well with just the one, and the Prime fits upper midway within this group of turntables, and I have to admit to it being the best looking of the crop. At £3750 it looks well worth the outlay, though VPIs start at under £1000 and end up at £27,500 in their "reference" range.

Being a high-torque design meant getting up to speed was very quickly, and the noise from the 300RPM 24 pole AC synchronous motor suspended in its large aluminium and steel tubular body was



# VPI PRIME TURNTABLE



exceptionally quiet, quoted in at greater than 85dB. The curvaceous MDF plinth is substantial in size and with excellent noise absorbing feet at each corner, each adjustable by turning. The unit comes with four isolation platforms for additional stability, again largely made from Delrin, the company name for a polymer made from Polyoxymethylene, a thermoplastic designed for precision parts that require high stiffness. The MDF plinth is heavier than I expected, with the added weight coming from the reinforcement with a 3mm (11 gauge) thick steel plate which

is bonded to the underside to help control resonance and improve feedback rejection, and all of which is hidden under the textured vinyl exterior. It comes complete with castors for the feet spikes to sit in, and VPI suggest the whole is placed on a substantial wood base. Whilst noise from around the turntable is eradicated very well, the turntable does resonate a tad if I tap it. Nothing I wouldn't expect; a larger metal plate, preferably sandwiched in the middle like in their more expensive Aries or HR-X would work well to help improve things further, but which would



# VPI PRIME TURNTABLE

obviously put the price up, something VPI are keen to avoid.

So, despite looking fairly basic by comparison to most other arms out there, in operation it was by no means inferior or lacking. The sound is fast, dynamic, with a particularly good bass that covered

my living room with good authority via my Wilson

**Piano recordings were clear and relaxed; instruments were well placed, with great detail, but not sounding complex. Not one sound was out of place.**

Benesch Torus infrasonic generator. Imagery was exceptionally precise and better than I expected for the price. All the musique concrete layers in David Gilmour 'Castellorizon' were easier to understand and enjoy than I had done before, with the guitar bends and vibrato's

sounding emotional rather than painful. Miles Davies Bitches Brew came across much more concise and



# VPI PRIME TURNTABLE

with a clearer soundstage than most turntables at this price.

No matter the complexity of recording or instrumentation this turntable kept in full control at all times. Whilst the colourful VPI record mat supplied with my review deck softened the edges of sounds, as said earlier I actually preferred not using it, and just making sure that I didn't scratch my records or the platter. The sound was as 3D as the arm was made. Despite some novelty and simplicity in adjusting azimuth and bias (if you were to compare it with the over-engineered marvels such as SME 3, 4, and 5) the VPI showed no signs of being less thought-out, nor less able for me to get a really good sound in a short space of time. Indeed, once I could understand what I needed to do on the paper manual (and much quicker on the video) I could get a great sound without needed to take a GCSE in arm forces. The immediacy of sound, excellent bass and extreme quiet were my first and last impressions. Quoted at greater than 85dB rumble, this was a quiet beast, though their top flyer Avenger does go to the dizzy heights of almost 100dB. It is a bit more expensive. The high torque means the speed is very stable, indeed better than on many external motor units at this price point or higher. Piano recordings were clear and relaxed; instruments were well placed, with great detail, but not sounding complex. Not one sound was out of place.

## CONCLUSION

As an audiophile looking for an all in one (minus cartridge) setup, and with a large unit to place it on (overall Dimensions are 21 3/8" x 15 3/4"), this is one that is hard to beat, and won't disappoint. OK, it might not look as fancy as some of offerings out there with glistening wood veneers and ornate metalwork, but this American product is still impressive to look at, and more than that, the sound is just plain honest. And if you add a Lyra or your favourite cartridge, you should get a very satisfying player at well under £5000.

**Sound Quality: 8.7/10**

**Value for Money: 8.6/10**

**Build Quality: 8.5/10 (novel 3D arm, and looking very professional when assembled)**

**Overall: 8.6/10**

**Pros;**

**The speed and detail of sound**

**Excellent soundstage both left-right and front back**

**Excellent motor unit**

**Value for money**

**Novelty of the arm**

**Supplied isolation platforms**

**Looks like the more expensive VPIs**

**Cons:**

**No dust cover provided**

**No spirit level (after all, VPI do make one)**

**Janine Elliot**

## Designer's Comments

The VPI Prime was my first solo design project. This was exciting and important to show that VPI would still be coming out with new and innovative ideas even with the retirement of original founder and designer Harry Weisfeld.

The Prime was meant to take the best VPI has to offer from the past 40 years and combine it into a comprehensive easy to use high-end package. The chassis was inspired by the footprint of the Classic table and material of the Scout table, and shape of the HR-X table. The motor was inspired by the Aries table and was topped off by having the VTA on the fly base with new 3D JMW tonearm.

The 3D idea was from my days as a teacher. Before VPI I was a high school and college technology teacher focusing on web design, animation, and 3D modeling. I would use VPI products to provide a real world industrial connection for my students. During a research and development meeting at VPI after a day of using the original JMW arm (originally made and named in memory of my brother Jonathan Mathew Weisfeld) as a sample in my CAD class I had suggested to my dad Harry, "Dad why don't why try printing it?" After some consideration he was impressed by the idea since it had never been done before. This led to a lot of testing, and combination of material until we found the perfect technique to make our tonearm for the JMW 3D.

The Prime marks the true passing of the torch from father to son in ownership of VPI and will be the first of many more designs and projects!

**Mat Weisfeld**





MC Step-Up Transformers  
Phono Amplifiers  
Pre Amplifiers



# PRO-JECT RPM3 CARBON TURNTABLE

**As the vinyl revival keeps on rolling forward, Ian Ringstead takes a listen to the £599 Pro-Ject RPM3 Carbon turntable.**



**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**

**P**ro-Ject is a company who I feel have somewhat revolutionised the hifi industry in the last 25 years or so and particularly in the turntable sector. When I was in retailing, the 1990's were not the best period for turntables. CD was king and vinyl sales had slumped; people couldn't be bothered with the hassle of record care when CDs were so convenient and apparently perfect! Hence the major Japanese companies dropped making turntables and companies like Dual who had dominated the budget sector all but disappeared.

Along came Heinz Lichtenegger in 1990 to rewrite the history books and help spark the vinyl revival. Like me, Heinz didn't believe vinyl was dead, just on a hiatus and felt that the industry and consumers needed to be enlightened as to what they were missing out on. The Pro-Ject Debut was born, a new up-start looking to take the crown for the best budget

turntable. The rest is history. I sold hundreds of Debut's and they came to dominate the budget sector. The reason it succeeded was because it was so simple in concept and was dead easy to set up as well as being reliable. The fact it sounded great as well was a real bonus and price-wise it was spot on for the budget sector.

Come forward in time to the present and Pro-Ject's rise is meteoric as a company. They now make a huge range of products including highly respected electronics and turntables from the budget to the true high-end sector. I recently met Heinz at a show and personally thanked him for his contribution to hifi and producing such a great range of products.

Now all this adoration might seem as if I am fawning over the company, but I don't impress easily, however, I do use a Pro-Ject Extension 9 myself, which is not faint praise given the number of turntables I have



# PRO-JECT RPM3 CARBON TURNTABLE

had over the years. As a retailer product excellence and reliability, as well as sound quality was a major factor in continuing to sell manufacturers' wares and Pro-Ject had this in spades.

Now to the item in question and the subject of this review, the Pro-Ject RPM3 Carbon, that retails for £599. As the name suggests, carbon fibre is used in this model in its newly designed S shaped 10" tone arm. The tone arm is a Pro-Ject design and is made from carbon, aluminium and resin, utilising special heat and pressure treatments. Modern materials like carbon fibre give designers far more scope for producing great performing units (just look at Formula 1 cars for instance) and here in the RPM3 it has given us a great value for money package with an exciting arm that has an excellent moving magnet cartridge in the form of Ortofon 2M Silver.

The turntable is very compact and is deceptively simple in concept. Mass-wise it is lightweight compared to Pro-Jects' more expensive models, but none the less it works extremely well. Pro-Ject has worked hard to reduce resonance issues as much as possible in this design - the sub chassis is shaped like a boomerang, or delta wing shape in an aircraft and has an inverted high quality bearing spindle with a ceramic

ball onto which the platter is placed. The platter is made of mdf which is topped with vinyl in a sandwich construction and is drilled underneath to balance it dynamically. This drilling, along with the ultra-precision DC-driven AC generator motor and belt drive synchronous motor unit, help to produce greater speed accuracy. Obviously speed options are 33/45 which can be changed via a stepped pulley. The power switch is on the motor unit and a bright red led indicates on off.

## SOUND

Sound-wise the RPM3 ticks all the right boxes for me. Bass is solid and well controlled and with good midrange detail and a clear treble. Compared to my reference deck, solidity and detail re not quite there, but at a quarter of the price the Carbon RPM3 is superb at what it can do.

I played Roger Waters "Pros and Cons of Hitchhiking" which has superb dynamics and is a great recording. The RPM3 delivered a surprisingly good rendition of this album that has incredible detail and the production (*as expected from Roger Waters*) is amazing. A lot of detail came through and the sound spacing was admirable for a modestly priced turntable.





# PRO-JECT RPM3 CARBON TURNTABLE

Another favourite was Supertramp's "Crime of the century" album - a delight from start to finish. Again the detail in the recording is amazing, with thunderous dynamics on the right system. The complexity of this recording astounds me, but Supertramp have always excelled in this area of creating consistently great productions and never compromising the end result. Standout tracks like School, Dreamer and Rudy thrilled me in their believability on the RPM3, with all the depth and nuances of the dense complex recording techniques held in place.

James Taylor's album "Dad Loves His Work" is a sublime listen if you enjoy his style of easy on the ear music. The singing is superb both from James and his backing singers and there are always top session musicians accompanying him. If I am ever stressed or want a relaxing session with my system, I feel I can't go wrong with his music. The music flowed over me and was highly enjoyable, rather like a good glass of wine.

Tears for Fears "Songs From The Big Chair" was another album I enjoyed from the 80's on the Pro-Ject, again with great production and infectious songs such as Shout. As you can tell from my musical choices I am a child of the 70's/80's era and I am not ashamed to admit that.

## CONCLUSION

All in all then the Pro-Ject RPM3 Carbon as a package is superb. It is easy to set up and use, as are all of Pro-Jects products and is built to an enviable standard of finish for the money.

The paint finishes, of which there are three options (Piano Black, White or Red) are all very smart. As the cartridge is factory fitted there are no set up issues or time wasting and I got the deck up and run-

ning in less than 10 minutes. The instructions are clear and comprehensive.

You can even upgrade the deck with a better plug in arm lead if you so wish... which I did for experimentation and found the benefits worthwhile. Of

course if you wanted to improve the cartridge by trying a moving coil you can easily do that as well, but I feel the 2M Silver is a good match for the budget.

Make sure the deck is positioned on a well isolated rack or surface to avoid any possible feedback issues and you will be richly rewarded.

Pro-Ject has done it again in producing a superb package that really works as a whole. The current vinyl revival has yet another bargain turntable to add to the roster of real value for money turntables.

If you are new to hifi and vinyl, coming back into the fold after a long hiatus, or currently strapped for cash

you should take a serious look at this turntable.

Bravo Heinz, you and your team have done it again.

**Sound Quality: 8.6/10**

**Build Quality: 8.6/10**

**Value for money: 8.6/10**

**Overall: 8.6/10**

## Pros

**Easy to use and set up**

**Works supremely well as a package with an excellent arm and cartridge**

**Can be tweaked if you so wish.**

## Cons

**No lid (but you can buy a cover from Pro-Ject)**

**Hard to criticise at this price-point.**

**Ian Ringstead**



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## BESPOKE AUDIO Co PASSIVE PRE

**At £9000 the Bespoke Audio Co passive Preamplifier certainly isn't cheap, but this is a hand-made in the UK, luxury product that is not meant to be within the reach of the majority of people. Stuart Smith takes a listen.**

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



**T**he Bespoke Audio Company is a UK based manufacturer with just the one product to their name, but their aim is to build this product without compromise and with the focus being on delivering a truly luxurious experience for the customer from start to finish and saying that the Bespoke Audio Preamplifier will be the “last preamplifier you will ever own”. Bold claims indeed.

You can choose the configuration of your preamplifier to satisfy your needs and in collaboration with the people at Bespoke. Once you have decided on the configuration, the colour etc, they will then begin work on the preamplifier...a process that will take around five weeks. During this time Bespoke will

keep you updated with regards the progress and even send you videos of your transformers being wound, photographs of the build and weekly updates.

You can choose a whole load of options from the colour of the case, the colour of the detailing and the colour of the lid. You can also choose how the inputs and outputs are configured with there being six inputs and two outputs, with any combination of XLR and RCA connections. As standard you get a volume control with 46 steps over a 67.5dB range, WBT - 0120 Cu Topline Nextgen RCA sockets, Neutrik NC3F/MD-LX-M3 XLR sockets and Jupiter Condenser Company cotton insulated 4N copper internal wiring. You also get an Apple remote that will control the volume – I’d have liked to have seen a be-



# BESPOKE AUDIO Co PASSIVE PRE

spoke unit that matched the preamplifier here. I spoke to Harry at Bespoke with regards this and he assures me that it is their plan to have a more “bespoke” remote control built at which time they will replace all the current units already with customers. However, you can request a whole host of options over and above the standard options outlined. I put in a request for a decidedly obscure back panel layout by way of testing the company and they were only too happy to oblige, sending over diagrams and pictures of what this would look like.

Let’s get one thing out of the way right from the start...this is not your common or garden product. This is a product aimed squarely at the luxury end of the market, a market that wants to feel that they are

getting not only the best available sound, but also the best available finish and service. This all carries a premium, so if you are the kind of person who feels that paying nine grand for a preamplifier is outrageous then I suggest you turn away now and read no further. Personally I don’t get the bellyaching “it costs how much?” brigade – basically I think there’s a degree of jealousy involved. If you are the kind of person that appreciates that hand built, quality products, be they fine watches, bespoke tailoring or whatever, carry a premium then read on, for you are the kind of person for whom The Bespoke Audio Company exist.

Linette and I bang on a good deal about the “Christmas Morning” effect...that feeling when a product





# Some Follow

others

# Leedh!



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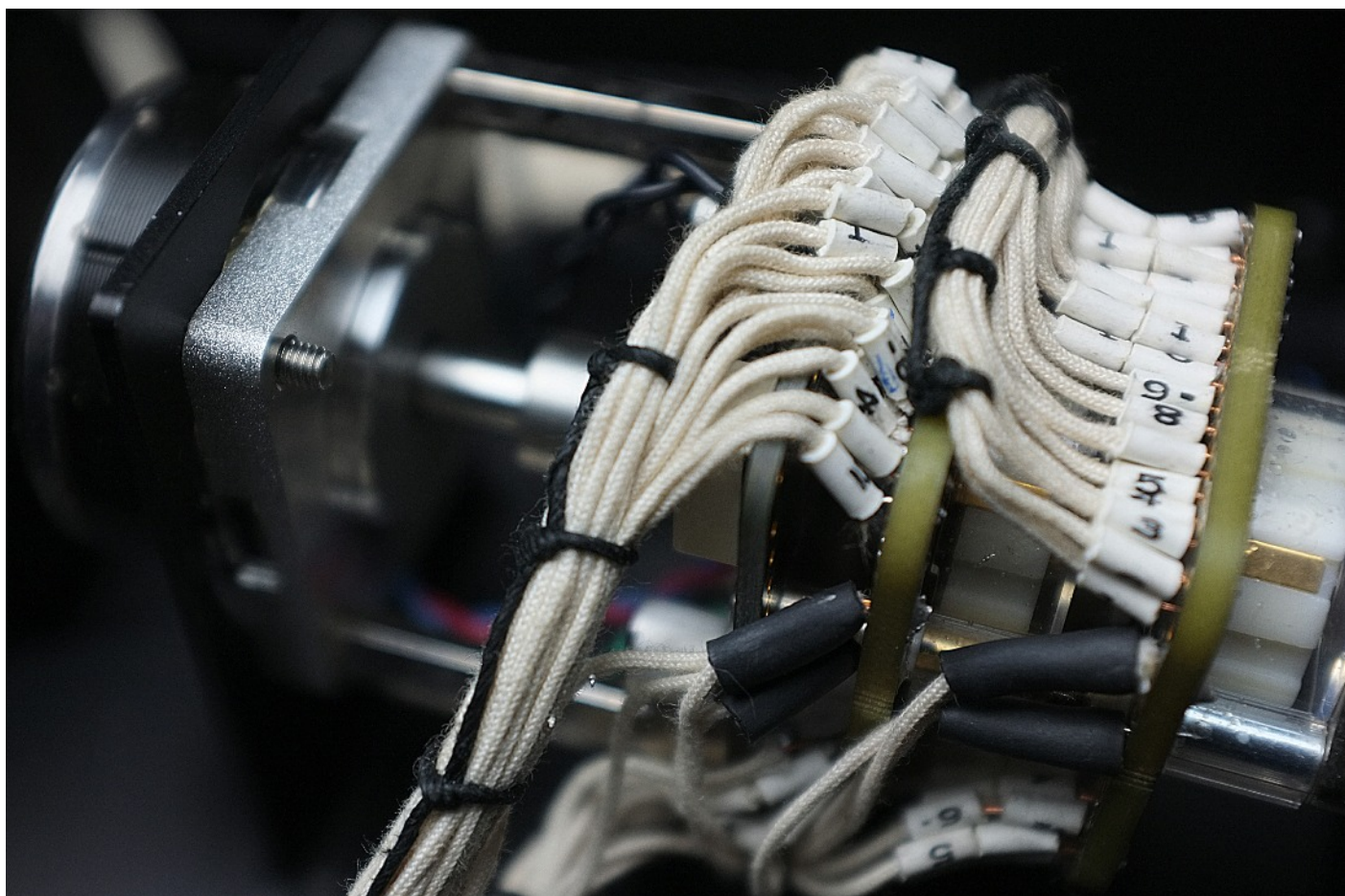
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# BESPOKE AUDIO Co PASSIVE PRE



arrives on your doorstep, the anticipation you feel and the delight you experience (or not) when you unpack the bit of kit you have spent your hard earned money on. Here Bespoke have got it right in my mind. The unit arrives in a well padded flight-case which you open to reveal the unit wrapped in Bespoke monogrammed paper. I think the industrial and functional nature of the flight-case is a little out of keeping with what is inside, but it does its job well in respect of protecting its precious cargo.

Lift the unit out the box and it is a weighty master-class in understated elegance – large volume control knob on the right and source selector on the left. Round the back you've got all the inputs and outputs and that's your lot. Well almost. I had an issue with an irritating buzz which through the 104dB sensitive Avantgarde Duos was a bit much and something I wasn't expecting. I tried everything - changed the cables, changed the source, changed the DAC, working it back and coming to the conclusion that it had to be the fault of the preamplifier. I called Harry at Bespoke and told him I was having issues and that it was definitely the fault of the pre. His response was a "Did you read the manual?" "Well of course not"

was my response. A couple of minutes later and a quick fiddle with two ground-lift switches on the underside of the pre and all was well. Not a peep other than a bit of valve whoosh from the DAC.

Let's take a look at the manual for a moment for it is little things like this that make owning a product like the Bespoke Audio preamp a bit of an experience. First of all the manual is a series of sheets of heavy-weight paper with the first sheet being in the form of a letter addressed to us by name...nice touch. Also in there is a specification sheet that tells us that this particular pre was built by Lucy Gastall and Harry O'Sullivan between 26th March and 22nd April 2015 and that it was retested on 22nd September 2015 before it was sent out to us... this is obviously a unit that is used for reviews etc. Also in the manual is a test report for the transformers and loads more techy stuff.

This particular unit came with three balanced XLR inputs, three unbalanced RCA inputs, one balanced XLR output and one unbalanced output...all stereo pairs obviously.



# BESPOKE AUDIO Co PASSIVE PRE

It was anodized black with chrome plated knob rings, inserts and trim rings and a black lid. Dimensions are 110 x 305 x 345mm (HWD) and it weighs a not inconsiderable 14Kg. Here the buyer has options too with details being available in Gold, Chrome or Black Nickel plate...you can even choose what to have the engraving around the input selector says, as each surround is engraved to order. You can have a choice of clear, black or champagne case and the lid can be anodized aluminium to match the case, clear Perspex or a variety of burr veneers. Speaking to Harry he suggests that they can do pretty much anything with him telling me the story of an American client who wanted a blue LED building into the volume knob so he could see where it was at from the listening position in his darkened listening room.

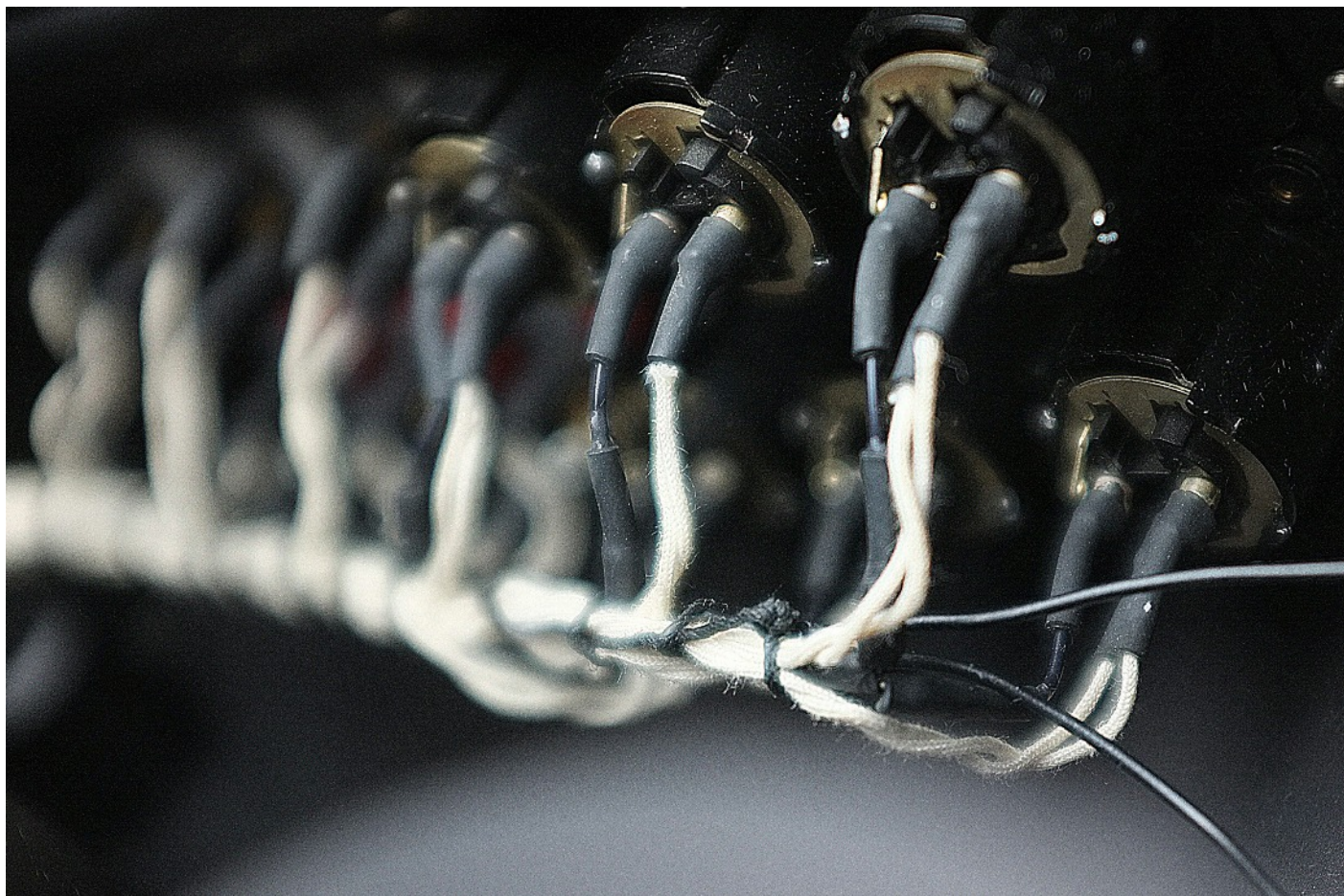
The build of the Bespoke Audio Preamplifier is without question of a very high standard indeed and is as you would expect.

