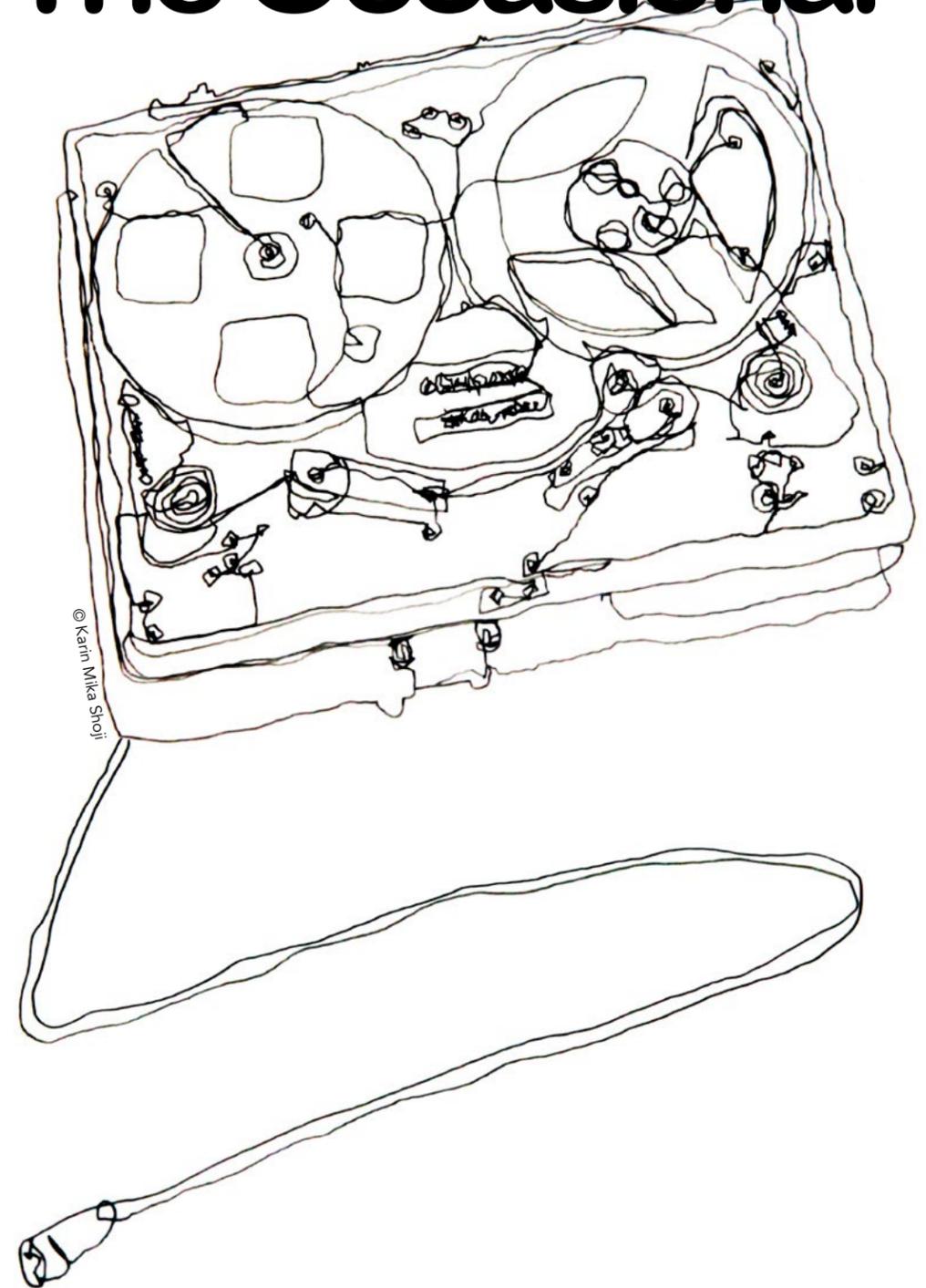


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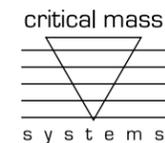
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# Incendiary Topiary



SCOT HULL, PUBLISHER

I've been thinking about Aziz Ansari. If I'm being honest, it's not because I want to be thinking about Aziz Ansari. And that's probably the point – the accusations against Ansari are uncomfortable. But what I've come to realize with the #MeToo movement, much like the #blacklivesmatter movement, is that it's not about me. That is, my comfort is not the point – me "sitting in my discomfort" is.