Now this is a passive preamplifier and has no plug or power supply of any kind and uses transformers in its innards which Harry will explain in his Designer's Comments that follow this piece. I confess to having no idea and no interest in how things work and concern myself only with the end result and the

music that comes out of the speakers. I've been using an active valve pre for the last couple of years in the form of the Coffman Labs G-1A, but I have dabbled with a couple of passive designs in the past from NVA and Tisbury...both MUCH less costly than the Bespoke it has to be said. Personally I have found that I preferred the extra drive and oomph that an active design offers up to the final sound, perhaps at the cost of absolute clarity and fidelity, and so it was with a good deal of interest that I agreed to have a play with the Bespoke Audio pre.

The usual suspects form the reference system that the Bespoke slotted into and were as follows. The signals feeding the pre were from a Lampizator Big 7 DAC (with files from a dedicated laptop or CDs from a Musical Fidelity NuVista 3D) and then the pre outputs to the excellent Merrill Audio Thor monoblocs which in turn powered the Avantgarde Duo XD loudspeakers or Audio Physic Avanti IIIs. Analogue signals came from an Audio Technica OC9 cartridge in a Wand arm into Graham Slee Elevator/Reflex combo. Cables from Merrill Audio, Chord Company, Atlas, Vermouth Audio, Tellurium Q, Graham Slee and Melodika were used throughout.

## SOUND





# BESPOKE AUDIO Co PASSIVE PRE



Well, there's not really a great deal to say about the sound of the Bespoke Audio preamplifier as it seems to offer so little a sonic signature as to be pretty much transparent in my system. What I did notice is that bad recordings were highlighted as such, but feed it with the best signal (The Naxos, DSD release of Jazz At the Pawnshop is a case in point here) and you will be justly rewarded.

At no point did I feel I was missing out on the extra drive that I mentioned getting from active preamplifiers and the music bounded along as it should whatever source I used and whatever speakers (the Duos have active bass modules and hence using the more conventional Audio Physics).

The whole clarity and transparency of the listening experience with the Bespoke in place (and with good sources) leads to you listening to more of the "air" in a recording, particularly with acoustic (real) instru-

## The Bespoke adds little character of its own to the listening experience

ments... which as I have written it sounds a bit daft. What I'm trying to convey, perhaps badly, is that good recordings of real instruments just seem to open up and let you into the soundscape in a fashion I've not experienced on my system previously – if you have ever popped a pair of supertweeters into your system it's a similar kind of experience.

On rock, techno and more hard hitting music I again found I didn't feel I was missing out on any of the

"drive" of my active pre. Indeed, particularly with well recorded techno, I felt that extra lucidity in the mid and upper registers afforded by the Bespoke, allowed for a better spatial insight ... that is, a more three dimensional feeling to the stereo image. Again, I'm not conveying this in the best way, but one way to describe the feeling of this preamplifier is that you are more aware of things that are no longer present – a silence becomes silent. Driving bass notes lose none of their bounce and power on this kind of mu-

# BESPOKE AUDIO Co PASSIVE PRE

sic ... and this is genuinely where I thought I would prefer my current pre.

The Bespoke adds little character of its own to the listening experience and changing source to a lesser DAC (for example) becomes immediately apparent ...and here lies one of the issues inherent in a product like the Bespoke. It is just so revealing of what is before it in the chain that you need to ensure that your sources are the very best you can afford...or that you enjoy the most.

## CONCLUSION

I was a little apprehensive about testing out this preamplifier. First of all it is expensive and something of a luxury product in the truest sense of the word and, secondly, being passive I expected to miss the apparent drive my active pre adds to the game. I also thought that the Bespoke would lay bare my Class D Thor amplifiers as being clinical and lacking that bit of warmth my valve pre apparently adds. However, I was pleasantly (very pleasantly) surprised as to just how much I enjoyed my time with it. It is (cliché alert) an open window to the recording and the electronics you have in the system, allowing you to see and hear further into a recording than with my current reference, but at the same time it is not clinical or fatiguing in any way.

Inevitably, any review of the Bespoke Audio preamplifier is going to draw comparisons with the Music First Baby Reference (which I also have here for review), and sonically I have to say that it is pretty much impossible to distinguish the two. However, to judge the Bespoke Audio product purely on its sonic merits would be to miss the whole idea somewhat, as I believe prospective buyers of the two products fall into two distinct camps. In the Music First camp you have the audiophile looking for sonic excellence at a relatively affordable price, whilst in the Bespoke Audio glamping arena you have the well to do audiophile looking for sonic excellence, but also looking for that indefinable quality that owning a luxury product brings to the table.

Yes this is a pricey product and as such is never going to represent great value for money in the strictest sense, but people who buy it aren't going to be overly concerned over splashing the cash to get something that is hand built, beautifully presented and sounds ... well it sounds of very little to be honest.

I have no qualms in heartily recommending this unit.

**Build quality: 9.25**

**Sound quality: 9.0**

**Value for money: 8.0**

**Total: 8.75**

## Pros:

**Beautiful build and presentation**

**Bespoke to your needs with regards inputs and output configuration**

**Transparent and revealing**

## Cons:

**So transparent care needs to be taken with partnering equipment**

**Current remote is a bit "tagged on"**

**Price is currently beyond my means**

**Stuart Smith**

## Designer's Notes

### Why a passive pre-amplifier?

To be clear, our opinion on the merits of a passive pre-amplifier over an active design is only that: our opinion.

Modern sources have output levels which are more than capable of driving amplifiers to their maximum volume. So, a pre-amplifier is almost always used to reduce (or attenuate) the signal level. Since there is no need to increase gain, the active element of a pre-amplifier could be considered to be effectively redundant.

Unfortunately, even though they are redundant, the active electronics can cause problems:

- Active electronics introduce noise. This is often heard as a hiss when no music is playing, but it's also there when music is playing.
- Active electronics rely on the quality of their power supply. This can be a problem because good internal power supplies are expensive and difficult to make and because even the best power supply is reliant on the quality of the mains electricity feeding it, which is often far from perfect!
- Active electronics can cause distortions. "Distortion" doesn't always mean the sound of a fuzzy electric guitar. In this instance the term "distortion" is simply defined as changes between



# BESPOKE AUDIO Co PASSIVE PRE

the signal going into the pre-amplifier and the signal going out. Unless an active circuit is exceptionally well designed it is likely there will be some distortion, however small. In a good design, this distortion might be so small that it's nearly inaudible, but it is always there. And of course, not all designs are good!

Of course, in some circumstances, for some listeners, an active pre-amplifier is preferable. It might be that the active pre-amplifier adds something to the sound in a pleasing way. It might be that the active pre-amplifier's sound, when balanced with a particular sound elsewhere in the system results in a neutrality, or in a performance which the listener enjoys.

Our approach is that the loudspeakers should be suited to the room, the power amplifier should be capable of driving the loudspeakers and the pre-amplifier should be as transparent as possible. Any particular sonic signature the listener prefers should ideally come from the source or from the loudspeakers. The amplification chain should offer neutrality, otherwise there is potential for the system to operate as a kind of "see-saw" where each component's performance is dictated and affected by the others. This approach can, of course, result in excellent performance, but it can prove a problem when one or other part of the chain is changed.

## Why a transformer passive pre-amplifier?

One option is to simply remove the active element of a pre-amplifier and just use the volume control (either as a potentiometer or as a stepped resistive "ladder" attenuator) – called a resistive passive pre-amplifier.

This partially ameliorates the possible problems associated with active electronics (above), but there are some technical issues. Briefly, relying on only resistive attenuation can result in very poor impedance matching. This can lead to problems with high frequency response and may explain the common perception that passive pre-amplifiers lack "drive". In order to minimise this effect, it is necessary to use short interconnects, and to pay careful attention to the source and load impedances.

The results with resistive passives can be excellent, but the technical limitations can mean that compromises must be made elsewhere in the system (cable length and the specifications of other components), which might not be ideal.

Another solution is to use a transformer with a multi tapped secondary winding to allow it to step down the level in various increments – a Transformer Volume Control (TVC).

A good analogy here is with a car. Using a resistive passive is a little like putting the brakes on, it's inefficient. Using a transformer is like changing gears – the engine is always working at its optimum pace, we're simply using gears to adjust its pace to our own preference.

There are many other benefits to using a transformer, not least of which is the ability to convert balanced and unbalanced signals in either direction. There's also the ability to completely isolate/decouple the source and load (called Galvanic Isolation), to break ground loops and further minimise noise.

In simple terms, a transformer is made by forming a wire coil around a core. The wire itself is wound onto a bobbin and the core is inserted into the bobbin (and therefore the coil). In order that our transformer design would not be constrained by commercially available components, we designed our own bobbin. This means we have more space to experiment with winding design and we can use a larger core.

The transformer we finally chose to build had become too large to fit into readily available shielding cans so we had to have a tool made to manufacture our own Mu-Metal cans. Our helpful local electronics engineer explained that in his experience of repairing older equipment he'd found the petroleum wax used to pot transformers was corroding the lacquer on winding wire. Eventually, over an extended period, this caused transformers to fail completely, but he also speculated that before this total failure, there must also be a point where the transformer's performance will be impacted. For this reason, we chose to pot our transformers in beeswax.

We've taken the same care and applied the same meticulous attention to every aspect of our pre-amplifier, from the exquisite casework to the individually printed owner's manual. Finally, we strive for complete excellence in the supply and support of our product, from the first enquiry to the delivery of the hand made unit itself and beyond. Our products carry a lifetime guarantee, so it's not unreasonable to say the service lasts forever.

**Harry O'Sullivan**



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## KRALK AUDIO BC30 LOUDSPEAKERS & PAW STAND

**Kralk Audio is owned by Alan Clark and located in the Yorkshire town of Wakefield. Ian Ringstead takes a listen to the company's BC30 loudspeakers (£429) and matching PAW stand (£350).**

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**

# KRALK AUDIO BC30 LOUDSPEAKERS & PAW STAND

**A**lan Clark who owns Kralk Audio is a relative new comer to the quality hifi scene, but he has been a passionate audiophile since his youth. At the age of 12 he made his first speaker by putting some EMI 6x9 drive units inside a shoe box with rock wool nicked from his dad's loft and which he thought sounded great. From there Alan experimented and his music teacher at school showed him how to build simple crossovers to add multiple drive units enabling him to build better speakers.

The name Kralk comes from his school days when a friend used to turn people's names backwards and call them by their new name. So Kralk Audio was begun when in 2012 Alan was told by friends that the speakers he had been making for friends to use in studios were so good that he ought to make a business out of his hobby.

## CONSTRUCTION

The BC30's (Black Cat) were named after Alan was building a pair in his workshop and a black cat walked in curious to see him at work and so the name stuck. The 30 is from the fact the speakers are 30cm high. Essentially they are a classic small bookshelf design hand crafted and are finished in real wood veneers of which there are several options. They are felt lined for natural damping of the cabinet and Sonarflex acoustic foam padding is used. Drive units are a 130 mm bass mid doped paper cone which has a flat response. The tweeter is 25mm fluid cooled design with Alan's own 6mm solid aluminium face plate, which offers excellent dispersion and maintains cabinet rigidity through the 6 hole mounting to the front baffle. Each speaker has matched components and the crossovers are hand built using hand wound inductors and audiophile MKP capacitors whilst internal wiring is Van Damme. The back panel has a very smart aluminium terminal plate with very good quality gold plated binding posts.





# KRALK AUDIO BC30 LOUDSPEAKERS & PAW STAND



The grilles are black cloth covered frames that are slim and elegant with magnets built in to make attaching to the front baffle a cinch (*a nice touch I have seen in a few designs and far nicer than the usual peg and socket arrangement*). The front baffle comes in either a natural wood veneer finish matching the rest of the cabinet, or a smart black acrylic finish that I felt was quite eye catching.

## SOUND

Because the BC30 is an infinite baffle design and very compact it is meant to be positioned on a bookshelf or close to a wall to work optimally. I found it they were moved out into my room on the stands then the bass

**I would say that they are an essential add on if you buy a pair of BC30's and want the extra bass on offer.**

reinforcement was diminished and they then sounded bass light. In close proximity to a wall or on a shelf they sound great as they were designed to do. Alan was conscious though that not everyone had an ideal spot to place the BC30's in or they wished to have them further into their room on stands so he developed the PAW stand

(Passive Audio Woofer). Inside the PAW is the same 130mm bass driver which is on a 12db 200hz resin cast crossover, it's an equal part bandpass design with the drive unit firing downwards into a heavy damped foam and long fibre wool chamber, the top part is damped with foam and outputs through the 50mm port. The stands are 70cm tall and finished in black

## KRALK AUDIO BC30 LOUDSPEAKERS & PAW STAND

ash but any other veneer finish can be made to order to match the speakers or room furniture finish.

The PAW is an interesting concept and although not a new idea, it makes for a neat solution in order to add extra bass without having a separate active sub in your room taking up valuable space. As they are passive all you have to do is link the PAW's pair of terminals to the main speakers with the wire links provided and away you go. I have found in the past that subwoofers can be problematical, especially passive designs where you are totally reliant on them matching your main speakers perfectly. Gladly I was pleasantly surprised how well the PAW did match the BC30's and spent the vast majority of my reviewing time with them in use. They integrated very well with good control and didn't boom like a lot of subs can. I would say that they are an essential add on if you buy a pair of BC30's and want the extra bass on offer. It wasn't just more bass though that the PAW provided. Like all good subwoofer designs, if integrated properly they gel with the main speakers and add air and space to the sound field giving a far more believable sonic picture and focussing of the sound.

**There was a lovely 3D sound stage which made the speakers disappear and they could be driven hard without fear of blowing them up, unlike older designs I fondly remember back in the 80's.**

The sound quality of the BC30's is very natural and clear with great depth when there in the recording and the clarity is excellent. All types of music fared well from rock to classical, solo acoustic and vocal. There was a lovely 3D sound stage which made the speakers disappear and they could be driven hard without fear of blowing them up, unlike older designs I fondly remember back in the 80's. They are not power hungry and are sensitive at 90dB 1w. Low powered amps





# KRALK AUDIO BC30 LOUDSPEAKERS & PAW STAND

**So for £780 you get an excellent set up that won't dominate your room and will sound fabulous.**

can be used, whether valve or transistor. Dynamically they are very good for the size and didn't baulk at loud levels when pushed sensibly to test them out.

As they produce a very clear open sound they might take a bit of getting used to if you aren't familiar with that type of presentation. Personally I love an open sound as long as it is accurate and musical (*i.e. I can listen to it for hours without switching the system off*). This is what greeted me when I first heard the BC 30's at Whittlebury this year and made me want to review them. They are unlike any other small monitor I've heard from my long experience in the business and I recommend you don't try and compare them with old designs like LS 3/5 a's or Linn Kans which are classic designs from the 80's and have great attributes in their own rights, but are also unique and have their own fan base.

What I love about the BC30's is their honest approach to the sound which Alan has honed from many hours of experimentation in his workshop and listening room. He has lovingly created a cracking little speaker that is beautifully made by himself and utilised excellent drive units and components to produce a superb addition to the classic British mini speaker range. In a small room on shelves the BC30 will shine especially if, like me, you have a spare room where I do all my hobbies or you have a man cave to get away

from it all (*or your other half occasionally !!*). Used in a standard living room you will probably want the PAW stands for the added bass.

Now to price. The BC30's are £429 a pair in the standard range of finishes which are light oak, sapelle, walnut, black ash or cherry. As stated earlier, Alan can finish them in any veneer you wish such as bird's eye maple or piano finishes, but with a commensurate increase to cover additional costs. The PAW stand can also be finished in any finish to suit and cost £350 in black ash as standard with special finishes at an additional cost.

Frequency response: 20Hz to 200Hz , Rear ported (only on powered PAW)

Impedance: 8 ohms. Dimensions: 720mm x 280mm x 280mm (hwd)

Column size: 180mm x 180mm .Connectors: 2 high quality gold plated connectors with anti-shred washers.

The PAW can also be bought just as a stand without the bass units and are £150, so you can use them with other speakers such as Kralk Audio's DTLSP speakers which are a larger stand mount.

## CONCLUSION

So here we have a lovely little speaker that is easy to drive and has a very musical sound. You could try them on their own first if the budget is tight, but I really liked them with the PAW and feel the extra money is well spent.

So for £780 you get an excellent set up that won't dominate your room and will sound fabulous.

With the PAW you'll be amazed how deep they go for such a small design and they will go pretty loud. I have to say I was rather taken by the BC30's and for the money are well worth trying out. Alan will gladly let you call at his home to hear them in his extension or try them in your own home. Being made to order Alan keeps his costs down and sells direct to the public from his website which is very informative and a useful guide to his product range. Compared to like for like products these are a seriously good buy for less than £800 as a combination, or just a great book shelf speaker in a study.

## BC30's

**Sound Quality: 8.6/10**

**Build Quality: 8.6/10**



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# KRALK AUDIO BC30 LOUDSPEAKERS & PAW STAND

**Value for money: 8.7/10**

**BC30 With PAW Stand**

**Sound Quality: 8.8/10**

**Build Quality: 8.6/10**

**Value for money: 8.8/10**

## Pros

**Very well made neat design**

**Great value for money**

**Clear open sound that is detailed and lively**

**With the PAW added bass is very welcome when used out into the room**

## Cons

**Not everyone will like the openness of the sound if not matched with decent electronics and cabling**

**Bass freaks will want a bigger design altogether**

**Ian Ringstead**

## Designer's Comment

I make all the cabinets and crossovers myself in the workshop and assemble everything up, there is no workforce, just me and the wife Christine, she has the design eye and the typing skills.

The BC-30 design came about when a friend had asked me to make a small bookshelf speaker that would actually fit on a bookshelf without sounding "boomy" and coloured, as all the other speakers he had tried had suffered from this problem. The design brief was a speaker under a foot tall that still could do room filling sound from a bookshelf position. The BC-30 was born.

The BC stands for Battened Cabinet and the 30 is cm tall. For the bass driver I chose a 1.8kg 110mm Doped paper unit well known for being almost indestructible and a 25mm 160watt silk dome tweeter. The crossover is a 12dB Bessel design crossing over at 3khz, with an engineered presence peak at 1300hz to counteract the bookshelf positioning. The cabinet was originally made from 9mm birch ply, but was later changed to heavily damped 9mm MDF – I just found the ply too inconsistent to work with and it caused all sorts of problems. The speaker was a hit with my friend and others who heard it.

The BC-30 was launched at the Whittlebury Audio Show September 2013 and sold alongside our popular DTLPS-1 monitors. I kept the price as low as I could so everybody could enjoy the little speaker and it was an instant success packing out the room and getting a great reception on the show blogs. Over the coming years the speaker sold well and overtook sales of the DTLPS-1.

In 2014 I made a few changes to the crossover using even better quality Capacitors and this time I used hand wound air core inductors instead of the ferrite rod ones I used in the previous versions. I found every little tweak just made them sound better and better.

In 2014 the BC-30 was upgraded to Black Cat status and I upgraded the speaker with new terminals and now with a nice new Alloy terminal plate and black acrylic face plate to make the speaker look even better. I made a dedicated stand for the Black Cat for the 2015 show called the PAW (Passive Audio Woof-er) – the reasoning behind this was people were wanting to use them on stands into the room and the design simply didn't work in that situation as it needs the rear wall and the bookshelf to get the right bass extension from the tiny box. The PAW stand features the same bass driver as the speaker but mounted in an equal part ported band pass cabinet working below 200 Hz and it allows the Black Cats to come down off the bookshelf and play with the big boys. The stand worked really well and was a hit with the public at the show and I feel it has taken the little Black Cats to another level and given them a wider appeal to the buying public.

For the time being I think this version of the BC-30 will run for quite a while although I do have plans to make an over the top version with an external crossover like our DTLPS-1 Elite, but for now orders are coming in for them and I'm happy with the steady flow. I've tried over the years to get away from the LS3/5 look, but people still love that, so now I manufacture the Classic and the Face Lift versions of the Black Cats side by side to give more choice. With each pair being hand crafted from scratch it also make it easy for each individual pair to be customized to the customers' needs with regards to cabinet finish and colour...and all done for the same price, unless it's an exotic veneer finish and then I have to charge extra according to cost. And that's about it, thanks.

**Alan Clark**

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# OPHIDIAN MOJO LOUDSPEAKERS

**Ian Ringstead comes over a bit Austin Powers when he gives the British made Ophidian Mojo loudspeakers, which cost £995, a listen.**



**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**

**H**aving recently [reviewed the Minimos](#), the babies of the M series range I am now focussing my attention on the middle model, the Mojo. This differs from the Minimo in having two bass/mid units and the tweeters are offset in mirror image to allow positioning them either to the inside of the speaker or outside depending on taste.

The Mojo is a compact 2-way loudspeaker designed for use either as a stand mount speaker or alternatively wall mounted. Utilising dual mid-bass units in a close coupled array and the unique Aeroflex port system, it is capable of producing a truly room filling sound. Dual 3.5" bass/mid units utilise lightweight and stiff aluminium diaphragms, balanced neodym-

ium magnet motor systems and long throw rubber surrounds.

Aeroflex technology enables this highly compact speaker to produce deep and precisely controlled bass by keeping port velocity to a minimum and ensuring the drive units are properly supported throughout their stroke. By building the port systems directly into the cabinet structure the outer walls are braced and strengthened minimising panel resonances. High frequencies are produced by a 27mm tweeter with a Sonolux coated fabric diaphragm and low distortion neodymium motor system closely coupled between the bass/mid units

I won't go into the Aeroflex technology as I discussed this in the previous review other than to say it is used to great effect again to control the airflow

# OPHIDIAN MOJO LOUDSPEAKERS

inside the Mojo cabinet. Being a bigger cabinet and having an extra bass/mid unit means obviously more bass and so a greater room filling capability. At the Cranage show the Minimo's

worked better in the room used on the day but in my living room in much better surroundings the Mojo's showed their character to far better effect. It was a much punchier sound and although initially not as impressive as the Minimo's had been, over time they began to grow on me and my wife.

## SOUND

I experimented with the tweeters both inside and outside of the bass/mid units and although there was a slight difference I didn't have a particular preference. Others may prefer one position over the other, but like all components this is down to personal tastes. Although the sound wasn't as airy as the little Minimos, I would say it was more solid and cohesive, having fleshed out the sound. Gareth said he had to experiment with the crossover components and make it more complex in order to get the right sound balance due to the different cabinet interactions of the Mojo's.

The word Mojo originally means a charm or a spell. But now it's more commonly meaning is sex appeal... or talent. I remember seeing Austin Power's many years ago with Mike Myers playing a spoof on the James Bond character in the sixties. In the film he lost his Mojo briefly and so was desperate to regain it. The Ophidian Mojos certainly have talent and appeal and for their size are impressive. Again they can take power without sounding strained and

reproduce all types of music successfully, especially in the standard UK living room where space is at a premium. I listened to Capercaille's live album (a

current favourite) and was reward-

ed with the rich acoustic setting of the live venue. All the little clues were there in abundance to the live recording and there was a good sense of depth which aided the illusion of space in the arena.

I tried Ed Sheeran's latest album X which has some excellent songs on it and it was most enjoyable to hear this talented artist singing

about experiences I am sure

he has gone through, of angst and of

love.

A characteristic of all the M series speakers is that they don't sound flustered and get on with the job of reproducing music like an experienced professional. The Aeroflex technology really does pay off here and makes them work more easily with awkward rooms I reckon than a lot of other designs. I'd like to try some room acoustic treatments sometime to see how they affect my living room's sound such as bass traps or sound deadening panels (*Review on these coming soon – Ed*).

In contrast to the Minimo which had less airflow output from the rear port, the Mojos produce more airflow, so I wonder if this had an effect on its sound characteristic in my living room. I can't move the speakers too far forward into the room for practical reasons, so maybe some form of dampening behind them might alter the sound. Anyhow they still worked well in my room which is quite well damped, without being dead acoustically and there was plenty of headroom.

## CONCLUSION







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# OPHIDIAN MOJO LOUDSPEAKERS



people with a taste for heavier/bassier music, or a larger room that requires filling more easily than the Minimo could manage. Gareth James the designer has again done an admirable job of producing a great sounding, smaller speaker to suit most tastes. My wife and I both love the Mojos and Minimos and it would be a hard choice as to which one we would keep. They both have real plus points. I will be trying the largest model the Mambo at some point in the near future, which will be interesting to say the least. The extra bass and scale they can produce may tip the balance in their favour, or perhaps be too much for my room. Watch this space....

As I mentioned at the beginning of this review Austin Power's lost his Mojo for a while. Well having lived with the Ophidian Mojos for a couple of weeks I think Austin would have been pleased to say he had regained his. They certainly have appeal and a magic about them well worth seeking a dealer out for in order to audition them or the other models in the range.

As Austin Power's stock phrase in the films was "Yeh baby", these babies are too cute to ignore. You never know you might just regain your mojo.

**Build Quality: 8.5/10**

**Sound Quality: 9.0/10**

**Value for money: 8.8/10**

**Overall: 8.76/10**

The speakers I had were in the walnut veneer finish and were very well made and would suit a lot of homes aesthetically. I can see the Mojos appealing to

**Ian Ringstead**



# Paint It Black

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Tony Bolton



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A black Leema Xen nearfield monitor is mounted on a tall, thin black stand. The monitor features a large circular driver and two smaller tweeters. It is positioned in a room with a red wall and a textured stone wall. To the left of the stand is a tall plant with long, thin leaves, and to the right is a peace lily in a large, ornate ceramic pot. The floor is covered with a colorful, multi-colored checkered rug. The overall scene is a lifestyle shot for a product review.

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**

**The original Leema Xen was initially designed as a “cost no object” nearfield monitor for use in studios and the like, but then it was embraced somewhat by those in audiophile circles. Stuart Smith takes a listen to this diminutive £1295 loudspeaker that hails from Wales.**



# LEEMA ACOUSTICS XEN LOUDSPEAKERS

Each speaker is a tiny little thing measuring just 21cm x 14cm x 20cm (HWD) and has a volume of just five litres. There's a 10cm woofer and a soft dome tweeter coupled with a pair of front firing ports and the whole package looks tremendously well put together, feeling solid and weighty enough. The knock test suggests the cabs are far from absolutely dead and this is to be expected as they are thin walled, but they don't sound overly hollow, ringy or empty. The cabinet is made from 1.2mm steel sheet then lined with a bitumastic material and then lambs wool.

Down each side of the speaker is a large bolt in the cabinet which I assume is to add a degree of rigidity. Round the back you've got two pairs of speaker binding posts on a plate that covers the whole of the back of the speaker and this is bolted onto the main chassis. On this plate is also a frequency response graph showing that the little Xens roll off at 57 Hz (-3dB – (the website says -6dB)) and go all the way up to 25kHz. They are quoted as being 85dB efficient and have an impedance of 6 Ohms. The website says that the efficiency is "good" but you will need to have a power amp capable of delivering a decent amount of

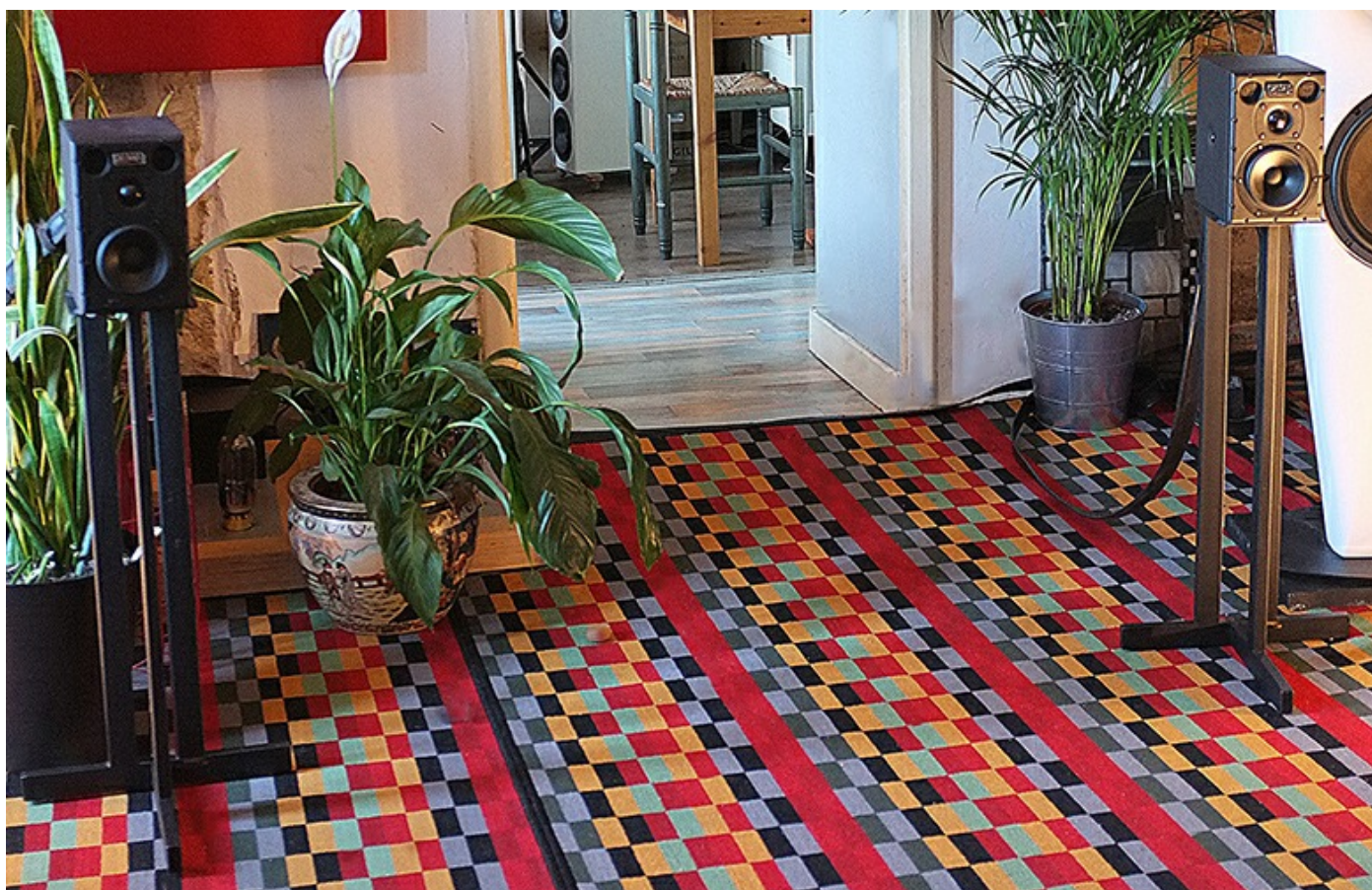
welly to the Xens to get them singing as they should...flea power valve amps need not apply.

## SOUND

They look pretty cool I reckon in a stealth-black kind of way and I had them perched on 70cm stands which brought the tweeter perfectly to ear height in my listening position...there are no grills supplied or available but I rarely use speakers with grills on anyway. I had the speakers in our large listening room and I genuinely thought they would be lost in this space, but I was very pleasantly surprised indeed. I had them 150cm apart, with me sat 170cm away bang in the middle, with them being well away from both rear and side walls...so sort of nearfieldish to mid-fieldish positioning.

Power was supplied by a pair of Merrill Thor Monoblocks fed with a signal direct from the Lampizator Big7 DAC. Speaker cables were from Tellurium Q Ultra Blacks on this occasion, with interconnects and power cables being a mix of Atlas, Vermouth and Chord Company.

As mentioned in the preamble, the Xens were originally designed for nearfield monitoring and I'm very familiar with this kind of speaker, having sat in front of them for years and years in studios. First impres-





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sions are that the Xens are typical of the very best of this kind of monitor, with them feeling accurate, balanced and composed. Of course they don't go super low, but you know what, you don't always miss trouser flapping bass when the mids are just so "right". I can see some people reading this and saying "Surely this isn't Stuart reviewing these, we all know he likes his bass strong and taut" but guess what, with the right kind of program you can get a good deal of enjoyment from these despite the lack of bass. Popping a bit of spoken word on the stereo is a good thing to do when testing speakers and I did this with the Xens where you get a pretty natural sounding voice, without a hint of nasality to it.

The Xens throw a huge stage and whilst they don't disappear (*I think that's a bit of a hifi cliché anyway*) the music does extend beyond the left and right of the speakers, with instruments remaining just where they should in the mix...again just what you would want from a loudspeaker designed for the studio. Imaging is great and you get a real feel for the mix...again just as you would expect! They throw a good image in three dimensions too.

One of the issues I often have with this kind of loudspeaker designed essentially (*or initially*) for pro use is that they can sound a bit boring and sterile, but the Xens just don't. Yes they feel accurate and what not, but you can actually listen to music on them...and enjoy it

a good deal into the bargain. They're not warm and cuddly though, something I hate in a speaker and which to me suggests that there is an over exaggeration in the lower-mid/upper-bass frequencies...nope these sound flat and truthful to the source material. I once had a bit of a discussion in the days before I learned to keep away from the dreaded beast that is hifi fora about loudspeakers being flat. Basically the





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chap I was discussing this suggested that if in room response was flat then the speakers were good. I disagreed and moaned about the crossover adding something to the mix that was audible. Well the Xens are pretty much flat and I don't reckon that the crossover is doing the majority of the work here...clever design, careful choice of drivers and a crossover that is sympathetic is how I would describe the Xens.

I said earlier that I fully expected the Xens to get totally lost in our listening room, and if you aren't sympathetic to their size they sort of can get lost, but set them up as I did (near/midfield) and you will be rewarded handsomely!! The average person buying the Xens isn't going to be placing them in a huge space anyway and in a normal sized sitting room they will be perfectly fine...and played loudly they are a right laugh and great fun. They certainly give you a great insight into the recording you are listening to (*as you'd expect*) but they aren't so over analytical as to be ruthless to the recording you are trying to enjoy, or give you so much information overload that you feel like you are listening out for errors in the recording, rather than sitting back and enjoying the music...this is a fine balancing act to do but the Xens pull it off with aplomb.

The speakers integrate all the frequencies really nicely and are evenhanded, with nothing jumping out and coming to the fore frequency-wise. Again, this is to be expected given they are monitors, if anything there is a little lift at the very top end, but this only serves as to add a little air, space and what not to the tunes. Box speakers are always coloured to a greater or lesser extent and of course there is colouration here too



(*show me a speaker that isn't*) but it's not huge and it's more than livable with.

I had a bit of a shuffle in my seating position away from the "hotspot" and found that I could still enjoy a very satisfactory stereo image anywhere on the couch and this means that you can sit and listen with your friends too should you be of that bent.

Of course I need to talk you through a few of the tunes I listened to on the Xens or this review would not be



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a complete review and so first up we have some jazz-funk/P funk in the guise of Mtume's "Kiss the World Goodbye". Here we have lovely crisp hats and that whole flying round your head feel to the top end, and vocals come across as being balanced and correct. Effects (*phaser surprise, surprise*) on Phase 1 (40 Seconds Dedicated To All Conga Players) sound like they should and when the next tune (*Day Of The Reggin*) comes in the Xens react quickly and spritely. I suppose this is one of the huge benefits of little, well designed loudspeakers like the Xens – they are fast, nimble and agile. On this kind of music I would have loved to have a bit more of that lovely tight bass (*the Xens don't do much below 60Hz*) and this got me thinking as to what these would sound like with a

really well integrated sub. Sadly I've not got a separate sub, BUT if you could have this pinpoint accuracy and speed of the Xens but with just that extra 20 or so Hertz further down the registers you'd be like the proverbial pig in muck and well pleased with yourself for being so clever and getting these speakers.

One of the highlights of the Xens for me was female vocals and on the same Mtume album and the track This Is Your World, the woman singer comes in and there's just none of that ear-cringing-"that's-bright" reaction that you can sometimes get with some loudspeakers just before the high note that you know is coming...a sort of "oh god this is gonna be horrible" feeling where you squint your eyes and pull your head in a bit...it just doesn't happen with the Xens at all

and they feel composed, unruffled and in control. This isn't to suggest that the Xens are overly polite or trying to hide things, it's just they don't screech and shout at you, if that makes sense.

## CONCLUSION

I really enjoyed these loudspeakers and I can heartily recommend that if you are in the market for a small pair of well made speakers then you should certainly have these on your short list. They cost £1295 which seems a lot for such a diminutive package, but the proof is in the pudding and all that and clearly there has been a lot of research and development that has gone into this cleverly designed loudspeaker. On top of that the Xens from Leema are very nicely made indeed and feel solid and sturdy. Appearance wise they look really cool and because of their size they should find favour in all but the pickiest of homeowners rooms.

Due to the forward firing port the Xens are easy to locate, with Leema suggesting they will be ok on bookshelves etc. I didn't try this as it just wasn't practical but I have no reason to doubt this given the ease with which I positioned them in our room.

Standout feature to the sonics of the Xens is the lovely even-natured mid-band that integrates beautifully with the





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upper registers. On the downside bass will be lacking for some, but to be fair to the Xens, in a normally proportioned space, anything lower than 50Hz or so will need taming with room treatment...something just not practical for most people. So here we have a compromise, but it is a sensible compromise that is well thought out and intelligent...don't have the frequencies there that are going to give you issues and you just won't have issues! Personally I think the Xens would benefit from an optional and matching sub to fill in the bottom end a little – built by Leema it would, I'm sure be perfectly integrated and a popular add on.

Yes, the Xens are going to struggle to an extent I huge spaces, but even here, if you set them up properly and position your listening chair midfield you should have little to moan about.

As always the question is always “Could I live with them” and the response here is a definite yes...with a caveat – I prefer my big horns and subs of course in our main listening space, but if I was to add a second system, say in the bedroom or in our television/lounge area which is more of a normal size, then I'd snap these up in an instant. In fact I did snap them up and I'll be using them as our reference for mid priced kit reviews.

**Sound Quality: 8.85/10**

**Build Quality: 8.75/10**

**Value for money: 8.65/10**

**Overall: 8.75/10**

**Pros:**

**Beautifully balanced yet revealing**

**Easy to position**

**Solid build and decent finish**

**Fast and responsive**

**Cons:**

**Bass will be lacking for some**

**Stuart Smith**

## Designer's Comment

Both Mallory and I were very early adopters of surround sound at home, way before Dolby stereo decoders for home use were widely available....I was after all a TV and Cinema sound mixer in my proper job.

I purchased a very expensive VHS machine which featured Nicam...and more importantly.....adjustable tracking.....in the late eighties...it cost about £1000...sounds like a lot of money now, but in 1985 I bought my first flat...in Earls Court London...for £25,000 (probably worth about a million now....oh the joys of separation :-) So back then it was the price of a decent car.

The important thing is that I could access the HiFi track encoded in the picture and adjust the tracking to get rid of the horrible chopping sound that resulted from poor line up.

The HiFi track on pre-recorded VHS tapes was usually encoded in Dolby Stereo (a two channel phase encoded surround system).

Dolby stereo is loosely based on the Hafler principle so I wired my living room system with a stereo amplifier and four speakers connected in a Hafler network (see below from Everyday Electronics 1975).

This worked spectacularly well

No discrete centre, but with a decent set of speakers, the phantom centre image was more than adequate.

I used this system for quite a while, but then two things happened which forced me to change:-

1. I got married.
2. I suddenly noticed three little girls running around the house who all insisted on calling me daddy! ...don't remember ordering them but there you are.

Now I should explain that the front speakers were a pair of transmission line four way monitors that my Father and I built in the 70's from an article in HiFi answers magazine...only my father made them bigger because he said “they” had got the maths wrong for the line! May seem a funny thing to say but my father turned down Mensa membership because they were “all too stupid”. He was probably right.

Consequently they sounded great but were less than domestically friendly...about 6 feet tall, 18 inches wide and 2 feet deep....solid mahogany...they are probably living on as someone's dining table even now.

Following some fairly exhaustive discussions with the current Mrs T, we decided (*Ahem....the Royal we*) to downsize the speakers so she could actually get some furniture in.

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So... what to use instead...despite what you may have heard, the mid to late nineties were not a great period for loudspeakers....if you wanted something neutral and monitor like.

Mallory and I decided the only thing to do was build our own...and just to make it “interesting” the new speaker would have a maximum volume of 5 litres, thin wall cabinet construction and would comply with BBC grade 2 monitor spec (*plus or minus 2dB max with limited low frequency capability*). Sounds quite straightforward but it proved to be anything but.

We really wanted the new speaker to work on its own, with sufficient bass output to make the use of a sub-woofer optional.

The thing is that most loudspeaker drive units want lots of volume to make bass. The technical parameters for small box driver units are very specific and hard to achieve.

We originally designed the Xen (*as it came to be known*) as an isobaric using two Audax paper drivers...which they handily discontinued just as we were going to make the first set!

So the search was on for a replacement...we tried dozens, if not hundreds of drive units from many manufacturers and most simply did not perform correctly....in fact we ended up writing a suite of software tools ourselves to aid in the design because most of the information out there was too coarse, with significant rounding errors, in fact it made it very clear that much commercial loudspeaker design at that time was a combination of maths and “suck it and see”.

The only company that understood what we were trying to do were Seas in Norway, who came to the rescue with a terrific driver...perfect parameters, good linear cone excursion, excellent power handling and....very important in those pre-flat screen times...they could make it magnetically screened!

So the Xen was completely redesigned around the new driver.

The Seas drive unit had a resonant frequency of 57Hz which is very low for a four inch diameter unit. This made the ports difficult to squeeze in to the box because they are 10 inches long....bigger than the longest dimension of the cabinet. So they had to be made with a bend part way down.

Two ports were used to avoid port noise. It is important to keep the velocity of the column of air in the port below 0.1 mach (*the speed of sound*) otherwise it behaves as a solid and generates noise of its own...usually heard as chuffing or distortion.

Also, inadequate porting leads to compression because too much friction is produced so the air cannot move easily.

The cabinet is formed from 1.2mm steel sheet then lined with a bitumastic material from the automotive industry to damp resonance.

The cabinet is then lined with sheep’s wool. We tried all the artificial alternatives but none worked as well as sheep’s wool. Ironically, despite the fact I stare out of my office window at fields full of Wales’s finest sheep, we had to import it from Germany.

The tweeter is a very sweet soft dome with Ferrofluid damping and a Neodimium magnet.

The crossover design is somewhat over engineered...but the Xens were designed as a pro monitor and high power handling and no power compression in the crossover is an absolute requirement, so it’s air cored inductors and large ceramic power resistors all the way.

So, in what way is the new Xen different to the old Xen?

Well the simple answer is “not a lot”.