Someone wise once said to me that "culture eats systems for breakfast." This was part of a conversation about "dismantling systems of oppression," when instead of talking about new legislation, or by-laws changes, or new rules, we were talking about how the phrase "white supremacy" made us white people feel icky, irritable, argumentative, and generally uncomfortable. The point of the exercise: getting people uncomfortable is a culture-solution. Because without a culture change, system-change is only ever temporary.

Which brings me to "Where are the women in high-end audio?" meme. The meme has various flavors, but comes down to the "fact" that women just don't like the same things as men. Which makes it okay to include pictures of scantily clad female models when advertising consumer electronics, to hire "booth babes" at trade shows like CES 2018, and to mansplain some aspect of "audiophile culture" whenever a woman happens to be present (or even mentioned).

The point isn't that women aren't different than men. The point is that men routinely treat women poorly. As if women are a little slow. Benighted. A tad foolish. But charming nonetheless. And certainly fun to look at. There's a word for this behavior. That word is sexist.

How is the fact that there aren't a lot of women "in the industry" not a stunning embarrassment? Every single male "in the industry" really ought to be saying *WTF* to

themselves, over and over, like a mantra. Asking ourselves "What have I done?" to contribute to this sorry state of affairs. And asking ourselves "even if I didn't say anything overtly sexist, when did I let that crap slide when I saw it or heard it come from another?"

Because we're all culpable here. Every single male "in the industry."

We tell stupid stories. We laugh at sexist jokes. We "guy talk," as if that's some kind of excuse to let something out of our mouths that we know we ought to swallow down. We tell each other that "sex sells," that "women's magazines are filled with sexist imagery," that "women are just as bad as men," as if any of that is somehow an excuse for our own misogyny.

We're lying to ourselves.

I have no predictions here, dire or otherwise. Women aren't going to suddenly flee the market if men don't "wake up." And neither are women going to show up in droves if we stop being assholes, either. But that doesn't mean we get a pass. We still have work to do, even if "the women" don't magically appear. Why? Because it's the right thing to do. And it's time. It's way past time.

Culture change is hard. It takes time. But it starts with me. With you. And if we're being honest, aren't you often stunned that any of our mothers ever let any us out of the house?

What have we been thinking?

Fact is, we weren't thinking.

And that's how we get stories like Aziz Ansari, stories about how men are oblivious to basic human ideals like "consent." We get there, we stay there, by not thinking. By not asking. By not listening. By not living up to the ideals of all of those strong women in our lives. Fact is, we all know better. What #MeToo is asking is that we men now do better, too.