Sadly, Seas had discontinued production of the original bass driver so we had to design our own replacement...which gave us an opportunity to engineer out a slight midrange hump in the original design, making the presentation of the new Xen a little more neutral and easy to listen too...otherwise, the new Xen has all the attributes of the old...including the 14 bolts on the front holding the baffle on...The Xen was never designed to have a grill and attracted a fair bit of criticism in its early days...but somehow, a more industrial approach to design seems to be more acceptable now...or maybe we have all just got used to the look

So what started out as a project to maintain domestic harmony ended up as one of the last truly British HiFi companies, making several ranges of electronics, speakers, cables etc.

**Lee Taylor**





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# MELODIKA PURPLE RAIN SPEAKER CABLES



**Dominic Marsh plugs in the Purple Rain series of speaker cables from Polish manufacturer Melodika (€71.00 for 2.5m pair).**



**H**ere we have you another cable maker emerging from our Polish cousins in the shape of Melodika, founded in the year 2010. Unlike most others though, they not only sell you the finished product, they will also sell you cable off the reel and the plugs to go with it, so the budget conscious audiophiles that can wield a soldering iron can build their own cables and save some cash. Melodika also have a small speaker range in their catalogue consisting of 2 floor standing models, 2 stand mount models, a subwoofer and a “dual mode” surround speaker. I notice the driver arrays for these speakers look remarkably similar to those found in the early Roth Audio models sold here in the UK.

The cables are manufactured in Poland by one of their largest cable manufacturers to Melodika’s exacting specifications. The majority of their products seem to be centred around this “Purple Rain” design in various gauges and configurations for producing interconnects (*analogue and digital*), loudspeaker cables and power cords and also various AV connections.

## CONSTRUCTION

The pair of speaker cables provided for the review were 2.5 metres in length, fitted with gold plated “Z” type 4mm banana plugs. The model designation (*All their cables have one for precise ordering*) is MDSC4025 priced at €71.00, although that price varies depending upon the country where the purchaser resides.

Metallurgy of the Purple Rain series is Oxygen Free Copper (*OFC*) of 99.99% purity so their website informs me and, unusually, more than one diameter of wire is utilised with 110 strands of 0.15mm and 1 x 0.85mm, presumably to utilise the best sound attributes of both gauges as gauge thickness also has an effect on sound quality. Insulation is by way of 2 layers of PVC sleeving, giving it a tough outer coat to enable the cable to be used in professional installations where the cables are likely to be buried in walls or under floorboards. The colour of the outer sleeve is commensurate with its name of course, being a nice shade of purple which either pleases or not, according to personal taste.



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Outside diameter is around 11mm and internal construction is by twisted pair cores bound inside a single sheath, bifurcated at each end of the cables into two short tails of around 7cm with a rubberoid 'boot' at the junction.

## SOUND QUALITY

Fresh out of the pack-sounded rather thin in and that seemed to onto the treble reg-glossy polish to ter of only a few filled out in the was less prominent cause of that transi-advise letting them while before the first sion. Once that initial completed they sound-balanced, so I began my ing sessions with these cables.

Considering their relatively modest cost, there wasn't any aspect of their performance that I could throw any real criticism at. Sure, they couldn't quite render the high treble registers as other more expensive cable confections can muster and I wouldn't expect that level of performance from the Melodikas anyway, but nonetheless what treble was there was clean, insightful and free of any hash. Midband was uncoloured and also very clean, much to my surprise as that is one area that inexpensive cables seem to fall down on, with congestion and fog hanging over the sound, but not so at all with these Melodika Purple Rain cables, they were refreshingly clean and articulate. Bass was taut and controlled rather than full bodied and fleshed out down in the lowest of bass registers and I'm pleased to report that I heard no boom or overhang either.

I played Fink's "Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet" live album and noted that the venue ambiances for each track should all sound different because they were each recorded at different locations, but the Melodika Purple Rains couldn't quite capture that particular distinguishing essence from this album, as although I could hear the venue ambience as a whole on the album, the individuality of the various ambiances was

aging they the bass registers throw a spotlight isters which had a them. Within a mat-hours though they bass and the treble from then on be-tion, so I would run in for a listening ses-burn in was ed well listen-

**Considering their relatively modest cost, there wasn't any aspect of their performance that I could throw any real criticism at.**

lost. Let me say that too is no criticism of their performance, as the cables that can capture and fully recreate that trait cost some 15 times more than the Melodikas. In the track called "Sort of Revolution" we can hear the drummer driving down hard with his Floor Tom strikes which does reverberate powerfully around my listening room and really does show up any loose or flabby bass immediately when it occurs. The drive and impact of those drum hits were delivered with enough weight, although that anticipated resounding energy I expected was a tad diluted and less powerful than more expensive cables can deliver. Still a credible and noteworthy performance from what is after all classed as a 'budget' level cable.

Next to be played was Roger Waters "In The Flesh" CD which again is

also a live re-cording. I love this album as the recording is full of tonal richness and coupled with great musicianship thrown in for good measure. One of my favourite tracks is called "Perfect Sense" which by the way is the track Sony chose to include on their SACD only demonstration CD to showcase the format and rightly deserved to be included too I say, as the tonal colours are simply superb to listen to. The Melodika cables left nothing at all out of this CD and there are a lot more instruments hiding in there than a first hearing would lead you to believe, so listen



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# MELODIKA PURPLE RAIN SPEAKER CABLES

carefully. In “Perfect Sense” for example there is several background noises running concurrently; caderas and what sounds like heavy breathing, hi-hat cymbals and other weird noises, plus cat calls and whistles from the audience too and any cable that cannot give those will displease me.

## CONCLUSION

So what conclusions can we draw from this review? Firstly, I like them, not for what they can’t do, but for what they can do. They do not offend in any way, so top marks on that score. Next, they have a clear and lucid mid-band and that area of the sound more than any other will come to the fore with inexpensive cables, but not with the Melodika Purple Rain.

Free of fog or congestion, they compliment female vocals well and demonstrate how you can find rich timbres in the female voice. Bass, while not plumb-ing the lowest registers managed to stay controlled and taut. Treble didn’t climb to the topmost rungs of the treble registers either, but in some systems that could be a blessing in disguise. Note I didn’t write

the words “rolled off” because that would suggest the treble tapered off quite early up the scale, but that was not the case as they could recreate cymbals and triangle very accurately with no bloom or sheen.

In short then, the Melodika Purple Rain speaker cables managed to tick an awful lot of boxes along the way with me and when you also take into account the relatively modest cost, plus you can buy the same cable un-terminated form to build your own, makes it rather a worthy candidate to be included in any shortlist within that same price range.

**Build quality: 7.7/10**

**Sound quality: 8.7/10**

**Value for money: 8.9/10**

**Overall: 8.4/10**

**For:** A good sounding budget cable that has no real vices to mention. Available un-terminated for DIYers

**Against:** Colour won’t appeal to some tastes.

**Dominic Marsh**

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# RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY  
JANINE ELLIOT



If I had to select one item I have in my collection from the past century that made the earliest and biggest impact in the hifi industry 50 years later, it would have to be my Leak Stereo 20 and matching preamp. I still love the sound, though have considerably modified it, whilst leaving its beautiful capacitor cases intact.

Introduced in April 1958 at the Audio Fair in London, just weeks after the first stereo LP hit the platter, it originally appeared in Champagne Gold, which soon changed to Gold Bronze, the colour of mine, and later in 1964 a boring dark grey colour. The original price of 29 guineas plus a further 20 for the partnering Point One stereo preamp, was quite a hefty outlay when the average monthly salary was only four pounds more. The history of Harold Leak's company, H.J. Leak & Co. Ltd, from its original offices in 470 Uxbridge Road, London, W12, is quite a major one in terms of audio. Leak revolutionised the performance standards of amplifiers way back in June 1945, when, as a result of his research, he transformed amplifier distortion down from an average of 3-4% to an un-

## Janine Elliot takes a step down memory lane with the much loved Leak Stereo 20 power amplifier.

precedented 0.1%. Consequently all his products were labelled Point One. His world-beating amplifier designs gave Leak a worldwide reputation.

The Leak Stereo 20 is therefore actually called the "Point One Stereo 20" denoting the fact that as well as the 0.1% harmonic distortion, 20 watts is had by both channels (10 + 10 Watts). It carries on from the slightly earlier and similar design TL12 Plus (1957), having identical output stages, with EL84's, though using two ECC83's instead of EF86 and ECC81 in the driver stage of the design. The GZ34 rectifier is used in both designs. The much earlier original TL12 from 1949 had much bigger bottle valves, and this model was highly successful, with

sales to the BBC, Swiss Broadcasting Corporation and the Italian Broadcasting Corporation. Over 2000 units were sold to America in the first 5 months, an enviable reputation from a fledgling British company. What really made the Stereo 20 amplifier special for me was the clever safety design built in to protect it from overloading. A 100Ω/3W resistor is soldered upside down at the front of the unit, and bearing in mind that with the amplifier operating normally (ie, capacitors and valves in good condition), this resistor dissipates two-and-a-half watts and therefore runs pretty hot. If a coupling capacitor fails and it then puts a positive voltage onto the control grid of the output valve, it will pass more current and may eventually

go virtual short circuit. This means the resistor will get extremely hot and will de-solder itself from the connector and drops off, protecting the transformers. I was given a faulty Leak Stereo 20, which had quite simply protected itself at some point, so all I needed to do was re-solder it back and start listening! So, if you get offered a faulty Leak, check this safety point. I changed all the capacitors and valves on my Leak, and only needed to change some of the resistors and clean the joints on my Varislope preamp to get the pair working again in harmony.



And sound good it certainly does, with a typical bass and treble warmth and roll off typical of valve amplifiers from this period, though it has a great mid-band making for great vocals and strings. The quoted frequency response is 20-20,000Hz $\pm$ 0.5dB, so it is still very acceptable. The pre-amp is the weakest link, though has a considerable number of listening options and settings in the VariSlope Stereo version from 1960, similar to the original Point One from 1958. Despite a 0.01% total harmonic distortion and three input sensitivities its output S/N ratio was 52dB for moving magnet phono and only 60dB for line (compared with 80dB for the Stereo 20 power-amp). The Leak Varislope pre-amplifiers (they started in 1952 in mono form) were designed to slope the high frequency output to enable the high-frequen-

cy distortion from inadequate disc reproduction of the day to be filtered out - with minimal effect on the audio signal itself. Like other Leak pre-amps, and most audio of its day, it was designed to be mounted in a timber cabinet, and all looked magnificent and quite modern even today, certainly in the gold bronze, flat fronted models. Indeed, the earlier incarnations looked more modern than the later "Varislope Stereo" (1960) in its curved burgundy red and gold 'plasticky' front. Just as early cars were bought in basic form and you sent it to a coach builder to make the bodywork and seats, so early hifi was often bought in the "nude" for you to make the cabinets. As well as a number of versions appearing of this preamplifier, so did later models of the power amp. As the "20" went to production, a "50" appeared with 25 Watts per channel and in 1964 the "60" with its 30 Watts per channel (both with EL34's instead of EL84's output valves). Neither of these models was as iconic as the 20.

In 1963 Harold Leak moved to integrated amplifiers with the transistor Stereo 30, and in 1968 with the Stereo 70 with yes you guessed, 35 Watts per channel. Both failed as products and proved to Harold that Valve worked best. In common with even his earlier TL12, TL25 and TL50 mono amplifier, the bigger output they offered, the worse the sound. Therefore the best models to buy would be the stereo 20 followed by the TL12.

Back to the Stereo 20, I use mine with the minimalist Meridian 101 preamplifier, a combination that today would easily pass as a £1000 offering, and the much higher output from the 101 does not give the Stereo 20 any problems; the 10 Watts per channel is no slouch up against my Krell 250W goliaths. The original Varislope and Point One preamps were designed for tape outputs, and not modern-day digital players, and so they are very low level, and the sound quality does not match that of the power-amp.



# RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO...BY JANINE ELLIOT

Would I recommend you finding a Leak on eBay? Of course I would, and if you could find the earliest champagne gold version, then snap it up whatever the condition, as they are very rare objects. With all models, check the underside for large amounts of wax which may have run out of the transformer if it's been overheating. The mains transformer, as I mentioned earlier, can be problematic, though the safety resistor should have done its job well. Like all old things, they start to leak and so the capacitors will most definitely need changing, but whatever you do, don't disassemble the two original "can" electrolytic capacitors visible in line with the valves, as the Stereo 20 won't look the job anymore, and certainly not be worth as much. What I did originally was disconnect them and use tiny switch-mode power supply capacitors (47uF, 400V) which I strapped onto the underside of the original valves. Whilst this doesn't look very nice, it is underneath so only flies and spiders would see it anyway. I have now modded my Leak even further to set it to the next level.

To the sound, whilst slow and imprecise by today's standard, is very musical and therefore enjoyable, particularly on vocal and orchestral music. It even tries its best on pop and passes quite admirably, though if it had its own mind of 1958 I wonder what it would think of it all. The Stereo 20 was the pinnacle of Harold Leak's work, and luckily still keep his reputation sound (sic) today. I remember his later products, such as the Sandwich speakers and the time delay compensated 3050's speakers sitting in Lasky's in Tottenham Road, London, and whilst

## Amplifiers that are acclaimed throughout the world



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F.R.S.A., Assoc. I.E.E.,  
M.Brit. I.R.E., F.T.S.

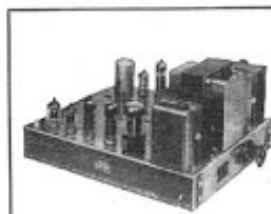
The "Point One Stereo" pre-amplifier is designed so that it can be used with any Leak monaural power amplifier or a combination of any two Leak monaural power amplifiers additionally to its more normal use with the "Stereo 20" or "Stereo 30."

"The 'Point One Stereo' pre-amplifier is probably the most comprehensive unit in existence covering every refinement for stereo tape, disc and radio plus monaural amplification for any form of input signal... it is difficult to think of any additional requirement that one would ever wish. The equipment performs with the high performance always associated with the tradition of Leak equipment. It is a fine example of design and construction, and the pre-amplifier can be used with any other Leak main amplifiers. How the pre-amplifier can be sold for as little as £21 can be answered only by Harold Leak... Summing up, therefore, one can highly recommend the Leak stereo system for use with any current monaural or stereo input whether it be from pickup, tape, radio or microphone."

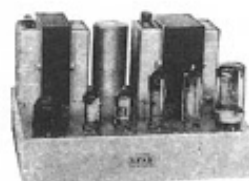
Extract from Test Report by J. C. G. Gilbert reprinted from the Music Trades Review, February, 1959 and in our advertisement in October's "Wireless World". The full two-page Test Report and an illustrated brochure on the amplifiers will be sent to you on request.



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these were iconic inventions, are not the first thing you think of when you mention his name. Leak was a great name, and if only someone would revive the brand again, just as they have iconic cars such as Mini, Fiat 500 and VW Beetle, I wonder what it would sound and look like. Not that this hasn't been done before. Audio Innovations begat Audion and AudioNote of Japan, as have many other manufacturers rebranded or bought into old names. Some man-

ufacturers like Transcriptors claim to have re-appeared again, and of course some present-day manufacturers have even re-released old models, like Quad II, and even famous Musical Fidelity A1 integrated amplifier of the 1984 was reborn by them twenty years later. Best, perhaps, that we just add some TLC on the original TL and Stereo 20 and just bring them back to life again in our own homes by ourselves.

Janine Elliot



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# THE VOICE OF DOM!



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

**A**nd now for the final part of my musings on upgrade or after-market mains power cables. I am trying very hard to keep it simple for those folks who have no electrical or electronics knowledge, who can hopefully get their head around such complexities without being bamboozled by technicalities.

**SAFETY WARNING: Hifi Pig does not advocate anyone making ANY unauthorized or unsafe changes to their mains supply or equipment in ANY way. Always consult a professional and qualified electrician. Be safe out there in audiophile-land folks.**

Based purely on my experience and observations, aftermarket power cords seem to be least effective with switch mode power supplies and that is because they lack large reservoir and smoothing capacitors and I believe I may know the reason why. With conventional linear power supplies as in transformer, rectifier(s) reservoir and smoothing capacitor(s) circuits, power demand is usually met by the energy stored in the

**Dominic Marsh concludes his three part series on mains cables. YOU can read [Part 1 here](#) and [Part 2 here](#).**

reservoir capacitors provided the demand is of short duration and of low demand current draw. However, when current demand is high the capacitors are supplying the required energy for short durations, but they are unable to discharge and charge at the same time – they can only perform one function at a time. The power amplifier section will still draw more power even though the energy is being drained from the reservoir capacitor, but where will the amplifier get it from? Good question.

In acute situations, the amplifier will “clip”, that is run out of available power for the amplifier section and that is clearly audible to anyone that’s heard it as it is a rather memorable sound. High-ish

but lesser power demands below that clipping threshold could result in an increase in distortion, but what if the power supply is only slightly lagging behind the power amplifier’s power demands? I believe that is where bass boom artifacts arise, which then can lead to a “loud” or “shouty” kind of sound, which then leads on to clipping as power availability from the supply diminishes and a poorly rated power cord that cannot keep up with the power supply’s demands either simply exacerbates that.

A switch mode power supply on the other hand regulates voltage by switching on and off rapidly and curtailing the “on” time of the electronic switch when controlling an AC waveform derived from a



high frequency oscillation circuit from a frequency generator in the power supply module, usually at a frequency well above human hearing capability. So, instead of adjusting the power output up and down in a linear fashion from a Direct Current source (hence why it's called a "linear" power supply) the switch mode power supply effectively chops up an AC waveform into "lumps" of energy which is then smoothed in a capacitor to provide a constant DC current source that the amplifier requires. The power adjustment comes from varying the amount of time the switch (Usually a transistor and sometimes known as the "chopper" transistor) is allowed to conduct in the 'on' position, so the longer it is conducting the more energy is produced and stored in a capacitor and reducing the 'on' time of the switch com-

mensurately reduces the energy output. The major benefit of this design is that it is more efficient, produces less heat from the energy saving and less costly to produce too, even though some switch mode power supply PCB's are well populated with many discrete components. Yes there are generally some transformers in their design but they are minute compared to the ones found in linear power supplies.

A good indicator of power supply capabilities can be found in the quoted specifications for an amplifier fed into an 8 Ohm load and a 4 Ohm load. If the figure given for a 4 Ohm load is double that for an 8 Ohm load, then the power supply has been designed with plenty of reserve power and any figure less than double, should be viewed very cautiously as that power supply isn't a very capable perform-

er. So if the specification sheet says "100 watts into 8 Ohms, 200 watts into 4 Ohms", that is a good indicator, whereas "100 watts into 8 Ohms, 125 watts into 4 Ohms" tells you then that the power supply should be regarded as inadequate. Even though pre amplifiers, CD players, streamers and DACs etc., all benefit from an upgrade power cord, the effect seems to be less dramatic than with an integrated or power amplifier. The one component where it has had no effect at all is turntables.

"What's that got to do with an aftermarket power cord?" I hear you ask. On its own very little actually, but in the context of the entire chain between wall power socket and speaker cones it is an essential link component in that total chain and any weakness here will be reflected right through to the speak-



## THE VOICE OF DOM!

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

**Over the years I have probably heard all the inane arguments about kettles boiling faster from an aftermarket power cord (*Has anyone actually created or carried out such a test? I doubt it*), their vacuum cleaner cleans better, blah, blah, blah, but it has been reported many times that televisions will also benefit from an aftermarket power cord upgrade with more vivid colours, better contrast, less on screen noise/speckles and better sound quality too.**

ers. I explained this in Part One of this blog the reasons why an aftermarket power cord can, in my opinion, have a profound effect on sound quality and I am trying to mesh that knowledge in with the explanations given in this part.

Over the years I have probably heard all the inane arguments about kettles boiling faster from an aftermarket power cord (*Has anyone actually created or carried out such a test? I doubt it*), their vacuum cleaner cleans better, blah, blah, blah, but it has been reported many times that televisions will also benefit from an aftermarket power cord upgrade with more vivid colours, better contrast, less on screen noise/speckles and better

sound quality too. I really must get around to trying this one day.

Copper, yes, silver, yes, but what about other metals? I have experimented with aluminium wire, gold wire, platinum wire, carbon, steel wire and unobtainium wire, which all sounded completely different, but that was used in constructing interconnects and speaker cables, which I may cover if readers wish me to do so. With regards to mains cables however, I have only heard differences in silver and copper cables, the former significantly reducing hiss, while the latter seemed to 'slow' the sound down slightly, which was only noticed during direct comparison between copper and silver cables, the effect was only slight may I add,

so those of you with copper cables can still sleep soundly at night and heavy gauges of copper wire should trouble you even less.

So there you have it, my take on the why's and wherefore's of aftermarket upgrade mains cables. You may not agree and that bothers me not one bit if you do, as it's not meant to be the definitive answer to the age old debate over cables. It's the only way I keep myself grounded on why I have spent quite a tidy sum on the cabling in my own system, so if it does likewise for you too then it has been worthwhile. I fall back on this because I don't subscribe to the notion that any cable only has the three basic parameters of resistance, inductance and capacitance. No sir. To me those measurements are rather primitive and two dimensional at best, plus when there are still debates about which direction electricity flows in and how lightning is created still to this day remains a complete mystery to even the most eminent scientists, then my entirely subjective version still holds true with me. The objectivists also said that the human ear wasn't sensitive enough to detect changes in sound levels below 3db, yet a Spanish blind testing panel a few years ago noted that changes down to 0.1db could be heard by the listening panel, so that's another misconception blown out of the water.

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**Dominic Marsh**

# FIDELITY MATTERS

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



**F**or sometime now I have been pondering the state of the hifi industry and where it stands today. When I first started in the business in 1980 everything was rosy and the hifi business was booming. The Linn LP12 was the new king on the block and was changing our thinking of how we listened to music and the importance of source components. Many new companies were emerging along with the old hands of Quad etc. and hifi was exciting. Everyone wanted a decent separates system or at the very least a midi or mini system and if you ever asked anyone back then what was in their list of top ten wants, hifi would be high on that list.

Move on 35 years and the climate is very different. Now a decent hifi doesn't even register on the list of wants and when I talk about it to colleagues at work or my friends I generally get a shrug of the shoulders or how much!! Youngsters just don't dig hifi or even realise what decent separates can sound like. The way people in general listen to music now is very

**Ian Ringstead takes a look at the state of the hifi industry and asks what we can all do to boost the popularity of two channel audio in the home.**

different. When I was younger I couldn't wait to get home from work and spend all evening listening to my hifi in my bedroom (pity my parents and neighbours). Even now that I am married and 35 years older I still love to listen to my system when possible and regularly buy new music on cd or records. Youngsters in particular don't follow this pattern. They want instant music on their mobile phones and are happy to download poor quality mp3 files preferably for free if possible and listen on in ear headphones or through the

speaker walking along in the street.