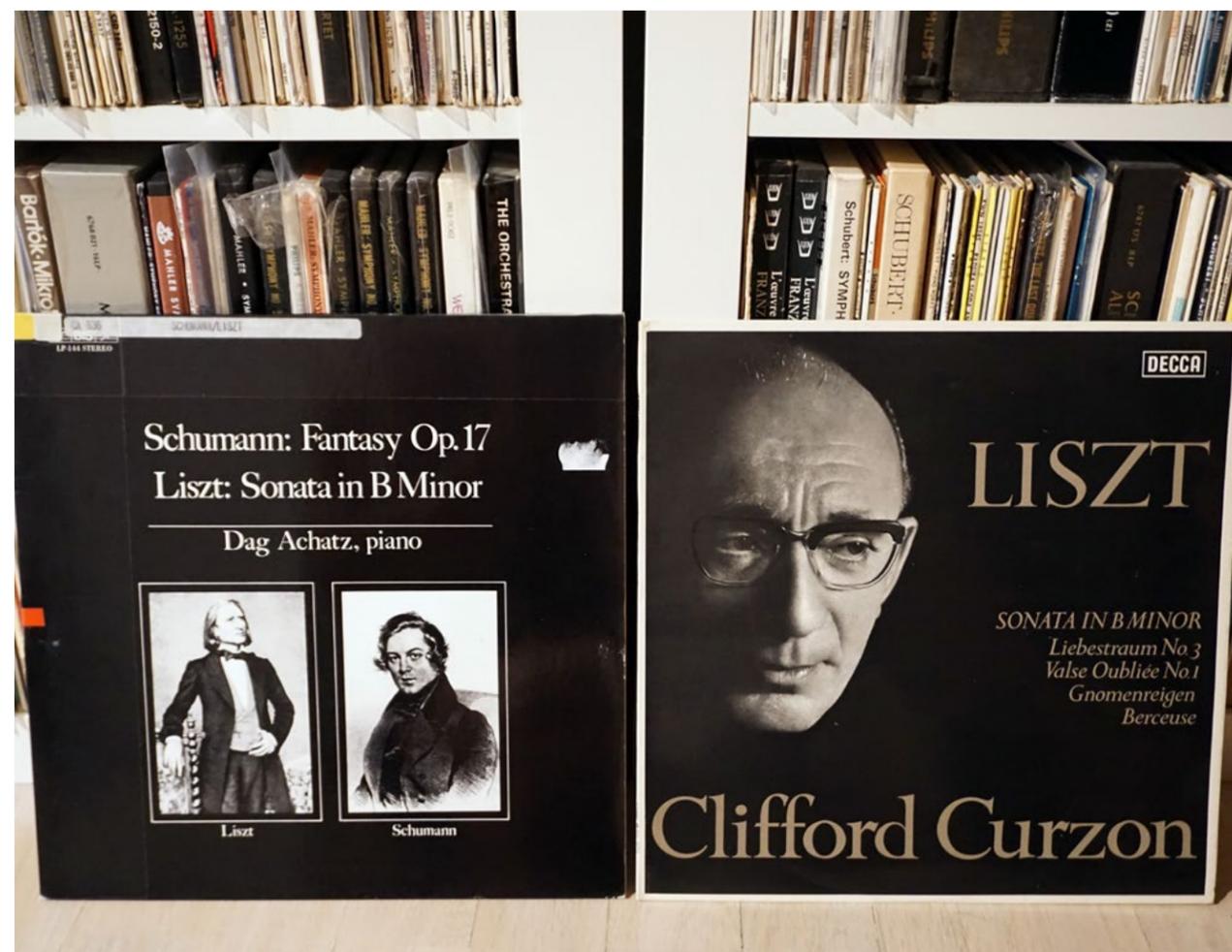
Even if it makes us uncomfortable. And perhaps especially then.

# ZYX 4D Ultimate

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DR. PANAGIOTIS KARAVITIS



REVIEW



**A**udiophiles love to gamble. And so do I. *There once was a dealer from the far east...*

Once upon a time there was a young cartridge designer from Nagano, Japan called Hisayoshi Nakatsuka. He went to work for Ortofon and came up with some rather interesting designs, including the MC-20. When finally back in Japan he was hired by the most important OEM manufacturer of moving-coil cartridges and diamond tips, namely Namiki.

After heading the design team that produced some rather famous carts for several high end companies he went solo, starting his own company: ZYX. Some 15 patents in cartridge design came in handy, along with the support of Namiki who still provides some of the best, if not the best stylus tips.

In fact, this is the story of my system and my personal choice in cartridges. I

tend to be a loyal customer and at the same time I love small gambles.

I changed my smaller ATC speakers for bigger ones, changed a Kuzma Stogi for a Kuzma 4point, have had several ASR pieces of gear and yes, I had the fantastic ZYX 1000 airy3 before moving to the 4D Ultimate. Do you make acquisitions without demoing the product first? I do. You shouldn't, but I do.

I trust some designers who have a record of commitment to what they do, they have never failed me in the past so I give them credit for that, paying in advance and patiently waiting for my purchase to prove me right.

This is a bit of a gamble, not high stakes poker but then again, not peanuts either. The 4D Ultimate retails for \$4,800 USD which puts it in the high-roller class for most audiophiles. It comfortably sits in the middle of the ZYX line up, above the 1000 and below the Omega, which packs a Lapis Lazulis stone acting as a –

*“balancing weight to accord the sweet spot of the cartridge body and the gravity point of vibration system.”*

The Lapis Lazulis stone was a bit too much for my scientific background, I moved in for the 4D.

So what's at stake?

At the moment of purchase I had a 1000 airy3 mounted on the Kuzma 4point. If you take a look at the specifications of the two car-

tridges you will realize that the differences are less than minimal they are almost non-existent.

The previous generation had the same magnets and coils, same highly polished micro-ridge diamond tip, same output and impedance, channel separation, tracking force and ability.

Differences?

The new C1000 cantilever is made of carbon

fibre which rumour has it was swapped due to the lack of boron (the market is running dry, more and more companies will have to find alternatives and soon). So why one would put down hard-earned cash for an almost identical cartridge already in one's arsenal?

Enter the ZYX 100 Yatra II, a friend's cart which also has the same identical

specs with the 1000 airy3 while the sound is clearly rolled off on both the top and bottom octave when compared to the Airy. You see where this is getting, right?

Specs mean nothing. For reasons obscure to me (not so obscure – but anyway) there is a clearly audible difference between ZYX models, no matter what the specs suggest.

Continued on **PAGE 17**

*Ultimate*

That's one of the words I don't really fancy. Same with platinum, diamond, reference, exclusive, *Supreeme* and the like.

Sick 'n tired of these ridiculous adjectives.

On this occasion the Ultimate marks the latest generation of ZYX designs with the aforementioned carbon cantilever. I will cut some slack to Yoshi for the Ultimate denomination due the sound of the

4D, which is in one word – *unbelievable* – or ultimate.

ZYX offers three choices of coil material, 6N copper, 5N silver or 24K gold and for both my carts I went for the copper version. There is a thing about copper, I prefer it to silver in most cases, the sole exception being the internal wiring of my tube amps. ZYX also offers two choices of output, low (0.24mV) and high (0.48mV). The low being exactly half the impedance of

the high, meaning the exact same quality of coils used. Low output versions sound better than the high output equivalents since there is less moving mass, the problem is that they require some serious amplification.

There is a catch here, ZYX measures output at 3.54cm/sec @ 1kHz while several other companies measure at 5cm/sec. This is very important as an equivalent of ZYX's 0.24 measured at 5cm/sec would

**“The tonearm was taking forever to hit the groove. I was sweating like a pig.”**

**PANAGIOTIS KARAVITIS**

be almost 0.34mV, so while it still remains a low-ish output MC, it isn't as low as figures suggest.

Still, a good phono stage or step-up transformer is mandatory; same applies for cables. I use the ASR Basis Exclusive phono stage, the one with the batteries. The cable connecting the tonearm to the ASR comes from Signal Projects, the Apollon model with industry-low resistance and inductance values. At his level the cable choice is critical.

*Unpacking and first impressions*

In typical ZYX fashion the 4D came in a bamboo box with plexiglass cover, wrapped inside a silk cloth, nothing new here. The look – with the exception of the cantilever – were identical to the old version. I even ordered the same extra weight to be attached on the top of the cartridge as all ZYX bodies are made from plexiglass, meaning they tip the scale at less than five grams. My choice was the so called *Tin Base*,

which pushes the overall weight to 6.8 grams, perfect for most medium-weight tonearms.

I was starting to sweat. I was all-in with this one and had nothing but a few outs. I mounted the cartridge and waited for the dealer to hit me. The tonearm was taking forever to hit the groove. I was sweating like a pig. I was in, raising the 1000 airy3 with an additional \$1,500 USD, hoping to not steal the pot but to crack the game at the showdown.

Continued on **PAGE 20**



**ZYX 4D Ultimate specifications:**

"REAL STEREO" Generator System  
 Cryogenic Treatment Temperature:  
 -196 C (-320 F)  
 Output Voltage: 0.24mV (0.48mV)  
 (3.54cm/sec, 1kHz)  
 Frequency Response: 20Hz - 20kHz  
 ±1dB 10 Hz - 100 kHz  
 Channel Separation: >30dB [1kHz]  
 Channel Balance: < 0.5dB [1kHz]  
 Recommended Tracking Force: 2.0gm  
 Tracking Force Range: 1.7gm - 2.5gm  
 Trackability > 60µm /2.0gm  
 EQ Compliance horizontal: 15×10-  
 6cm/dyn Vertical: 12×10-6cm/dyne  
 Internal Impedance: 4.0 Ω (8.0 Ω)  
 Load Impedance: > 100Ω  
 Coil Wire X type:  
 S type 5N Silver 0.035mm  
 G type K24 Gold 0.035mm  
 6N Crystal Copper 0.035mm  
 Cantilever Material: C-1000 Carbon  
 0.30mm  
 Stylus: Micro-Ridge Solid Diamond  
 0.1mm  
 Contact Radius: Life Time 3µm×60µm,  
 2000Hour/2.0gm  
 Output Terminals: 1.25mm gold plated  
 [EIA]  
 Body – Terminal Board Glass Epoxy  
 Plate:  
 Dimensions 16.8mm(W)×19.0mm(L)×x-  
 15.6mm(H)  
 Net Weight: 4.1gm, 6.8gm(TB2),  
 8.0gm(SB2).  
 MSRP: \$4,800 USD.

The river was merciless though, same packaging, same looks and nothing to be particularly excited about.