I see this every day at work or on my way home especially on public transport. Now that's fair enough, especially if they used hi resolution players, but most don't. The mobile phone rules and even my daughter and son in law happily put their mobiles into the docking station in their flat or play music through their TV. Music tends to be used as background entertainment rather than the main attraction and they wouldn't dream of listening seriously for several



## FIDELITY MATTERS

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



hours. That's their choice and I understand that habits have changed and evolved over the last few decades. My fear is that our wonderful hobby will die out with the older generation i.e. 45 plus males especially.

When you go to hifi shows now there is a predominance of grey haired middle aged men who drool over the kit they can't afford or they are looking for a new toy to upgrade to. Of course hifi is all about the desire to get better kit or achieve a more believable sound, but how we achieve this is our prerogative and is fun. The problem is it might die out with this older generation unless we can make it attractive to the youngsters.

I have talked to many younger people about this issue and most

shrug their shoulders. First you need a desire to listen to music whatever genre it may be and get excited by it. Then you need to want to hear it on decent equipment or ideally be educated to the fact of how good a decent hifi can sound. That means attracting them into good dealers and going to shows. This I feel is where a lot of the problems lie now. Without wishing to offend dealers, unless they are open to truly wanting to attract customers and educate them as to what is possible then we as an industry are doomed. The number of dealers I have walked in to and been ignored because they are on the phone or assume I can't afford the dearer kit is astonishing. Shows can be no better either. If manufacturers don't make the effort to try and demonstrate their equipment properly or show

interest in the public attending (don't be on your mobiles all the time and looking so bored that it's obvious you're not interested). That may sound harsh but I have witnessed this at every show I have attended for years and I go to three at least a year. I and two of my friends one year walked into a well known company's room where there was some very tasty but very expensive equipment that we wished to listen to. The exhibitor looked down his nose at us as if to say you can't afford this so I can't be bothered to even talk to you. One of my friends was abhorred by this attitude and proceeded to walk out of the room saying if that's your attitude I won't ever buy your equipment no matter how good it may sound. Snobbery is totally unacceptable and my friend was brave enough to say what I felt. I am not wishing

**Marketing strategies need to be radically altered and shows need to be fun to attend for every age group. This means they need to be more than just rooms full of hifi, other attractions to satisfy everyone and keep them amused would attract larger numbers and hopefully result in more sales / interest.**

to tarnish all dealers or manufacturers with this brush , believe me there are many friendly dealers and companies who are very professional and deserve to do well , but the few that don't try or care annoy me. Why bother to even turn up if you are bored by the whole affair. I know I am not the only person who feels this way having talked to many colleagues in the business.

So what do we do to address this situation? There is no easy answer or magic wand that will solve it easily. The population in general needs to be enlightened again to the joy of music, and when Top of the Pops finished (an institution in its day), I feel we lost a conduit to enriching the public's interest in

music. Radio is still there, especially Radio One and Two but the charts have disappeared as we knew them and only youngsters probably look at the download charts now. So do people still listen to music as much as we used to? I don't know for sure. Habits have definitely changed and maybe we need to adopt a different approach. Music is still used a lot on computer and console games which sell in their tens of millions and youngsters love them, so why can't we attract them through that avenue. Maybe we can. Marketing strategies need to be radically altered and shows need to be fun to attend for every age group. This means they need to be more than just rooms full of hifi, other attractions to satisfy

everyone and keep them amused would attract larger numbers and hopefully result in more sales / interest.

These are just my own thoughts and opinions amassed over time and as stated earlier there is no simple answer to this conundrum. I in no way mean to sound negative about the hobby I love, I just wish to see the future being brighter with more people enjoying what we enthusiasts do now and have done for years. On travelling to work today Chris Evans was talking to Darcy Bussell about her career and the fact she had just released a new cd with music that had inspired her during her dancing period. She said how music is universally liked by people and is such a great communicator of emotions. I have felt this for many years and I feel music is an integral part of our being and psyche. How you can not helped to be moved by the many great pieces of music that have been written and performed over the last few hundred years. Music stirs most people's souls spiritually, so why not enjoy it on a good system?

Feel free to disagree with me if you wish, but if you can come up with any good ideas to reinvigorate this industry please write in with your suggestions. Hifi is not dead, just not as cool as it once was and has fallen out of fashion. How many millionaires do you see or hear talking about their fabulous hifi systems; now if it was a new super yacht they would be shouting about it from the rooftops.

**Ian Ringstead**



# THE VIEWS OF STU!

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



**T**he idea for this article came out of the initial thought that people involved in the audi-

ophile world seemed to be much more vociferous in decrying and denouncing the business of selling hifi and the buying decisions people make, than almost any market sector I could think of, and I began to wonder why this should be, and what sets this particular sector apart from the likes of say the fashion industry.

The fashion industry, much as the hifi industry, has very distinct levels that make it up. In fashion there is the haute-couture market that caters to the well-heeled socialite and they buy into this exclusive market for their own reasons. We then have the prêt-à-porter level that is a slightly watered down version of haute couture and a little less expensive,

**There seems to be a lot of in-fighting within the audiophile world about people's personal choices and the equipment they finally place in their system. Stuart Smith takes a tongue-in-cheek look at what he thinks are the reasons for this phenomenon...**

even if out of the each of the vast majority of people. Next we have the high-street where you and I may well buy our togs. Of course the high-street has its own divisions broadly based on the final

selling price of a garment...some will buy from M&S, some from Tesco and others from Primark. Peoples' choices of where they shop will largely be based on disposable income and whether they

feel comfortable in a particular brand's clothes - personal choice based on a wide variety of influencers and preferences. Likewise in audio there are a whole load of reasons that people buy a particular brand and not all of it is down to the way it sounds... shocking I know. Now, Primark's clothes may well be well made and look great, but I don't see everyone that shops there suggesting that it's the only place you should buy your clothes from.

I could have looked at the car industry and why people buy into particular brands and I'm sure I'd find the same situation as the fashion industry...people buying cars based on personal preferences and what they can afford. Isn't this just the same as the hifi industry?

There's a certain kind of audiophile that seems almost evangelical in their desire to suggest that anyone who spends more than tuppence ha'penny on their sound system is either a raving lunatic or in league with Beelzebub himself and responsible for all the woes in the World including hunger, pestilence, disease and not being able to remember where you put your car keys last night. These are the kind of people who moan and moan...and then moan some more to anyone that will give them an audience, that everything in the hifi world is now a rip off and the owners of the companies making

**These people almost invariably come off sounding bitter and petulant and, it seems to me that they are the kind of person who may prefer to wear hessian underwear – cheap as chips but not the most flattering choice of undercracker.**

hifi are the most evil kind of people and unspeakably wicked for wanting to make a bob or two.

Let's face the truth of the matter here; having a decent hifi is a bit of a luxury and like all products there will be different markets within the wider market. Of course there will be those who want to feel that they have scored a bargain and managed to put together a system that is "oh so much better than anything at fifty times its price", but then at the other end of the scale you will have the "money no object" folk that want to have what they perceive as being the very best. In between these two

extremes you have the vast majority of audiophiles who will have differing degrees of disposable income and different preferences in the way a system sounds. Oooh look, that's a bit like the fashion and car industries I briefly described earlier...

As with [the article I wrote last month about cable wars](#), we have a whole host of audiophiles with different mentalities and different opinions on this.

### THE HATERS

Let's start at what I feel is the bottom of the food chain here with the **I Can't Afford "THAT" So**





**I'm Going To Whine** kind of audiophile. These people almost invariably come off sounding bitter and petulant and, it seems to me that they are the kind of person who may prefer to wear hessian underwear – cheap as chips but not the most flattering choice of undercracker. Perhaps life has dealt these people a relatively poor hand and they don't have the opportunity to splurge a king's ransom on audio, but for the love of baby Jesus will you give it a rest please. Yes, we all know that some audio equipment is outrageously expensive, but no one actually has a gun to anyone's head and forcing them to part with their hard earned dosh. Buy what you can afford and if it makes you happy and gets you involved in the enjoyment of music then all power to you!

Probably drives an Austin Allegro in diarrhoea brown and wears an old jacket with leather patches on the elbows from a charity shop.

## Probably takes the bus and is wearing an anorak.

A similar breed to the above is the **I Can Afford "THAT" But I'm Morally Superior To Everyone So I'm Going To Whine**. These people are on a moral crusade and convinced that they're the most honourable people on the planet and that by waging a campaign against expensive hifi they will somehow make all the ills of the world disappear and everyone will live happily ever after. Personally I think that this particular band of people would be better employed spending their time and energies targeting a sector of the unfair system we live in that actually has a major effect on the planet...there's loads to choose from folks...use your imagination a bit. This band clearly have the time and the money to spend writ-

ing angry letters to their MPs and signing petitions...use your time and energy more wisely people!

Probably drives a Prius and is wearing M&S slacks.

Then we have the **I Have A Vested Interest In Whining About Expensive Hifi**. These people can come from a variety of backgrounds, be that resellers, manufacturers, folk looking to sell used kit, or brand 'fanboys'. These are a tricky bunch to deal with as they will invariably claim that they are taking their stance from the lofty heights of the moral outrage point of view, when in actual fact it would appear that they are putting down more expensive brands by way of self promotion or loyalty to a particular brand. Yes, we all know there are lots of brands out

there that offer really excellent value for money, but ‘fess up and be honest about what you are doing...you are trying to earn a crust in a difficult marketplace just like everyone else, or trying to promote your favourite brand for whatever reason you can think of.

Probably takes the bus and is wearing an anorak.

### THE UPPER ECHELONS

Now, if we swing to the other end of the scale and to the upper echelons of the audiophile world we also have a number of different attitudes that prevail and these are, in the main, in stark contrast to the people above who we will broadly label “The Haters”. This group of audiophiles will always strive to have what they believe is the very best of everything, it’s just the means of getting there and motivations are very different.

First up are the people with oodles and oodles of cash and for whom money is absolutely no object, but who are modest and have no need to shout about their purchases to the world. These people will be have made their own money perhaps and feel that to “willy wave” about the expensive kit they have would be crass and a little uncivilized. This group are unlikely to enter into discussions with others about whether this or that is sonically superior because they know that their decisions have been

## Willy Wavers are the type of audiophile I find really entertaining and I reckon there’s a bit of this in most of us if truth be known.

based on what is perceived to be the best. Let’s call this group **Loadsamoney Why Would I Entertain Your**

**Opinions.** Probably drives seven series Beemer and wears an understated Hugo Boss suit in black.

Then we have the normal guy who has a very strong desire to have the best premium products that he thinks sound the finest, but really has to scrimp and save to afford them. Now, this is my favourite group because they have invested heavily in what they perceive to be the very best and will have sacrificed other things in order to achieve their own personal idea of audio nirvana. This group will perhaps be a little embarrassed by their purchases, realising, that in actual fact, other things should have taken priority over their audio habit. These are the true enthusiast to me and stand as testament to what is great about this hobby. These people will be the ones who carefully listen to the equipment they intend to buy, taking notes

and identifying what they truly believe to be the superlative products. Their rig is unlikely to be made up of the “household” names of audio and is likely to contain rare and hard to find artisanal brands that they have travelled far and wide to hear and select. Let’s call this group **Not Wealthy But Obsessed.**

Rides a bike and wears whatever was to hand when he dressed this morning.

**Willy Wavers** are the type of audiophile I find really entertaining and I reckon there’s a bit of this in most of us if truth be known. If we’ve worked or saved hard we all like to show off a little bit...human nature, simple human nature. However, the true hardcore Willy Waver of the audio world will buy the biggest and flashiest product they can and then tell the world and his dog about how great this product is and how anything else that you may own is vastly inferior and to be scoffed at.



Drives a Lamborghini round Knightsbridge at three in the morning whilst looking simply fabulous in Versace.

## THE REST

In-between these extremes you have everyone else...the normal audiophile who just loves music and the gear that it is played on. Of course you're going to have groups within groups, but, depending on disposable income and passion for the hobby they have, this is where the vast majority of us sit. We will argue the merits, or otherwise, of products based on what we perceive as being great sound at whatever price. This group sees the merits in all sectors and price-points and is interested in hearing loads of different kit. It matters not one jot what the outlay for a particular piece of equipment is to this group of audiophiles and they can take pleasure in enjoying being sat in front of a million dollar rig without either becoming jealous, evangelical or whiny, just as they can take pleasure in more modest systems. Yes, these people may well be very proud of the music centre they have put together and they will obviously want to talk to people about it and share it with others, but this is done out of a love of the hobby and a love for the music and gear. It is done without malice and without nastiness and with a genuine desire to learn more, hear more and im-

prove their system over time.

Let's call this group **Probably You!**

Drives whatever you drive and is wearing whatever you are.

## THE LOWDOWN

Ok, we've met the players in this game, but I want to get a few things off my chest and these opinions of mine are aimed squarely at the broad group of whiners of the audio world who gripe about companies charging often quite large sums for their products.

First off all new products cost money to research and design...these are not in the main the Fred In A Shed type of manufacturer (*though these clearly have their place in audio*) and employ real people and pay real wages, allowing their workers to support their families in a reasonable level of comfort. These companies pay taxes and contribute to the system (*like it or not*) and are out there in this capitalist world playing the game of profit making.

I often hear people moaning about (*cue Jeremy Clarkson's adenoidy whiner voice*) "£10 000 (*you could have chosen ANY number here*) for a DAC is outrageous, the bits inside are only worth 27 pence", but I think they are missing the point. Do these Moaning Minnies not think that the huge bulk of people, realistically thinking of

spending ten large on a single piece of audio equipment, are not going to have done their homework, listened to a few alternatives at different prices and read reviews... or that they have the right to spend their money however they wish... or do the haters think that their perception of what good value is the only legitimate opinion out there?

Forever trying to force your negative opinion down others' throats and forever telling a person what is good for them does little other than alienate and isolate yourself, so that you look sour, not a little bit envious and in the end people just stop listening and taking any notice of your opinions.

I think the main point I am trying to make is that the everyday music lover and audiophile is not stupid creature needing Nanny Hater to stop them being hurt by the big bad world that is going to force them at knifepoint to splurge money they don't have on whatever they are having to pushed at them – we are able to make our own decisions, spend our own money however we like and enjoy our hifis (*cars, clothes, homes...*) in our own way.

I drive a Peugeot 206 and am wearing jeans and a tee shirt if that helps any!

**Stuart Smith**

# BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

In Association With

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**W**e normally just spend a day in

Paris, or are passing through on our way to some other destination, but this year, the show is a week later than usual and it coincides with my birthday, so we decided to make a long weekend of it. We had planned a weekend of Hifi show, eating out, visiting bars and hopefully going to see some live music.....just like thousands of people do every weekend in Paris. After the horrific events on the 13th we debated whether or not we should come to the show, watching the news we saw a Paris locked down with fear and crawling with army and police, but defi-

**This is not really the article that I was going to write this month, but things changed in Paris on Friday the 13th of November 2015. We are setting off to visit the Haute Fidélité Show at the Marriott Rive Gauche in Paris. I'm not entirely sure how I am feeling, a mixture of anger and defiance, but also sadness and admittedly fear.**

ance won over fear and we are sat on the train for the 4 hour trip to the capital.

We are travelling first class, which is not really as flash as it sounds, the TGV trains are pretty nice any-

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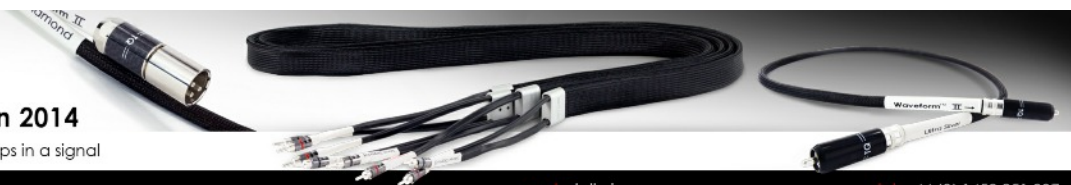
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## BIRD'S EYE VIEW

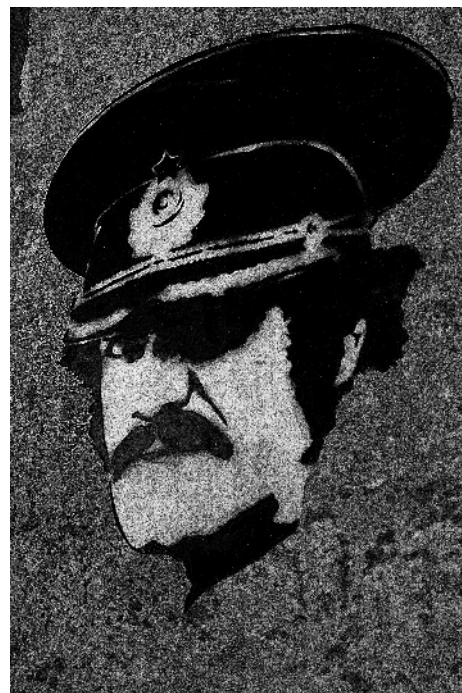
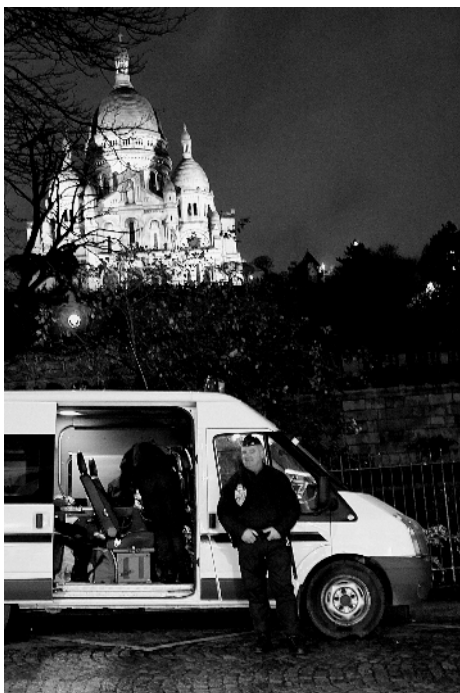
AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM  
THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY  
LINETTE SMITH

**A small note, tied to a tree in the Place De La Republique, summed up the feeling of the weekend for me, it said 'smile, and Paris smiles with you'.**

way, but first class offers a more comfy armchair-type seat and a supposedly quiet carriage, just what is called for when you've been up since 5am... the quiet of the carriage though is being somewhat broken by the tinny sounding, autotune laden rap that the young guy across the aisle from us is listening to on his iphone and earbuds. I feel it may be a service to humanity if I lend him my X5 and Sennheiser IE800s with some

decent music, but fortunately he alights at Vannes. This train to Paris, which leaves our local station just after 7am and gets into Paris in time for pre lunchtime drinks, is usually pretty packed, especially on a Friday. It actually seems fairly quiet today, but as it's only a week after the terrorist attacks and a day after the French police stormed an apartment in Saint Denis, in the north of Paris, where the terrorist group were hiding out, that is probably not overly surprising.

We arrive at Montparnasse station which is as busy and bustling as usual...welcome to Paris! There are the usual army guys with guns patrolling the station, but this has been happening for the past few years, there doesn't seem to be any sense of heightened panic, everyone seems to be just going about their business as usual. We make our way to Anvers via the metro and again all seems pretty normal. We drop off our bags at our little



Air B&B studio and make our way out into the rain. We are hunting down veggie burgers and find the wonderful little place, VG vegetarian burgers. Suitably stuffed and now armed with an umbrella we make our way back to the flat via a couple of bars. We are only a short walk from where the attacks took place a week ago but there does not seem to be any hint of Paris being in shock and crawling with police, in fact there are possibly less police on the streets than when we were here last year...and the ones that we do encounter are very friendly.

Seeing as being out and about in the city doesn't seem to be a problem at all, we head out for a few

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of long stemmed roses on the tables. We of course decide this place looks too mad to walk past and go in for a beer. The people are very friendly and relaxed and we are soon playing chess and chatting and drinking with the locals. The bizarre part is that there is a piece of graffiti on the wall (see below) that looks very familiar, we think it looks like Aldo Vegas 777. Aldo is an entertainer and comedian who used to frequent our bar in Brittany when he was visiting friends for the local summer festivities...it turns out that the picture actually IS of Aldo and this is his local bar in Paris, he is the 'Treasure of Pigalle' and they even distribute his beer and have beer mats with him on! Of all the bars in all of Paris we end up in the one dedicated to someone we know from home. Replete with our bottle of Aldo beer we get back home for a good nights sleep before the show.

drinks and dinner around the foot of the Sacre Coeur and on into Pigalle, we are actually heading back round towards home when our night takes a suitably bizarre twist.

We pass a bar, the vintage wallpaper is falling off the walls and there is art all over, some framed and some graffiti, there are people playing chess and there are vases

Saturday dawns and we are off on the metro again to the Hotel Marriot Rive Gauche. Again the Metro is busy and everything feels normal. The only difference to previous years is that everybody entering the hotel is scanned with a metal detector and bags are giv-



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# BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

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en a quick search. We had thought that the show may be cancelled or that there would be less attendees, or perhaps overseas exhibitors would stay at home. Speaking to some of the guys from Haute Fidélité they did say that they were feeling incredibly lucky because the show was a week later than it usually is. Everyone seems to have turned up and is in fine form and there are also plenty visitors, French audiophiles are not to be kept away from the latest hifi gems by mere terrorists! We enjoy listening to some top class systems including a bit of a home from home moment as the DEA room are demoing the Avantgarde Acoustic Duo XD, I suppose its the mark of fantastic hifi when you sit in a room at a show to listen to

music on the speakers that you have yourself!

There does seem to be less people visiting Paris from outside of France, perhaps put off by the media hype that seems intent on keeping people away. Chatting to our friend Anna of O2A cables she

reveals that she flew in from Vienna and there were just 10 people on a usually packed flight. This show is a lot more bijoux than Munich and is really doable in a day, however we get sidetracked by G&Ts and chatting in the bar so we are coming back tomorrow for an hour or so. Dinner is organised by the Living Leedh club, a group of French audiophiles who support Gilles Millot, the creator of the rather fabulous Leedh loudspeakers. Gilles' system was one of the highlights of the show for me, his E2 speakers defy their small size and the set up with the two subs is very impressive, they do that magical thing of totally disappearing into a seamless sound-stage.