The dealer, Hisayoshi Nakatsuka gave me nothing more than a seven and an ace, one of those hands I hate playing.

For the retail price I would have hoped for at least something fancier in the packaging department, I don't know, maybe a clue that I was actually upgrading and not moving sideways? I was trying to play cool but I had to rush to my well known LPs. No space for experiments here, no new and exciting, never heard before records; I needed the same old stuff that was imprinted in my memory since ages.

Where was that Liszt sonata on BIS?

All of a sudden that low pair with an ace on top doesn't look that bad.

I start to hear what made me fall in love with ZYX in the first place. I get that sensation of having something truly special on my tonearm, there is that famous ZYX speed, probably the cleanest and deepest bass I can think of. The BIS recording with Dag Achatz playing that glorious Bosendorfer 275 piano is a landmark in terms of real-life bottom extension and has been a personal favorite for years, topping even my Clifford Curzon original Decca pressing both in terms of clarity and sheer scale. I remember describing the ZYX 1000 airy3 as a *machine gun* for how fast the playback was, and the 4D was at least on par. I could not accept loosing even one per cent of that glorious ZYX speed.

I want my analog front end to be blazing fast.

*Flop.* There was more. There was a new found sense of bloom in the piano strokes. My hand was looking better and better after the flop. A second seven was on the table. A miserable pair you might think. *Where you wanna go with that?* Bloom was something that was missing from the airy3, not that much anyway. The piano strokes were thicker, bolder and remained reverberating in free space longer. Yes, there was a longer decay time, the famous coda was plusher. Where is Billie Holiday when you need her? The first voice that comes to mind, the voice that makes or breaks the tonality question. You might think that all cartridges produce a natural timbre but this is nowhere close to reality. Yes, moving-coil designs are hands down more natural sounding than digital to analog converters but there are serious differences among say a ZYX, a Benz Micro and an AirTight. Generally speaking ZYX comes out flat, Benz too, but with an added harshness on the upper-mids while the AirTight PC-7 that made it to my place for a few weeks projected those same voices a bit forward, putting them under a spotlight – I like evenly distributed energy throughout the frequency spectrum.

*The turn.*

A seven, three of a kind for me. A grin was starting to form on my face, but I had to hold back a bit more. I had to check for sibilance, harshness, edginess and the like.

Continued on **PAGE 21**



There was none on Billie's voice but I had to try out some not-so-well recorded albums; pop and rock music with a load of sibilance already in the grooves. Cartridges that add even a glimpse of edge on those records make them sound insufferable through my ATC 100SL speakers. The notorious British monitors take no prisoners and after listening to the likes of Metallica and Sivert Hoyem I had no doubt that the 4D Ultimate added nothing that wasn't there in the first place.

Apparently my Japanese dealer knows his game very well, he managed to push the dreaded ringing way above the audible frequencies, thus achieving a sibilant-free sound.

#### *The river.*

I needed something more. Three of a kind is good but not what I was after. I was throwing swift glances at my cards and that ace was still there. I drew out of my collection Mahler's Resurrection Symphony, put down the needle and witnessed the dealer

throwing another ace on the table.

That was it, a full house and overall the best cartridge to play with my Garrard 401.

*Everyone has a tell.*

I was moving my arms like a fool, tapping my feet and singing the crescendos. How about that for a *tell*?

Transported inside the scene, submerged by the violins and the violas, it was that sensation of knowing you had the game cracked.

After the initial adrenaline rush I tried to think on the pros and cons of the 4D Ultimate. This is a complete offering, balanced and even, top to bottom, fast like few other carts out there, with what I usually tag as "modern sound."

If you are into the old fashioned mid-rangy cartridges, the ones that reserve a special place for female voices and make 'em sound lush, ZYX is not for you. This aspect of being clean but not lean, throwing a big soundstage and positioning instruments perfectly on the scene

is my personal objective and ZYX truly excels in all aspects.

The only con I can come up with is the output. The effective 0.34mV is on the low-ish side, so one must be absolutely positive his phono stage will be able to handle such an output. There is also the loading issue, ZYX recommends more than 100 Ohms but my experience suggests otherwise: 47 Ohms are perfect here. Many phono stages won't allow for loading adjustment and most of them usually have 100 Ohms as a preset. In that case go for the high output ZYX 4D Ultimate which will work perfectly fine with less gain and 100 Ohms is spot on.

Besides that, the ZYX 4D Ultimate is absolutely amazing. Compared to the 1000 airy3 it creates a more impactful playback with richer tonality while maintaining all the other characteristics of the ZYX family unaltered.

*So, who's in for a hand? T/O*



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# Pity the Fool

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LABORATORY  
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Built by hand on a per-order basis in the Tokyo suburb of Saitama, the Shindo Mr. T power conditioner came to me from Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports in late November. It's relatively diminutive size belies the solidity and weight of the Mr. T, and with my CD player, phono preamplifier, and integrated line-stage amplifier plugged into it, I noticed an immediate drop in the background noise floor of LPs, and discs, to say nothing of an almost startling injection of *humanity* to everything I was hearing. Review forthcoming. MSRP \$2,195 USD.

-Rafe Arnott





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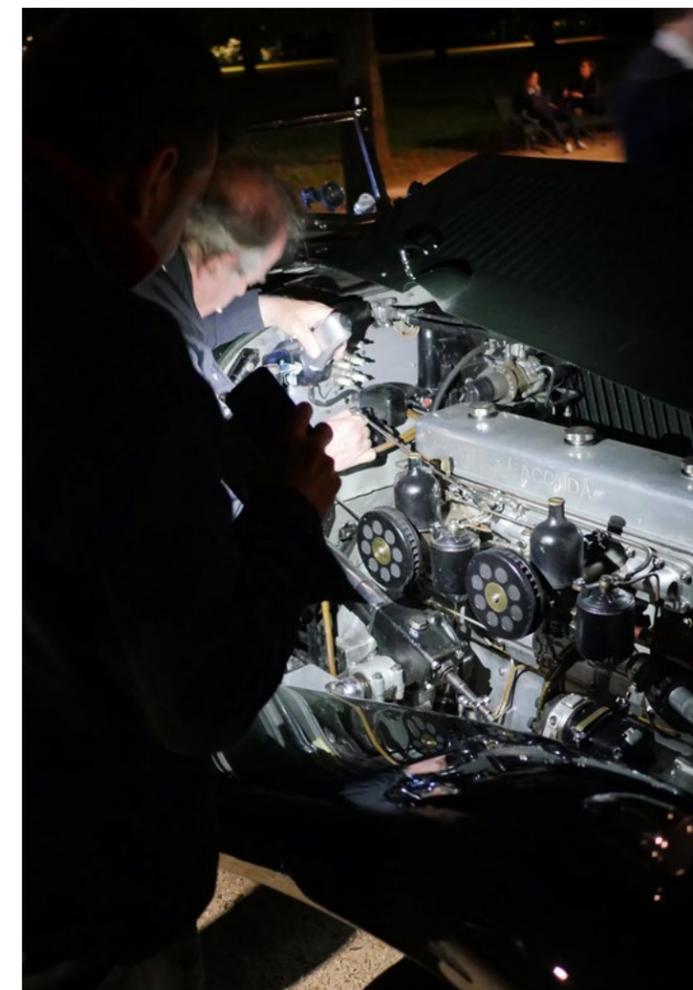
**M**echanical shrieks and cracking reports bounced off the ancient buildings of Rome on a Saturday morning in the spring of 1955 – violent sounds of battle that would normally send people running for cover. But for the crowds filling the sidewalks the approaching noise was the *reason* they had come.

Craning their necks and spilling out onto the narrow cobblestone streets, each wanted to be the first to accurately identify the sound, like avid birders trying to ID a species from its call alone. Some even praying out loud that the roaring engines would belong to a crimson 118LM from fabled Scuderia Ferrari, or perhaps a streamlined Maserati A6 storming through the city.

A great deal of commotion arose when the menacing silver bullet burst into view and the crowds recognized the vehicle that was bearing down on them much faster than expected: A Mercedes-Benz 300SLR.

The driver, a 25-year-old Englishman without a major racing victory to his name, lifted his foot off the accelerator pedal causing the howling straight-eight engine to blast flames out of the side-mounted exhaust pipes. High-pitched thunder crackled off the brick and stone walls on either side of the crowded street. For a moment his rear tires lost traction and the careening car slid to the right.

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With a deft dose of opposite lock the driver brought the rear of his car back to center, then slid the car out to the left just a bit. Terrified spectators scrambled out of the way as fast as they could, clearing a path for the racer to bolt through the city.