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EYE VIEW**  
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LINETTE SMITH

Sunday is our last full day in Paris so we head out to the show bright and early and finish off the rest of the rooms. It is very easy at hifi shows to be seduced by the big, show-stopper systems but a notable one for me was a Technics 'bibliothèque' (as the guy running the room referred to it as) system. I rather like it if you walk into a room with several speakers set up and can't immediately pinpoint which is playing, the little SB C700 loudspeakers and the smaller electronics set up were doing a cracking job and are a tempting smaller room option.

Other systems that stood out in my memory were the KEF blades running on PASS Labs amps, not a



combination I had heard before but very enjoyable indeed. The Triangle and Atoll room was a great celebration of French brands and I was particularly taken with the room that had Fostex speakers running off Accuphase electronics.

All in all, it was a very successful show. There was a great turnout and everyone seemed in good spirits. Had the show been cancelled or people stayed away it would have just been giving in to what the terrorists were trying to achieve, to make us live in fear and not enjoy the freedom that we have. Instead of presenting our usually Hifi Pig Loves You award to a particular room or brand, we give it to Haute Fidélité magazine themselves and to all the people that exhibited and attended and made the show what it should be, a celebration of music and hifi...it seemed to be very fitting.

We spend Sunday afternoon continuing our walk around Paris, it's a cold but sunny day so we walk



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through several districts, stopping at different places on the way including going up to the Sacre Coeur to look over the city. There are still plenty of tourists around at the tourist hot-spots but it is not quite as packed as usual, however places are still busy. We pay a visit to the Place De La Republique, here things feel different to the rest of the city as people come to pay their respects to those that died last week, but there is still a sense of purpose and activity with volunteers organising the tributes and they seem to be collecting and cat-

aloguing the paper notes and messages to keep as a permanent reminder of what happened. There is a banner on the statue in the centre of the square that proclaims 'still not scared', Paris is giving the terrorists a one fingered salute. The square is ringed by what can only be described as a media circus, reporters and camera teams from all around the world have set up camp here, perhaps they would give a more rounded view of how Paris is fairing if they took their cameras out into the city where life is obviously carrying on.

We end our Parisian trip on Monday, with a lovely Italian meal before we board the train at Montparnasse. We reflect on how lucky we are to be in a city that refuses to be crushed by terrorist attacks. We can still go out, eat, drink, meet new people, listen to music and enjoy life. A small note, tied to a tree in the Place De La Republique, summed up the feeling of the weekend for me, it said 'smile, and Paris smiles with you'.

**Linette Smith****Tellurium Q®****6 products of the year in 2014**

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# DEALERS VIEW

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

**E**very “holiday season” is viewed with equal parts dread and enthusiasm by Audio-Video Dealers throughout the realm. In the States the overbearing and ever present American Press fill the airways with reports on how retailers are bearing up in the “this highly important” time of the year. People camp out in parking lots and storm the doors of the local big box retailer at 3AM on so called “Black Friday”. This dubious phrase comes from the myth that on this day, most retailers finally turn a profit for the year. Just a thought...if you are 11 months into your year and have not turned a profit yet, you may wish to consider an alternative career in the fast food industry.

Below is a video of some of the locals rampaging and trampling

**Mike Twomey has a bit of advice about how to get the best deal on your audio during the holidays. The Wondrous Holiday Season – a Six Week Period. Where People Totally Lose Their Mind. How to Get a Good Deal from your Dealer During the Holidays**

each other. Great fun to watch by the way. Many of these people have had their brains surgically removed as you can see. Imagine you are visiting Earth from the planet Zeldar 4 and this is your

first contact with human beings..... No intelligent life exists here.

So here you sit pondering buying something nice for your budding



## DEALERS VIEW

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

audiophile (or yourself) for the holidays. You want a good deal but you sure as hell don't want to go the local big box and get slammed around. Well this little article is for you.

We've preached about all of the good things that can occur if you establish a relationship with your local dealer. Dealers want regular customers who visit the store, bring their friends, and talk music and gear. That is why we went into the business to begin with (and of course meeting women). Your dealer is incented to make sales during this time of year. Why? Well the manufacturers give us quotas to hit which typically end in December. If a dealer wants to keep the lines he has, he damn well better make his quota. In the States, at the CES conference in January dealers get to explain themselves to the manufacturers. Trust me on this. This can be a pleasant or significantly less than pleasant experience depending on where you sit on hitting your quota. So... keep that point in mind. We dealers want to make sales and we want happy customers.

Here are some more hints to help you in "this highly important" time of the year:

The Value of Bundling – if you want a good deal from your dealer, consider buying multiple items

such as an amplifier and speakers together. This gives the dealer more incentive to work with you on price. To help the process along I suggest you tell your dealer that you want a good deal on your purchase and want to spend your money with her or him and ... and you understand he needs to make a reasonable margin to keep the doors open. This conversation tends to yield great results.

It Helps to Know the Technology – Knowing the technology of the product you are buying is a plus. An educated customer is a joy to work with for your dealer. It also means that you've done your research and know the market price points. A good example of this is Digital to Analogue Converters, "DAC's". There is a wide variety and many quality levels for this class of products. We sell DAC's that range in price from \$149 USD to \$16,000USD. The only thing that these two products have in common is the name. Our educated customer knows the difference in these products. If you don't know the difference in the products...ask! A good dealer wants to help customers understand and enjoy the products she or he sells. My little shop offers classes every two weeks on a wide variety of topics. They are meant for education and for fun; a commodity in short supply these days. I'm on a one

man mission to prevent FDD; Fun Deficit Disorder.

Trust YOUR ears not your friends or the salesperson – Buy the product that you like and sounds pleasant to your ears. When doing a demo at your dealer bring your music and preferably in the format that you prefer. (Vinyl, CD or digital download). Spend time listening to the instruments and vocals. If you are auditioning multiple products, use the same track or series of tracks on each set of gear. Try to eliminate as many variables as possible. Don't change cables for instance. If a product is too expensive for your budget, just say so to your dealer. He will respect you for that and for saving his time. If you are just shopping and beginning your search tell your dealer this. She/he will leave you alone. But don't be afraid to ask questions. They are there to help you. When you think you have a product you like engage your salesperson. Ask for an audition using your music.

The "I know more than you" game – We see this a lot and it's a hot button with us. This is where a customer comes in, browses our store and proceeds to ask dozens of questions and corrects or disagrees with our sales people. Usually this guy has a pair of homemade speakers that he claims outperform anything made by Magico, Wilson or B&W.

We're *thrilled* for him. We put him in the "time out" chair in the back of the store near the furnace. Dealers should never ever play this game either. It's a far greater sin in my view for a dealer to adopt a pretentious and nose-in-the-air attitude. This traditionally has been a problem in this business. The good dealers that I know both in Europe and in the States get this. So there is an emphasis in our business on making sure you have a good experience in coming in to the shop. If you find that you have an arrogant know-it-all salesperson working with you, you have my permission to slap the shit out of him or her whilst saying in loud firm voice "I'm doing this for your own good and for the entire industry!!!" (*Hifi Pig would never condone slapping the shit out of your salesperson...or anyone else for that matter – Ed*)

I would imagine that my long suffering editors Linette and Stuart will judiciously edit this last sentence out. "Stuart I can't believe what that dumb Yank is saying now!"

How you pay does make a difference – The credit card companies make a nice living thanks to you and your dealer. The credit card companies charge your dealer anywhere from 2% to 3% on purchases made. Then they hope you don't pay your balance

## **Cash is always king but a bit inconvenient especially when buying higher ticket items.**

in full each month and then charge you a tidy 15% to 20% monthly interest fee. So your dealer is incented to not take a credit card transactions if possible. Cash is always king but a bit inconvenient especially when buying higher ticket items. Very few people I know walk around with 3000 quid on them (okay, besides Linette and Stuart. But they own an international publishing conglomerate). But if you can, paying with currency helps the dealer who in turn will be inclined to view a product discount kindly.

Be Honest – yes I said it. I cannot tell how many customers lie like rugs to us. So your dealer is fairly jaded to negotiation games. If your intent is really to buy an item, say so. If you want a better price...ask.

The world goes for want of asking. But if you want a better price from the dealer, the dealer will want something in return. Are you buying anything else? How are you paying? Are you a repeat customer? Also if your intent is to buy on the internet please don't waste the dealer's time.

Saying that you can get a piece for "x" at another dealer actually doesn't help your cause. The dealer knows this already. We know what the competition is doing. Skip that stuff please.

Okay let's summarize:

- Establish a rapport with your dealer
- To get a great deal try to bundle products together
- Bone up on the technology
- Trust your own ears
- Don't play the "I know more than you game"
- If your salesperson is rude go ahead and smack them around...perfectly good (no really, don't do that it'll lead to bad things happening down the line – Ed').
- Credit Cards cost your dealer money. Be aware of that
- Be Honest with your Dealer

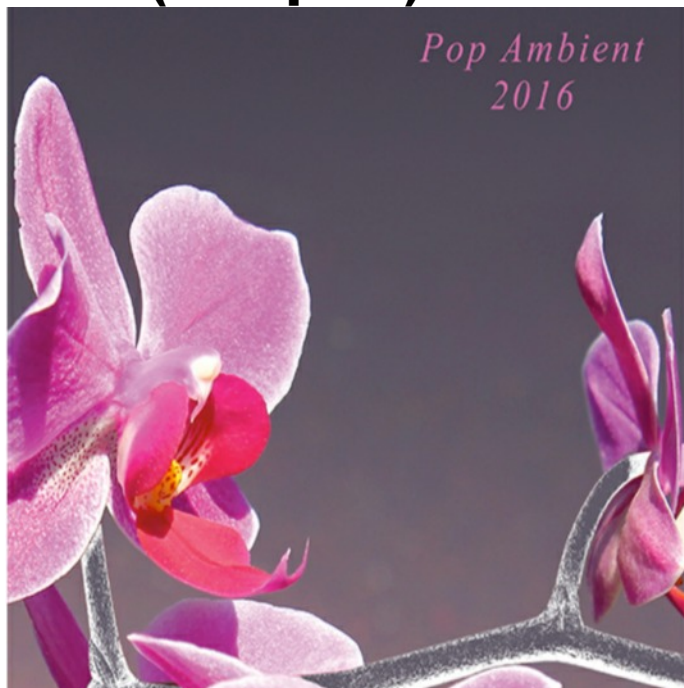
With these hints in mind, go forth and find the holiday bit of kit that you've always wanted.

Have a great holiday season!  
**Mike Twomey owns [Big Kids Toys AV](#) in Greensboro NC. The annual Big Kids Toys customer holiday party will be streamed live over the net. Mike is secretly hoping for a Sony Betamax VCR this holiday season.**



# MUSIC REVIEWS

## Various- Pop Ambient 2016 (Kompakt)



**K**ompakt's Pop Ambient series of records has been going now for over ten years but still shows no signs of becoming tired or struggling for new and relevant material and artists.

Pop Ambient 2016 (out on 13<sup>th</sup> November) continues the previous albums in the series' themes – lush electronica that is perfect to float away with. Pop Ambient is accessible and easy to listen to whilst remaining clever enough to be stimulating.

The new record opens with Stephan Mathieu who is an electro acoustic composer and installation artist. His tune April Im Oktober is a building piece of electronic tonal textures that almost feel to be one long sound made up of several others.

Next up is The Orb, who has released stuff on Kompakt in the past, and the tune Alpine Dawn. For those of you expecting the dubbed out basslines etc of the likes of Little Fluffy Clouds you will be surprised at this offering. It's a tripped out ambient piece (*of course*) with references to the tunes title in the form of cow bells and the like. There is a bassline of sorts in there that sort of comes and goes, but the main feature of this tune is the aural landscapes the good Doctor builds on... sat here listening to this I'm reminded of films taken from hang-gliders where the pilot happens along a different feature (and sound) in the landscape as he glides through it.

Anton Kubikov (SCSI-9) is up next with a more traditional arrangement (April) in that it has a lovely melody line played over an evolving synthscape and a slow throbbing bassline that just draws you in and takes you away.

**It's a tripped out ambient piece (*of course*) with references to the tunes title in the form of cow bells and the like.**

Max Wurden enters the fray with an underwater inspired and wistful piece that really wouldn't be out of place in a wildlife documentary featuring whales and what not. Again, another lovely piece that just allows the listener to glide into his own thoughts whilst the music guides a little... actually quite meditative and calming. On the CD version of Pop Ambient 2016 Wurden collaborates with Thore Pfeiffer which has both artists bringing a bit of their own style to the mix for a tune (Feinherb) that has messed up (but still very ambient) loops intermingled with drones and pads... perhaps the edgiest of the tunes on the record I'd say.

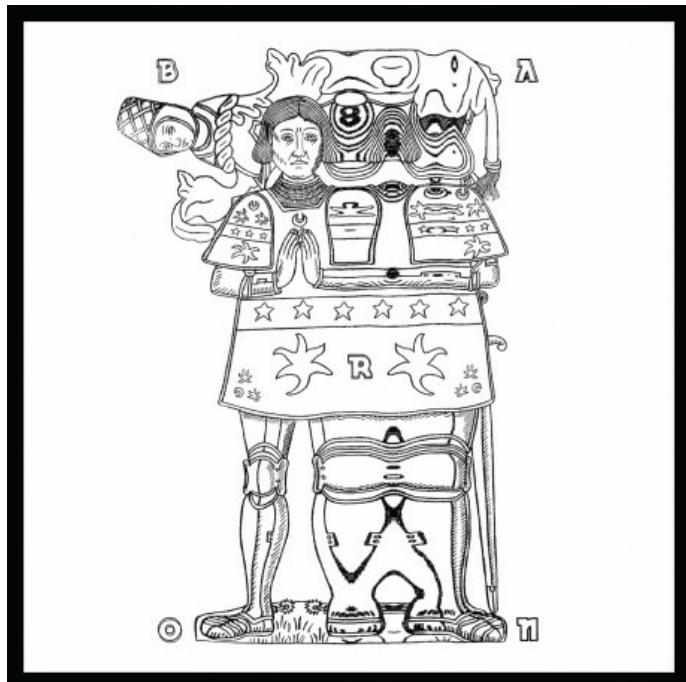
Also collaborating on Pop Ambient 2016 are Sicker Man and Gregor Schwellenbach who come together to create an impressively grand piece that ebbs and flows but has enough of a melody to have more widespread appeal. I loved this tune and my only criticism is it didn't go on longer.

There are more artists on Pop Ambient 216 (Mikkel Metal, Leandro Fresco, Dave DK (a beautifully alien piece), Wolfgang Voigt, Jens-Uwe Beyer) but the theme remains the same throughout – accessible and enjoyable electronica created to quieten the mind and take them away from their every day lives and into an inner space, all the time with the music as a guide. Personally I'd like to see a version of Pop Ambient that was DJ mixed and without gaps to allow for a more coherent and unified experience. Nevertheless, 2016 represents a beautifully hypnotic album that is reverie inducing and soothing. Just what you want at the end of a hard day at the coal face.

**Stuart Smith**

# MUSIC REVIEWS

## Baron – Torpor (Svart)



**B**ack in the murky mists of time, when I was around eight years old, I read a couple of children's fantasy books by Alan Garner – *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomerath*. Filled with wizards, witches and evil magical creatures, they were terrific; I read them over and over back then. I read them again just a couple of years ago and I still enjoyed them immensely.

One species of evil creature in the books was the Svart, a slit-eyed goblin-like demon from the bowels of the earth. My eye was caught, therefore, when I saw that there was a record label called Svart. My interest was further piqued when the press release for Baron's new album mentioned Alan Garner as an influence on the band. Torpor isn't some warlock-festooned prog-fest though; if you need a musical shortcut comparison, imagine Fleet Foxes with more iron in their diet and fronted by John Grant for starters.

Like Fairport Convention's *Liege And Lief*, Torpor exudes a sense of place; it is unmistakably English. This is not traditional finger-in-the-ear folk music but there is tradition here nevertheless – the dark, mystic tradition of the Green Man and the Cerne Abbas Giant; the power of the land and the seasons and of blood.

The band (Alex Crispin on vocals, guitar, and keyboards; Peter Evans on bass; Blue Firth on organ, recorder and vocals, Luke Foster on drums and per-

cussion) recorded parts of the album not entirely legally at one of the UK's last surviving medieval halls, Purton Green. The album opens with *Dragonfly*; a cyclical organ figure - I'm briefly reminded of English composer David Bedford whose *Song Of The White Horse* similarly tapped into the ancient landscape - is joined by Crispin's vocals, pounding drums and droning guitars. The lynchpin of the album is *Stry*; questing guitars mingle with prowling, purposeful bass as the song gains intensity and the guitars thrash and howl.

Torpor does not give up its secrets easily, I'm still trying to unlock the tale it tells but it's a journey worth pursuing as the nights grow longer and winter looms.

John Scott

## Elvis Costello – Unfaithful Music & Soundtrack Album (UMC)

# ELVIS COSTELLO



## UNFAITHFUL MUSIC & SOUNDTRACK ALBUM

**A** man of few words – a phrase that has almost definitely never been used in relation to Elvis Costello. Although he is every bit as much a tunesmith as a lyricist, it is his way with words that has made him one of rock music's most respected songwriters.

Now Costello has written his memoirs, *Unfaithful Music & Disappearing Ink*, and has released an accompanying "soundtrack" collection, providing a 38



# CLASSICS

track overview of his career from pre-fame demos to brand new material.

It's almost forty years since Costello appeared as an angry young man, his sneering, sputtering, invective-filled songs syncing with the punk ethos although his influences owed more to The Band, Johnny Cash and Joni Mitchell than The Damned, The Clash and The Pistols.

**Costello's takes on jealousy, betrayal, lust and self-loathing are as varied as the musical styles that clothe these compositions.**

He is now – although he may not like the thought – one of rock music's elder statesman, his endless, restless enthusiasm for music having led him to incorporate a variety of styles, from country to classical, into his music. While this has resulted in him being labelled by some as a genre-hopping dilettante, his aim was never anything other than true.

I need to own up at this point: I am a massive Costello fan; the 11 albums he recorded between the 1977 debut *My Aim Is True* and 1986's *Blood and Chocolate* are in my musical DNA. If we subsequently drifted slightly apart then I'm happy to say it was my fault Elvis, not yours, I've tried to stay faithful but now and again I've strayed.

Fidelity, and the lack of it, are themes that run through this non-chronological compilation like a dagger through the soul. Costello's takes on jealousy, betrayal, lust and self-loathing are as varied as the musical styles that clothe these compositions. While the Costello canon has already been compiled comprehensively, this particular collection avoids much of the obvious. Instead, it is intended as a companion and compliment to the book. Not then, one for the casually curious despite the presence of *Oliver's Army* and *Watching The Detectives*. And not perhaps of immediate attraction to the committed fan who will surely already own at least one copy of all but a handful of these tracks. But when you settle in for the night with a copy of *Unfaithful Music & Disappearing Ink* and find that you just can't put it down, there will be no better accompaniment.

**John Scott**

## **Wolfgang Flür - Eloquence, The Complete Works (Cherry Red)**



**E**loquence, The Complete Works' is a compilation of ex-Kraftwerk percussionist Wolfgang Flür's "pop" tunes from 2002 to today.

**If Kraftwerk played minimal electro, then I now play 'maximal electro'; for example, I have nothing against the sound of a trumpet in a song if it fits well, as in my track "Best Friend's Birthday".**

"I selected the tracks on ELOQUENCE to show the width of my artistic possibilities from lyric writing, melody development, working with my voice and my being involved in collaborations with interesting

# MUSIC REVIEWS

international artists" says Flür, continuing "With Kraftwerk, I was a drummer and device inventor. I only detected my own more melodic musicality after I left my former group. If Kraftwerk played minimal electro, then I now play 'maximal electro'; for example, I have nothing against the sound of a trumpet in a song if it fits well, as in my track "Best Friend's Birthday". In this respect, ELOQUENCE charts my development from a drummer-boy to a melody inventor and story--telling man and it's been a great journey for me which makes me happy."

Since 2004, Flür has been presenting music in clubs and at festivals as the 'Musik Soldat' playing tech-house, industrial and electro works of his own as well as of Kraftwerk, Karl Bartos and other international artists who he's friendly with which has led to some collaborations for the first getting an outing on Eloquence.

Eloquence opens with Robot which is edge of your seat driving electro pop with a vocoded vocal and it really does set the scene for what is to come. There is clearly a Kraftwerkesqueness to Eloquence and it's immediately identifiable with the band, but it's also more accessible and more dance floor friendly. There's some clever stuff amongst this collection and Moda Makina stands out as a successful fusing electronic and acoustic instruments.

Ok, this record is playing to my personal liking for all things electronic and club oriented, but it will appeal to others I'm sure. It's at times on the softer and more accessible side of "techno" but it's also interesting enough to hold the technohead's interest and most definitely Teutonic in conception. That said, Flür's collaboration with Jack Dangers of Meat Beat Manifesto on 'Staying In The Shadow' manages to be "experimental" and yet poppy in equal measure.

There's a feeling of some of the early European techno of Antler Subway such as on Axis Of Envy and this is a good thing but it goes further and beyond this. Best Friend's Birthday is brilliant, disturbing and quite "funny" ....and then you have Pleasure Lane which is much happier and more straightforward pop, though it has a brilliant bassline and vocal - a 5am comedown track if ever there was one.

There's twelve tracks here and then a handful of remixes of some of the tracks and it's all thriller and no filler. Out now and highly recommended.

**Stuart Smith**

## Israel Nash's Silver Season



**N**ow I don't often buy music on spec but when I heard this album playing in the local supermarket (*of all places*) I had to enquire what it was...I assumed given the track that was playing that it was something new from Neil Young that I'd not heard about.

Silver Season is Nash's fourth album and, given my penchant for all things Youngesque, I don't really understand how I missed out on his previous records...they will be being purchased in the very near future on the strength of this outing!

It would be impossible to hear Silver Season and not make at least the slightest reference to the aforementioned Young for the influence is there and it's there in spades. The way Parlour Song's vocal plaintively tails off at the very end has Young written all over it. There are steel guitars and there's more than a hint of the classic "psychedelic" country-tinged sound that came out of Laurel Canyon at the end of the 60s and into the 70s and there is absolutely nothing wrong with this!

L.A. Lately is an absolute belter of a tune that builds and builds... and perhaps here we're hearing a sprinkling of The Flaming Lips. This is pure unashamed Americana at its best, conjuring lazy dope filled days spent in sunny, incense filled sitting rooms.