Sir Stirling Moss, though not yet knighted in 1955, had found this to be the most effective and expedient method for clearing the millions of spectators off the 1,000-mile road race that threaded through medieval cities and wound across treacherous mountain passes as it looped through Italy, and known as the *Mille Miglia*. He went on that Saturday to win the race with a time of just over 10 hours, seven minutes and an astonishing average speed of 98.58 MPH, a record for the event that has never been broken. [Footnote 1]

In many ways this moment represented the pinnacle of an unsustainable golden age of motorcar racing. Technology had pushed the speed capabilities of the cars ever higher, while the races were still held over courses designed decades before, for the far slower cars of the '20s and '30s. Safety was not a priority, either for the drivers or for the spectators; seat belts being rare, crumple zones unheard-of and with few barriers to separate the cars from the fans (an occasional hay-bale at best.)

While Moss hit speeds in excess of 170 MPH over the course of his record race, the brakes on his 300SLR were still outdated drums instead of the more effective discs in use by some of the British race cars of the time.

In addition, the *Mille Miglia* was a timed race, with cars leaving every minute.

Continued on **PAGE 31**



**“In many ways this moment represented the pinnacle of an unsustainable golden age of motorcar racing.”**

**JOHN DEVORE**



But in an effort to maximize racing excitement and minimize the amount of time streets had to be closed and marshals had to be on duty, organizers of the race sent the slowest cars first, followed by the faster cars. This made for numerous passing opportunities through the narrow city streets but increased potential for crashes enormously. In fact just two years after Moss' run, the race was banned entirely by the Italian government after two crashes killed a dozen people.

The event was quintessentially Italian in many ways but one of the most important

is how its history traced one of Italy's most celebrated sons through his formative years at Alfa Romeo to his founding of the country's most famous car company. Enzo Ferrari's mark on the Mille Miglia is clear when you realize that he ran Alfa's racing program from 1927-1939, a period when that marque won 10 of 12 Mille Miglia races, then founded Ferrari S.p.A. in 1947 which went on to win 8 of the last 11 races.

The race is so much a part of its home country that in 1977 Italy brought back the Mille Miglia as a parade open only to those cars that either raced in it between 1927-

1957, or could have. The cars must be completely original, no homages or remakes. The course is the same as that of the historic races as well, 1,000 miles from Brescia to Rome and back over public roads that existed at the time. No modern highways or Autostrada. And while this parade is not strictly a race, the cars are timed, and there is fierce competition among many of the drivers.

Restrictions on the cars that can be entered means that nearly all are worth well into six-figures with a great many hitting values of seven or even eight figures.

These are legendary race cars that museums and collectors fight over, priceless, many one-of-a-kind, running flat-out through ancient town centres and down winding mountain switchbacks.

The newest cars are now 60 years old, the oldest 80. The heroics required to keep these original machines running at speed for 1,000 miles is considerable, and heroic also is the will and spirit to run them at all. Racing an exquisite, hand-made car from the 1940s worth millions of dollars for 1,000 miles through all types of conditions instead of stowing it away in a climate-controlled garage or museum is a wonderful thing, and speaks to the passion of the owners.

I was fortunate enough to get press credentials and attend the Mille Miglia with some friends in 2016. Many adventures were had over the five days we were in Italy but witnessing these cars doing what they were meant to do, in the place they were meant to do it, was something I will never forget.