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Nash makes tunes his own and he has his own style. The thing is, the music referenced and drawn upon was hugely popular and it was hugely popular with good reason...and it is the same reason Silver Season is a very (very) good record. I can't stop playing it.

would get an airing in 2015?) and this is reflected in the wide variety of tunes herein.

I was born in '67 but a lot of the theme tunes on here are familiar to me and will be to you too, I'm sure. The ones that I knew immediately were The Avengers theme, The Saint, Steptoe and Son, Z Cars, Coro-

## Various - Escape In Time: Popular British Television Themes Of The 1960s (él)



Let's get this straight from the outset... the él record label is absolutely nuts!!! And I love its quirkiness and bottle for putting out albums of music that otherwise would be unlikely to see the light of day. Regular readers will have read other reviews I've done of the label's output and it is nothing if not varied and eclectic. And this album is a continuation on that devil may care, plucky stance, for here on Escape In Time we have a collection of 24 popular British television themes of the 1960s and some incidental music from The Prisoner tacked on the end.

There was a lot of experimentation with formats and program aesthetics in the 60s, a time before boundaries had been set and where a degree of experimentation was encouraged(Do you think The Prisoner

**Alright, this is a bit of a trip down memory lane for the most part and with the tunes you know but it's an enjoyable romp that has merit not only as a fond reminiscence, but also for the musical content in itself and for the fact you don't just get a snippet of the tune but the whole performance...**

nation Street, Monty Python's Flying Circus, Animal Magic, ITN News, Grandstand... but there's a whole lot more on their too.

Most of the tunes are orchestral, BIG numbers with the exceptions being Fireball XL5 sung by Don Spencer that is straight up 60s pop music (as are Comedy Playhouse (Happy Joe) and Tuesday Rendezvous (China Doll)), The Strange World Of Gurney Slade (Gurney Slade) which is a jazzy number and confusingly The Strange World Of Gurney Slade (Hat and Cane) which is a honky tonk style. There are others that stray from the theme like Maigret Theme which has a distinctly Parisian (surprise surprise) theme to it ... and who could forget Steptoe and Son?

Alright, this is a bit of a trip down memory lane for the most part and with the tunes you know but it's an enjoyable romp that has merit not only as a fond reminiscence, but also for the musical content in itself and for the fact you don't just get a snippet of the tune but the whole performance... case in point here is the Coronation Street them which everyone in the UK will know, but have you heard the whole thing – it's fab!!!

Good on él for releasing this and all the other utterly bonkers stuff they do!

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## The Downes Braide Association - Suburban Ghosts (Cherry Red Records)



Geoff Downes and Chris Braide released “Pictures Of You”, their debut album as The Downes Braide Association, in 2012 after meeting at a Buggles reunion show in 2010. Downes was already familiar to me from his work with The Buggles - I'm a big fan of their Age Of Plastic album – Yes and Asia. Chris Braide was a new name to me but he has written and produced songs for Beyoncé, Lana del Ray, Paloma Faith, Christina Aguilera and Marc Almond amongst others so his pop pedigree is beyond doubt.

Snatching time between their other commitments, the pair have now released the follow-up album Suburban Ghosts. There is no sense, however, that this album has been quickly cobbled together; this is a well crafted pop/rock album with a strong theme running through its 12 tracks. There are strong traces of Buggles’ widescreen melody and high concept production here and that is a good thing. Downes also cites the 60’s and 70’s musical scenes of Manchester and Liverpool as an influence “...right the way from the Beatles to 10cc. But that’s only a small part of the picture...I find it quite difficult to to describe in

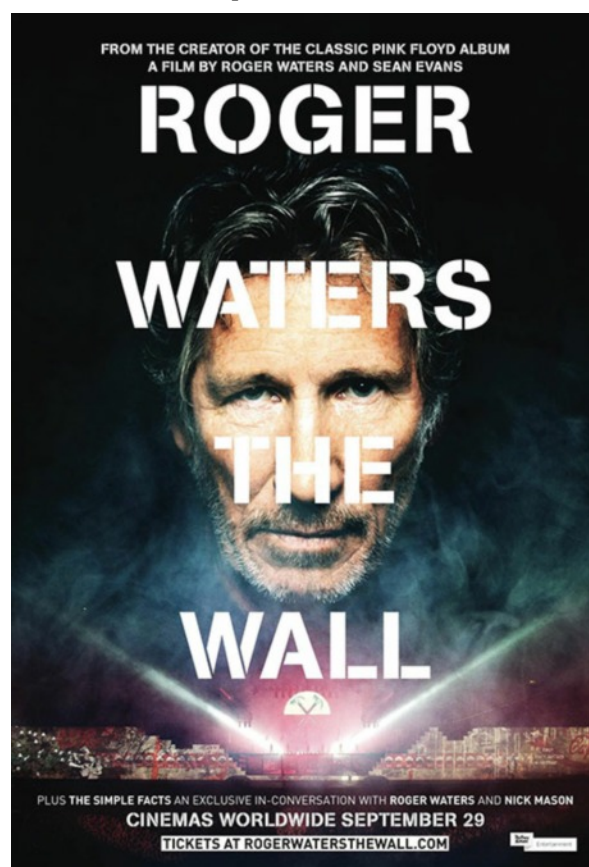
words as it’s a natural creation that comes from our collective hearts.”

Braide’s vocals – like a less breathy Neil Tennant or Al Stewart – are given a slightly otherworldly twist thanks to judicious use of some light auto tuning here and there and the synthetic elements of Downes and Braide’s keyboards and programming are balanced by contributions from Lee Pomeroy on bass guitar and Dave Gregory on guitar.

Braide describes the album as being about isolation and loneliness in small town suburbia – leaving to find something bigger and then returning to confront ghosts from the past. Despite the overarching theme though, the twelve tracks stand on their own merits. This may well be a kind of concept album but it’s not one just for Prog fans. Indeed, pure Prog fans might find its pop sensibility and lack of bombast and self importance a bit off putting. For fans of melodic synth pop though, Suburban Ghosts comes highly recommended.

John Scott

## Roger Waters – Roger Waters – The Wall (Columbia)





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**M**usic has power. The power to stir emotions and paint pictures in our imagination. When Pink Floyd released their high-concept double album *The Wall* in 1979 its listeners were left to flesh out the storyline that the music and lyrics provided with whatever visual concepts their own brains provided. Like no album before it though, *The Wall* called out for visual interpretation. Pink Floyd's live performances of the album mixed music and visuals in a way that no band had done before – building a physical wall between the band and audience and then projecting Gerald Scarfe's animated interpretations of the story onto it, accompanied by huge, grotesque marionettes. Alan Parker's 1982 film adaptations of the story provided a fully realised visual framework for the storyline, the music being somewhat relegated to a supporting narrative role.

*The Wall* was very much Waters' baby and the tensions between him and the other band members during its recording are well documented. The next Floyd album *The Final Cut* was to all intents a Waters solo album and the band subsequently split; Waters going his own way and the other band members carrying on without him.

## **So, does this work purely as a piece of music? Well...yes.**

In the years since the split both Waters and the Waters-less Floyd have toured, both performing songs from before the split. When Waters decided that he wanted to return to live performance a few years ago but did not have any new material to take out on tour, the idea of revisiting *The Wall* was born. Waters was concerned about costs but tour designer Mark Fisher persuaded Waters that it could be a viable proposition. Waters owes Fisher a pint – in October 2013 *Billboard* magazine reported that *The Wall* tour has grossed \$459million from 219 performances. Earlier this year Waters released a film, *Roger Waters The Wall*, part concert footage and part road trip documentary recording Waters' visits to his grandfather and father's war graves.

The film has now been released on Blu-ray with an accompanying soundtrack CD and it is this soundtrack that is being reviewed here, bereft of any visuals – I'm reviewing via Tidal so I don't even have the CD packaging to influence the music.

Certainly, there is a market for the blu-ray; the live show is by all accounts stunning and I'd be surprised

if any of the 4 million people who attended the shows didn't want to buy a souvenir of that experience. Fans who didn't make it to a show are bound to be interested too. But can the music stand up to the original album or the Waters-era Pink Floyd live release *In The Flesh* on its own? I must admit I was sceptical.

From The opening bombast of *In The Flesh* onwards, it's evident that Waters' band – Drums:Graham Broad; Guitars:Dave Kilminster, G.E. Smith, Snowy White; Keyboards:Jon Carin, Harry Waters; Lead Vocals:Robbie Wyckoff (covering David Gilmour's old parts); Backing Vocals:Jon Joyce, Mark Lennon, Michael Lennon and Kipp Lennon have the chops to carry it off. David Gilmour's guitar playing is of course inimitable but the guitarists here keep to the spirit of his playing and are sensible enough not to deviate too far from the script during solos. Waters himself is in decent voice but I suspect that most if not all of his bass duties are being handled by the other guitarists.

Waters has indicated in interviews that the narrative thrust of *The Wall* has shifted away from the psychoses of a Seventies' rock star to a strong anti-war message. This is no doubt clear in the visuals but the music has remained largely unchanged. One exception is a new segment, *The Ballad Of Jean Charles de Menezes*, which commemorates the Brazilian man shot down by police in London after having been wrongly identified as a terrorist suspect following the London bomb attacks on 7/7/2005 and follows on from *Another Brick In The Wall Part 2*.

So, does this work purely as a piece of music? Well...yes. The musical arrangements are subtly different enough to retain your interest, *Run Like Hell* is particularly impressive. The fascist overtones of *Waiting For Worms* –“ Would you like to see our coloured cousins sent home again?” have more resonance in our current political climate than they did when the album was originally released, and that is a really depressing thought. Will this recording replace the original album in your affections? I sincerely doubt it. If, like me your affection for the original album has waned somewhat over the years (I bought it on the day it was released and played it to death) this is a good way of becoming reacquainted. One for Waters and Floyd fans certainly, but unlikely to make many converts. It will, regardless, sell in bucket loads.

Reviewed via Tidal.

**John Scott**

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## Bert Kaempfert – A Swingin' Safari (Horch House)

**Janine Elliot takes a listen to the Album "A Swingin' Safari" which was recorded in the Polydor Studio, Hamburg in 1961/62. The original analogue recordings from 1961/62 form the basis of Christoph Stickel's unobtrusive "refurbishing" which aims to avoid any artistic intervention and here it is released on Reel to Reel tape from Horch House.**



The last 30 years have seen the biggest changes in the recording industry. In a very short time it has moved away from analogue to digital; from reel to reel past Betamax, DAT and CD, now to computer storage and manipulation. My own career as a sound engineer started with chinagraphs, razor blades and sticky tape. I loved it. Recording straight to two track most of the time, meant that mixing on the SSL, Calrec or Neve decks at the BBC needed to be right first time, and if you needed to do retakes, then the settings of the previous take needed to be remembered, so that edits mid-way through a symphony didn't suddenly move the viola section on top of the horns (they should be sat some 20 feet way from each other!) Swingin\_safari.

I have amassed a collection of 18 reel-to-reel machines over the years, from Fidelity and Ferrograph to Tandberg and Telefunken. The top machine of choice, as any serious reel-head will know, is Revox and their professional arm Studer. My favourite personal machine is the Revox PR99, which is also the favourite of a certain Volker Lange,

who owns two. He is one of the two owners of Horch House, a German company selling high quality vinyl, digital (24/96; 24/192; 64fs DSD) and now reel to reel master recordings using RMGI SM468 tapes on metal reels. There are, believe it or not, several other niche-pre-recorded reel to reel tape retailers around the world, The Tape Project from America and Opus 3 label from Sweden, being two that spring to mind. Back in Germany Volker Lange also is Managing Director for Lutz Precision, making precision machines for car industry, to which Horch House is the analogue audio division of this parent company. His role within HH is toward the hardware, and technical operation and production, and his colleague Thilo Berg, who founded the jazz and classical music label Mons Records in Trippstadt in 1991, deals with record deals content and software. Having worked as a music producer for Sony, BMG, Columbia and Universal, places him in the perfect position to get all those important master tapes he needs to create the different forms of copies available from HH. Recent deals have included Revox, who now sell HH master tapes on their website, although the Bert Kaempfert



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album under review here hasn't yet made its way on to the Revox website. The album was originally produced by Polydor between 1961-2.

As well as these two directors is a third very important member of the team. Christoph Stickel's job is to take those old, decaying, valuable master tapes and get them ready for making the copies. He calls this "unobtrusive" or "soft refurbishing". Getting correct output level and a sound as close as the original master was itself on day-one is his talent. Once he is satisfied, he then uses the settings created on the master to make a direct, first generation copy onto reel to reel.

The history of reel to reels has changed considerably since I started my adventure with reel to reels in 1970. Manufacturers such as Agfa BASF, Philips, Racal, Scotch, Maxell, TDK, etc have long since stopped manufacturing tapes, and even RMGI (Recordable Media Group International) from Holland was taken over by Pyral from Avranches, Normandy, France in 2012, having morphed from BASF to EMTEC along the way. If I remember correctly, the SM468 (Studio Master) tape was originally a BASF product, far superior to the PEM468 from Agfa, which used to shed oxide on my tape machines. Many of my own tapes from the 60's and 70's are only fit for the bin, though I do have a Kodak reel of tape made from paper from the very earliest days of tape which looks as new now as it was when it was made. The album under review here, the Bert Kaempfert's – A Swingin' Safari was originally produced between 1961 and 2, I hasten to tell you well before I bought my own and first reel to reel Fidelity recorder. And whilst 53 years have been and gone this recording sounded as refreshing as the day it was made. HH now have an ever growing collection of tapes presently covering 23 jazz, 2 bigband, 5 Blues and 12 classical labels. All are recorded using CCIR equalisation onto RMGI SM468 Tapes on metal reels. A single tape will set you back around €298, while two-tape sets sell for €365, €550 for three-tape albums, and €598 for the four-tape sets. Lots of dosh, but as HH put it, it really is "a musical experience like only the sound editor and the artist himself could experience beforehand." Reel\_to8reel\_horch\_house

But HH's concern for not adding or taking anything away, rather "truth in sound" continues in all formats they sell. For example they convert from the

analogue master tape directly into the 24/96 or 24/192 or DSD format digits without going near a PC or a Mac. All digital copies are provided on USB wafer cards, rather than relying on your internet to safely carry the digits to your home. And, they don't convert 24/96 copies from 24/192, as some companies have done. This is as pure as digits can be. Similarly, with the reel to reel copies, the master tape is played on one Studer A80 playback machine and sent directly to one of 8 refurbished A80 tape recorders. No mixer, no compression, no limiting, no processing, no high-speed recording. Before recording the heads are demagnetised and all tape-guiding rollers and capstans cleaned. After the tenth recording the machines are all recalibrated. All this, combined with the real time recording process and editing leader head and tail takes time and hence reflected in the cost of the tapes. Andreas Kuhn, from Studer, sources and services the Studer A80's, regularly monitoring them to check that they are working at their best.

Each first-generation copy is numbered and dated when it was recorded. Mine was No 11 recorded on 15/05/2015. The portfolio of tapes goes from Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Joe Pass, and George Duke to works by Bach, Beethoven, Mahler and Richard Strauss. All your favourites played as they were originally recorded. All depending, of course, that your own tape player has been set up at its very best. And there are presently no tape machines being manufactured, so at the moment you need to visit eBay, unless by chance you kept your collection with your original turntable (which of course you regularly use now). The last machines being manufactured were Otari, Stellavox and Nagra. Michael Fremer last year announced at the Munich show that a famous Swiss manufacturer would start making machines again in 2015, but I haven't seen any hints of that yet. I still live in hope. I used my PR99 and Sony TC766-2 for my review of the Bert Kaempfert.

It surprised me that a whole album would appear on a 10½ inch spool, but at around 34 minutes including all silences this was easily doable. The tape is stored tail-out, so that you have to rewind it all before you start to play. This is to prevent "print-through" of magnets lining up on the successive layer of tape. This was always a lot worse on early tapes that didn't have a thick matt non-sticking backing, though

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without it, obviously being thinner, you could get more feet on the spool (cassette tapes didn't generally bother with this backing). If it is stored tail out, then any print-through from a loud burst of sound would appear a microsecond after that original sound, and therefore be hidden. Not stored tail out, then after a time sitting on the reel that loud burst of sound will appear in the silence just before that burst of sound, if you follow me. Now, as a professional BBC sound engineer I would put yellow leader tape between each track, which also assists me if I need to quickly find track 4, for example. These tapes only have a red/white leader at the start and a yellow at the end. Finding tracks is guess work with your tape counter, though I only wanted to listen through from beginning to end, and which I did several times each and every day I had the tape. Whilst meeting international system of colour coding regarding the speed of the tape (red/white stripe is 15ips stereo, for example) it goes in opposite to my 25 years of Aunty training, where the red leader should be at the end. Nevermind, I could live with that. Indeed, the whole experience was like reliving my days in Broadcasting House and Maida Vale, and I thoroughly enjoyed it as I did the music. 52 years might have gone by, but the sound sounded just as fresh as in 1962. This was going back in time, just as I had listening to Mike Valentine's 'Syd Lawrence Orchestra' vinyl from a few weeks back. Mike had played a reel to reel at the NAS show in Whittlebury and the sound was by very very far the best sound in the show. Both HH and Valentine had the right ideas, but whether we see a resurgence of reel to reel or direct cut vinyl, well, who knows. At least blank tapes are still being manufactured by a few companies.

To the sound; this was incredibly real. Noise floor was amazingly good (like most good tapes the SM468 is quoted as +6dB) with peaks flashing on my meter not giving any sign of reaching saturation or distortion. To be honest, I didn't even notice any hiss. I was too busy just listening to the music. The biggest "noise" was from the mechanics of PR99, and even that didn't annoy me, as I was too engrossed in the music. This was as real as it could get. No over-accentuated tops or unrealistic dynamic range, or digital zits. This was set just right for the music. Originally master tapes would be engineered for vinyl playback, which has a smaller dynamic range than CD, so the sound engineering on the original master tapes would have had an appropriate

dynamic range in mind, just as whilst a BBC Radio Studio Manager my mixing was different for LW, AM, DAB or FM. Whilst the A Swingin' Safari had no signs of compression or limiting, most meter movement was within the top 20dB, meaning tape hiss was not even a thought. Indeed I am so glad Dolby A or B, or compressed DBX i or ii were not chosen. They were always very hard to get absolutely right, and using these would limit even further the customer clientele. Indeed, unless the master tape was absolutely in original condition, and the Dolby and DBX was set exactly as it was originally, Christoph Stickel would have much more than soft refurbishing to do. All the 14 tracks on this album I had known before, which was rather embarrassing for someone who likes to proclaim to being 'quite hip'. However, even sadder (for me) was that I kept returning back to this album to listen again. Tracks like 'Wimoweh' made me smile and think of my dad smoking his pipe and me watching a Bakelite Bush TV set next to the coal fire. Of course "A Swingin' Safari" and "Afrikaan Beat" were internationally known songs that hit the pop-parade in the 60's, and like Wimoweh were continually played on radio until the late 60's until a group of 4 Liverpool lads seemed to get all the air time. The tapes tracked exceptionally well, especially in the lower frequencies below 100Hz, which is usually where bad mechanics and dirty tape path can show signs of irregularity. Bass was potent and tops were very clean showing that record bias and record heads were in tip top condition. Obviously my PR99 and Sony TC766-2 were set up as good as ever they could be, and never let me down once, giving me a chance to relive my youth. And boy, was it like going back in time. Whilst the music perhaps not my first choice of listening, I really did enjoy being young again, and would have no problem in paying out for a copy once I have saved up enough money from my paper round.

As someone who has copied 24/192 onto reel to reel so they sounded more natural, I can vouch for reel to reel tapes as an alternative to digits or vinyl. They are not cheap, but bearing in mind the cost of the blank tape and time taken in preparing the first-generation copy, this album, and any other in the series, is remarkably cheap to get so close to the original. Think of it as a hand painted copy of the Mona Lisa. It's not the original, but it's bloomin' close.

**Janine Elliott**



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## The Syd Lawrence Orchestra - Big Band Spectacular



Mention Mike Valentine or Chasing the Dragon, and you should (if you visit the UK hifi shows) think of the dragonesque fiery orange and red colours of the clothes and an equally flamboyant bright personality that goes with it. His Chasing the Dragon and Vivaldi Four Seasons LP/CDs are part of my reference review sources. His background at the BBC and his love for reel to reels and ultra hi-quality recording gear go hand and hand with my own life experience, and whilst I don't always agree with everything he records, I sure get the point of what he is trying to do.

**As well as ensuring Mike had the best lathe operator, the orchestra had the additional worry that they could only have one go at this.**

Like the recording of the cellist in a church hall playing Bach Cello Suite No 1 and then played exact-

ly the same but this time in a field in the middle of nowhere. Whilst the second recording is quite horrible, for obvious reasons, it does make a point. So, to be given "Big Band Spectacular" a dual – LP of The Syd Lawrence Orchestra, both containing identical songs but one recorded as a direct-cut vinyl and the other a multitrack analogue tape recording and mix down, I could see exactly what this great man was trying to do. And to make it even clearer the supplied DVD shows how it was all done.

I remember when the fad for direct discs came in the 1970's, particularly with Dave Brubeck's Direct Cut Disc 'A Cut Above' in 1978. This particular disc is still used by me for reviewing, due to the precision of recording and the originality of the recording technique; an inverted Stanton Magnetics cutting lathe directly etching the master from which all copies are moulded, making for fewer moulding and recording paths and hence less hiss and distortion getting in the way. In a normal vinyl manufacture you record it onto disk, then make a "negative" of it, and mould all your 12" plastic from that. In this clever recording instead of the first process, a double stylus rides the upper edges of a groove whilst the stamper is rotated in the reverse direction of a normal record rotation, creating the etchings on the upper sides and from which the limited edition of copies is moulded. For Mike's album, he used the conventional approach, with the infamous VMS80 Neumann Cutting lathe, that works much the same as a conventional player, requiring careful control to ensure that where wider and deeper grooves are needed for the loud sections so that they don't cut into each other, the distance between each groove can be carefully, and manually, controlled. Similarly, if the groove is too shallow it could pinch the stylus out of the groove, so it needs to be adjusted. There are very few operators left who know how to work this machinery well, let alone finding many of the cutting lathes themselves. The VMS80 was the best of them, built in the 1980's (the VMS70 was in the 1970's).

As well as ensuring Mike had the best lathe operator, the orchestra had the additional worry that they could only have one go at this. There could be no retakes in a direct to disc recording. The lathe can only be halted between tracks, and at £50 a lacquer disc it was important to get it right first time. In this recording you hear page turns at the end of each track as the musicians get ready for the next track. I love this!

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Playing the multitrack recording of disc 2 just took away the excitement that disc one had given. Not just that the sound level was significantly lower than that of the direct cut disc, some of that top end buzz and mid warmth was just not there.

Despite the use of the same analogue Neve mixing desk from my own days at the BBC, no EQ or compression/limiting, Studer 24 track multitrack and 30ips master recorder (incidentally not using Dolby, which would add its own signature to the sound) and Gefell, Schoeps, STC, Neumann, Flea and AEA microphones, all brilliantly pressed onto 180g vinyl, some of that immediacy and intricacy of sound was somewhat lost, like the disappointment when you discover you didn't have all the numbers for this week's Lotto Rollover. Whilst this was indeed the same recording it sounded like a hundred miles from it. It reminded me of my youth recording a live Genesis concert broadcast on the Beeb. I recorded it on DAT with a back-up on cassette, but it was the cassette that sounded the most musical and exciting for me. Why that was is most likely to be due to the analogue distortion and mid-frequency warmth from my Akai GXC310D. And, much later, as a BBC sound engineer myself I always preferred recording as pure as possible, with a stereo coincident pair microphone set up with only a minimal amount of backup, rather than a whole orchestra of microphones. The latter often lost the musical detail as each microphone mixed with the next. Whilst both LPs used the same mixer and a fairly small sundry of microphones, the direct cut disc was for me one of the best sounding recordings I have ever heard. I did not mind having the same 8 tracks played twice, and whilst the Direct Cut disc was superior, even the more regular recording path was still an excellent recording to have in my collection, so if you accidentally scratch one disc, then at least you still have a backup.

With no compression or limiting the brass is brash and cymbals sizzingly good without any error in sound, something one has to be very careful when cutting a vinyl. Through my Wilson Benesch Arc/Torus/Townshend SuperTweeter trio, the Direct Cut disc was both real and exciting. The powerful "Sing Sing Sing" (Benny Goodman) that starts the affair off was followed by the melancholy "Moonlight Serenade" by Glen Miller. Despite the differing soundscape, both were equally enthralling for the listener. I always loved the use of woodwind on the front line of USA trombonist Glen Miller's manu-

**As well as great sound engineering from Jake Jackson at the Air Recording studios in London, made famous by George Martin, it is the brilliance of cutting lathe engineer John Webber really excels in this recording for me.**

scripts, something that makes his big band composing and performing so different to anyone at the time, and since. The warmth from the clarinet is shown to the full in these LPs, particularly the Direct Cut version. Syd Lawrence set up his own orchestra in the UK to play works by Miller, Count Basie and others. Lawrence retired from touring in 1994 and died of an aneurysm in 1998. The band continues to this day, and it was great to hear them here at their very best. This album contains works by Benny Goodman, Glen Miller and Artie Shaw.

As well as great sound engineering from Jake Jackson at the Air Recording studios in London, made famous by George Martin, it is the brilliance of cutting lathe engineer John Webber really excels in this recording for me. As discussed earlier, this is an art. The operator needs to continually adjust the gap between each groove on the record; if the gaps between the groove are too small then the recording will be ruined as there won't be enough depth in the groove for dynamics and stereo, and if the gaps are too great then you won't fit four tracks on each side. Both LPs are excellent recordings, with frequency response and musicality showing off the true greatness of analogue. This is a truly good example of what an LP should be, and you will be able to decide for yourself which recording you feel is the best. For me, direct cut discs will always be my nirvana, and the extended frequency response and headroom on the 12" plastic is apparent from the very start. This is a very special recording, and something I have absolutely no hesitation in recommending to hifi and music lovers alike. As Mike Valentine beautifully puts it "It's better than sex, it's wonderful."

Janine Elliot



# LIVE MUSIC

## Nils Lofgren – The Queen’s Hall, Edinburgh

Last night 89 people lost their lives because they went to a rock concert in Paris. Tonight, I’m at a rock concert and my thoughts, along with everyone in the audience, I suspect, are with that Bataclan audience and their families and loved ones. Nils Lofgren has opened his shows on this tour with Too Many Miles, a song that he wrote in 2003 and that he describes as being about his personal demons, but tonight the lyrics – “There’s been too many fights in the name of love, there’s been too many tears and too much blood” take on a particular resonance.

**Lofgren is accompanied tonight by Greg Varlotta on keyboards, guitar and trumpet. Lofgren also accompanies himself by setting up chord progressions with a looping pedal and then soloing on top.**

Nils Lofgren has been a touring musician for 47 years – he played on Neil Young’s *After The Gold Rush* at 19 and subsequently was a key member of Young’s studio and touring band during the fraught *Tonight’s The Night* period. He has been a member of Crazy Horse and for the last 31 years has been the lead guitarist in Bruce Springsteen’s *E Street Band*. Alongside this, he has released a series of critically acclaimed solo albums.

I first became aware of Lofgren in 1977 when he released the live album *Night After Night* – a school friend was a fan and insisted that I heard it (Hi Tim if you are reading this) – but it has taken until now for me to get the opportunity to see him live. Tonight’s show has a couple of surprises: Lofgren starts *Too Many Miles* on the harp – I had no idea that he played that, but he does so quite capably. Another unexpected “instrument” will feature later in the evening.

Lofgren is accompanied tonight by Greg Varlotta on keyboards, guitar and trumpet. Lofgren also accompanies himself by setting up chord progressions with a looping pedal and then soloing on top. Whether the audience have become familiar with his work through his solo career or his associations with Young or Springsteen, each song is met with enthusiasm and is greeted like an old friend. Between songs, Lofgren provides a wealth of anecdotes about his life as a professional musician; he may play to enormodomes as part of *The E Street Band* but he is clearly at home in front of a much smaller crowd and simply relishes just being on a stage. He alludes to darker times in the past but those demons have evidently been put to rest.

Drawing on songs from throughout his career, highlights include the aforementioned *Too Many Miles* – one of only two outings for his Strat; I would have liked a little more electric guitar – perennial Goffin/King cover *Goin’ Back*, which first made an appearance forty years ago on his debut solo album, and of course his love letter to Mr Richards, *Keith Don’t Go*.

*I Came To Dance* trounces the version on his classic live album *Night After Night* and gives us the second big surprise of the evening. Greg Varlotta provides a percussion solo in the form of a tap dance and is unexpectedly joined by Nils, the pair trying to outdo each other with their footwork. Lofgren comments later that “Excuse me while I change out of my tap shoes” was not a phrase that he ever expected to hear himself saying.

Elsewhere on this tour, the encore has included a cover of Springsteen’s *Because The Night* preceded by an accordion solo – Lofgren learned the instrument at the age of five. Tonight however we get an off-the-cuff *Rockin’ In The Free World* – Nils reading the lyrics from a sheet and asking the audience to help him out if he gets lost – a fitting tribute to last night’s atrocities. *Closer Shine Silently* sees the return of the Strat for a blistering but joyously uplifting finish.

Nils Lofgren is 64. He used to climax his shows by doing backflips off a trampoline while playing his guitar. These days, the gymnastics are confined to his fingers on the fretboard but as another of his songs says: the sun hasn’t set on this boy yet. Shine on, Nils.

**John Scott**

## CLASSICS

# The Kinks – The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society

**John Scott looks at the classic album *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* by The Kinks as part of the ongoing Classic Album series.**

Along with The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Who, The Kinks were one of the most important British groups of the early to mid Sixties. These bands spearheaded the “British Invasion”; bringing rock and roll and blues-based pop music back to America filtered by the sensibilities of largely white, middle-class, art school educated young men.

The Kinks were formed in the Muswell Hill suburb of London by brothers Ray and Dave Davies in 1963. Coming from a music loving family, the brothers absorbed music hall influences from their parents and jazz and rock and roll from their older sisters.

Following early incarnations in school band lineups and a brief stint at art college by

Ray Davies, the band settled on a line up of Ray Davies on guitar and lead vocals, Dave Davies on lead guitar, Pete Quaife on bass and Mick Avory on drums. The Kinks was chosen as a name by the band’s man-





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ager Larry Page because it was slightly outrageous in the pre-swinging Sixties. Ray Davies is on record as saying that he never liked the name and the band were apparently dismayed at the thought of being described as “kinky”.

Early singles *You Really Got Me* and *All Day And All Of The Night* were hard driving riff-based songs taking their inspiration from American garage rock and have come to be regarded as as an influence on the hard rock and heavy metal styles that would emerge later in the decade. Ray Davies would, however, soon reveal a more melodic, observational style of songwriting which would give birth to classics such as *Dedicated Follower Of Fashion*, *Sunny Afternoon* and *Waterloo Sunset* and would gain him a reputation as one of our finest songwriters.

By 1968, the idea of the rock concept album had been well established thanks to works such as *The Who's Tommy* and *The Beatles Sgt Pepper*. During the recording of the band's previous album *Something Else*, Davies had begun to think about a series of songs centred around a village green and the characters of the village. While the album would have no overarching storyline and so would not be a concept album in the same way that *Tommy* had been, the thematic link of village life would draw the songs together.

Recorded during 1968 the album, eventually titled *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* was released on 22 November, the same day as *The Beatles "White Album"*. Looking back from the distance of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it seems clear that in writing the album Davies was marking the passing of a way of life – the ending of rural England as modern life took over. This seemed to go largely unnoticed by both the critics and the public at the time. One reviewer lambasted Davies for being a poor copy of *The Beatles*. The album was not well received either here or in America, its overt nostalgia and Englishness being at odds with the psychedelic, forward-looking

fashions of the time. Davies, having gently mocked the *Dedicated Follower Of Fashion* was now wilfully out of step.

Opening track, *The Village Green Preservation Society* lists aspects of rural life and English institutions while at the same time having a sly dig at their increasing quaintness. “God save, Donald Duck, vaudeville and variety” goes the opening verse; the use of the American vaudeville rather than English music hall which would have scanned equally well perhaps indicates that Davies was pitching the album at the American market. “We are the Office Block Persecution Affinity”, the song continues “God save little shops, China cups and virginity”.

Having set up the aims of “Preserving the old ways from being abused, protecting the new ways for me and for you” Davies goes on to explore the nature of change through a variety of characters and situations. *Do You Remember Walter?* Recalls a time when “the world was young and all the girls remembered Walter’s name” tacitly suggesting that they no longer do so. Childhood plans and dreams come to nothing and



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as Davies notes: “People change but memories stay the same”.

## He returns to the village only to find that everything has changed and that Daisy has married Tom, the village grocer

Looking back at the past is also the theme of *Picture Book*, Davies bringing life to old photos in an album. *The Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains* mourns the passing of an old technology, the obsolescence of what had once been state of the art world-changing technology being consigned to museum pieces. Along with the inevitability of change, Davies also uses the album to explore ideas of escape. In *Animal Farm* he dreams of escaping to his animal home. “This was just me thing that everyone else is mad and we are all animals anyway, which is really the idea of the whole album”. *Village Green*, the first track to be recorded for the album, sees Davies escape the village to seek fame and fortune only to miss his girlfriend Daisy. He returns to the village only to find that everything has changed and that Daisy has married Tom, the village grocer. Interestingly, Patrick McGeehan had also made escape from a village the theme of his cult TV series *The Prisoner* which had aired the year before.

If all this talk of change and escape makes *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* seem a bit dull, it is, you will be glad to hear, anything but. Musically, the tracks brim with optimism, joy and defiance. In choosing not to tether himself to prevailing musical fashions, Davies created an album that has become timeless, sounding as fresh, vital and relevant today as it did on release – small shops, china cups and virginity are still under threat, just as Davies surely knew they would be.

Despite its lukewarm critical reception, the album is now rightly regarded as a classic piece of progressive (not in a Prog sense), intelligent pop music social commentary. Ray Davies would continue to construct themed albums to various levels of success – approach *Schoolboys In Disgrace* with caution – but *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* may well become to be regarded as his masterpiece.

## AT A GLANCE

**Released – 22 November**

**1968 Recorded – November 1966 –**

**October 1968 at Pye Studios, London**

**Genre – Rengthgth – 38’ 47”**

**Label – Pye UK, Reprise US**

**Producer – Ray Davies**

### TRACK LISTING

#### SIDE 1

**1. The Village Green Preservation Society 2:45**

**2. Do You Remember Walter 2:23**

**3. Picture Book 2:34**

**4. Johnny Thunder 2:28**

**5. The Last Of The Steam Powered Trains 4:03**

**6. Big Sky 2:49**

**7. Sitting By The Riverside 2:21**

#### SIDE 2

**1. Animal Farm 2:57**

**2. Village Green 2:08**

**3. Starstruck 2:18**

**4. Phenominal Cat 2:34**

**5. All My Friends Were There 2:23**

**6. Wicked Annabella 2:40**

**7. Monica 2:13**

**8. People Take Pictures Of Each Other 2:10**



## BEHIND THE BRANDS

**Bret D'Agostino is the President at BSC Audio that make a range of amplifiers, preamps and accessories...with an integrated amplifier on the way. He says the products he creates are "borne by a desire to produce a musical event that not only accurately represents the artist's vision, but consistently offers a satisfying listening experience".**

### **Hifi Pig Goes Behind The Brands with him.**



#### **Your History**

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

I was born into the Audio industry quite literally being the son of in those days Audio Salesmen and new speaker designer Dan D'Agostino. I used to build speaker crossover circuit boards and wind coils in my father's shop when I was around 7-8. During my High School years I would build KRELL circuit boards in the basement and in the summer work on the KRELL production line.

**Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?**

Definitely my father, but also Industry people like Nelson Pass (Threshold/Pass), Mike Wright (Dayton Wright), Gayle Sanders (Martin Logan), Jason Bloom (Apogee Acoustics) all had effects on me at an early age.

**Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?**

When my father and I developed his Momentum amplifier. It was a special time of which I will never forget. Most proud product is definitely the BSC

100m, my first amplifier. It honestly had no right to sound that good as a first solo effort.

**What product do you wish you had never conceived/launched?**

My latest preamplifier the L5, it is a tour de force of engineering challenges of which consumed much time and money. It turned out to be wonderful product of which I am very proud but do to its level of complication took a lot of blood from me in its realization.

**Tell Hifi Pig readers about your next project and what they can expect in the future from you and your company.**

I am working on a new lower cost series of components for what will be called the 3 series. The 3 Series will offer our first integrated amplifier and also a more cost conscious Stereo amplifier and preamplifier. Expect to see the i3 Integrated amplifier at CES 2016.

**You and your system**

**What was your very first system?**

My first system was a Harmon Kardon HK330i receiver I believe, and a pair of Great White Whale

## BEHIND THE BRANDS



(Dad's first speaker) prototype loudspeakers and a Denon turntable.

**Tell us about your system history and the way it has developed to the system you have today.**

I have had so many systems it gets a bit fuzzy however, my first real performance system was a Krell KSA-100 prototype and the 2nd pair of Apogee Scintilla speakers ever made given to me by Jason Bloom along with a Harmon Kardon Turntable I modified. The next major system I had was a Krell KSA-300S with Dual Krell KBL and KPA Preamps and a Goldmund Studio Turntable w/Kisiki Rosewood cartridge and a pair of B&W Silver Signatures given to me by the owner at that time of B&W Robert Trunz for helping them introduce the Nautilus speaker at CES when the original presenter couldn't make it for the conference on time.... or something along those lines. It's a million miles away these days J. My father was developing an active crossover for the Nautilus and I became quite well versed on the technology at the time. It was a cool system at the

CES with 4 pairs of Krell Audio Standard twos driving the speakers. Looked like a Sci-Fi Set for a film.

Today I am using a SME20/2 with a Koetsu Onyx platinum cartridge and Dan D'Agostino Phono Preamp. DCS and Bricasti Dac's with custom Music Server PC

Complete Cable systems from Kimber, Kubala, and Transparent Audio

BSC L5 Preamp and M5 or S5 amplifiers

Custom Dan D'Agostino designed 4 tower reference loudspeaker system as well as products from Wilson, Klipsch, Kef, Martin Logan, Magico, TAD, Rockport, Vivid, and Totem.

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

I wish I never let the last pair of Dayton Wright XG14 speakers owned by a dear friend get away from me. The Dayton Wright to this day is my reference for midrange performance period. It images like no other, but it had many other quirks that make it hard to live with.



## BEHIND THE BRANDS

### How often do you listen to music?

If I am in a design cycle I tend to listen only when the prototypes are ready. Once I have established a baseline then I listen critically quite often. When I am not in a design phase, I try to listen for enjoyment at least once a week, breaking out the records and actually enjoying music.

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

Besides the Dayton Wright above as a component, the Dan D'Agostino Momentum Amp and Preamp are quite wonderful. The best system of memory was definitely the Wilson Alexandria's powered by Levinson gear at Transparent Audios sound room in Maine. It is a special place for sure and when I can I like to take prototypes over there to listen.

### The state of the industry

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

Well I think it is a reaction to substandard sounding solid state gear brought about in the most part by the home theatre boom. Manufactures were more interested in fitting cool running products in racks playing explosions then they were listening to music. The

**Turntables are voodoo, I love them and have many favourites, when you think the engineering is all there the table sounds bad, when the engineering is flawed from every place in your brain, it sounds good the somewhere in between lies the perfect turntable. Alchemy I say... !**

reaction to all of these generic sounding products was a resurrection of tube sound and Vinyl.

#### Vinyl resurgence... what are your thoughts?

I am somewhat puzzled, I guess to me being immersed in the very best digital playback I didn't long for playing records. I am not sure why a younger audience is drawn to the format, perhaps the cover art and the physicality of it all??? I have heard some of the systems the youngsters are spinning records on and it isn't about the sound Ha Ha! As I stated above perhaps a more organic reaction to the edgy digital MP3 world they grew up in? I love vinyl and have



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several thousand records of which I do enjoy immensely, but it is work to play records.

## Is CD a dying format?

Well spinning disk formats will be dying soon I suspect. I hope CD lives long enough for me to sell the remaining disks I have. I have been using a music server for the better part of 6 years at this point, and personally a USB based server with a great DAC is far superior to any CD player I have heard even when the same disk burned into the library at 44.1 x 16. I prefer Hi-Res files when I can get them in original form. I am not a huge fan of up-sampling etc... but a native 24/96 audio file is pretty special, and or some of the DSD stuff I have heard.

## 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?

Wow these are some tough ones to answer here... I think the average age of the Hi-End audio component buyer is between 50-70 years of age. They have the means and the temperament to invest at the high end levels. However that has been the case for the last 20 years or so and the pool of prospective Hi-end customers is shrinking. As an industry we have to make it a point to educate and bring more people into

our hobby impressing upon them the virtues of great audio playback. I think some gear will get much more expensive as to attract a specific buyer type, I think gear will continue to shrink in order to entice a wider audience and simplicity will be a common thread.

**Digital downloads, what do you think their impact has been on the way people listen to music?** Music is everywhere, the first time in history the access to music is limitless, this unto itself is a great thing however it has a consequence in that we are oversaturated. Music is playing everywhere in our lives, in the background like a constant humming that moves us along, but that is not what “listening” to music is all about. Instead of sitting and listening to a new record, today people go home turn on one of their million tv sets, and listen to the album through their cell phone speakers while making dinner. This hardly does justice to the artist or performance.

## How do we engage young people, the audiophiles of the future?

No idea, they come to me when they are ready. You can't force it, it's like a cat, they will come when they think it is their idea not because you called them. But in all fairness making people aware there is more to music, and better than MP3 sound actually





# BEHIND THE BRANDS

does attract new buyers. It will happen, just not at the pace we expect, young people do recognize quality but it is on their own terms.. Some dude in a suit isn't going to be able to tell them how to listen to music, they just don't relate, they want to be talked too not at...

## Online shopping's effect on the retail industry?

Worse thing to ever happen to retail sales of luxury items. Hi Fi systems have to be custom designed to fit the clients taste and budget. This cannot be accomplished in a vacuum, unsupervised. Dealers are very important but many have lost their heart and just move boxes as opposed to building brands and selling the dream. A lot of that is due to internet sales and access to a global used equipment market.

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

Education and expense, it cost a lot of money for me to build a product, disproportional to other industries with much better profit margins. Many think we mark products up 10's of times and roll in profit but it simply is not true. It is a labour of love and hopefully I will be able to continue to make a living at the business I love.

## The way you work

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

Soul... I want to be sucked into the presentation and changed emotionally. I want the gear to disappear and leave me in the space where the music was created.

### Your sound preference - 'Smooth, listenable musicality', 'forward, driving, 'foot-tapping', involving sound' or 'detailed neutrality and transparency'?

All of the above, music is a dynamic art form, when you hear a kick drum or a trumpet it's a visceral powerful thing and should be presented as such, vocals and strings, percussion floats in the air and should do so in a good playback system, all the while each instrument should be detailed and flushed out in a 3d type presentation drawing you into the event.

### Turntable preferences...direct drive, belts, Idlers or what?

Turntables are voodoo, I love them and have many favourites, when you think the engineering is all there the table sounds bad, when the engineering is flawed from every place in your brain, it sounds

good the somewhere in between lies the perfect turntable. Alchemy I say... !

### Your preference - Full-range floor standers or freestanding mini monitors with a sub?

Different, I prefer a full range system with multiple floor standing towers to convey the size and scale of a musical performance. If that system can also convey a sense of intimacy then it is a home run... I love mini monitors by themselves with a really great system powering them, just an ethereal presentation. Adding a subwoofer is a plus for most listeners but for me personally it contaminates the simplicity.

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

**What is your favourite recording?** Scarborough Fair performed by Simon & Garfunkel, the lead track on the 1966 album Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme. Just eerie how lifelike it is.

### Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings.

"Dreams", Fleetwood Mac, a great 70's production that I have heard on pretty much every system I have ever played. I love the drum, bass and vocal energy. "Everybody plays the fool", Aaron Neville. A recording I latched onto in the early 90s that helps me dial in a system to this day. His position in the recording image is very important. Boz Skaggs Thanks to you, A reference My father and I have used for about 12 years, the presence of voice and underlying synth vibrato being prominent fixtures to this complex recording. I will add one other which is the Zombies, "She's not there" which on a dialled in system can be played at high volumes exposing the cool energy transfer in the recording, if it falls short this song will rip your face off. There are quite a few more actually...

### What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures?

I have a new love for the Little River Band, great songs, singing and players...

### 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?

Ha... great question, short answer I grab the hard drive bank of 75,000 songs plus.

If it were a vinyl scenario and to play fair I would have to burn with the house because I could never carry all the music that has changed my life.