Continued on **PAGE 35**



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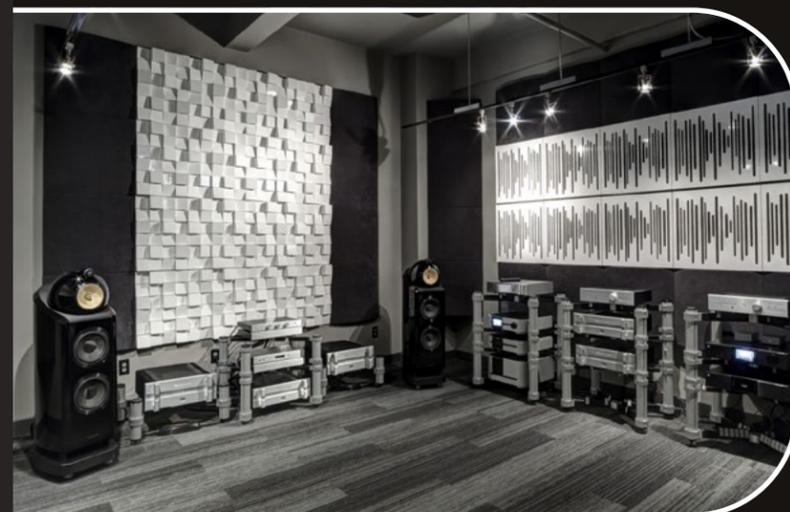
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| Audeze                           | Clarus Cable                        | Erhard Audio              | Kimber Kable                 | Parts Express           | Shure Incorporated         | Von Schweikert Audio             |
| Audio Envy Cables                | Clear Tune Monitors Inc.            | Esoteric                  | KirmussAudio                 | Pass Labs               | Silnote Audio              | Well Pleasced AV                 |
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| Audio Technica                   | CLEER, Inc.                         | EXOGAL                    | Fern & Roby                  | Periodic Audio, Inc.    | Sonist Audio               | Wells Audio                      |
| Audio Union                      | Comply Foam                         | Final                     | Fidelis                      | Pioneer Onkyo USA Corp  | Sonner Audio               | Western Electric                 |
| Audio Video Interiors of Chicago | Constellation Audio                 | Finest Fidelity           | final                        | pNeuance Audio, Inc.    | Sonoma Acoustics           | Wilson Audio                     |
| Audionet                         | Convergent Audio                    | Focal                     | Focal                        | PranaFidelity           | Sonus Faber                | Wolf Audio Systems               |
| Audiophile Direct, LLC           | Core Power                          | Galen Carol Audio         | Galen Carol Audio            | Precision Audio Video   | SOTA Sound Inventions, LLC | Wynn Audio                       |
| AudioQuest                       | Technologies                        | Gayle Sanders Audio       | Gayle Sanders Audio          | Prism Sound             | SOTA                       | Wyred 4 Sound                    |
| AudioThesis                      | Creative Sound Solutions            | Gershman Acoustics        | Gershman Acoustics           | Pro-Audio               | STAX                       | WyWires                          |
| AURALiC North America Inc.       | D Digital                           | Gingko Audio              | Gingko Audio                 | Pro-Ject                | Stereo Haven               | Zesto Audio                      |
| auranas®                         | Daedalus Audio                      | Göbel High End            | Göbel High End               | PS Audio                | Stereophile                | ZMF Headphones                   |
| Aurender                         | Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems | GTT Audio & Video         | GTT Audio & Video            | PureAudioProject        | Swan Song Audio            |                                  |
| AVM                              | Haniwa                              | Hanson Audio Video LLC    | Hanson Audio Video LLC       | Quintessence Audio      | Synergistic Research       |                                  |
| AXISS Audio                      | Danacable                           | HeadAmp Audio             | HeadAmp Audio                | Raidho Acoustics        | The Audio Surgeon          |                                  |
| Ayon Audio USA                   | David Michael Audio                 | HeadAmp Audio Electronics | HeadAmp Audio Electronics    | Rainbow Audio           | The Sound Organisation     |                                  |
|                                  | Dekoni Audio                        | HHR Exotic Speakers       | HHR Exotic Speakers          | Raven Audio             | The Tweak Studio           |                                  |
|                                  | Delmark Records                     |                           |                              | Rega                    | The Voice That Is Thrax    |                                  |

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Pouring over these works of art in a car museum is a wonderful thing, but it left me unprepared for the experience of seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling these cars doing what they do best. Masterpieces from a time when engineers used a pencil, paper, and track time, and designs shaped by hand and hammer were roaring past, throwing pebbles against cafe tables filled with cheering spectators. A massive Mercedes-Benz SSK clattering by, supercharger whining like an airplane. Impossibly small Fiats skidding around corners with their tiny engines screaming at redline. An Alfa Romeo 8C blasts by in a cloud of black smoke, proudly displaying the yellow Scuderia Ferrari shield. It was a dream come true.

We alternated between chasing the racers through the countryside and jumping on the Autostrada to get ahead of the cars in order to set-up with cameras as ready as they raced through beautiful piazzas and town centers. The camera I used was the Lumix G8 Micro-four-thirds body with two lenses, the Leica DG Summilux 15mm f/1.7, and the Leica DG Nocticron 42.5mm f/1.2. Note that lens lengths for the M4/3 format are half the equivalents in 35mm Full Frame, so these lenses are 30mm and 85mm equivalent. **T/O**

[Footnote 1] Unfortunately this was not the only record M-B's new car set in 1955. Just six weeks after Moss' incredible feat at the wheel of his 300SLR, another one, piloted by french driver Pierre Levegh in the 24 Hours of Le Mans, hit the rear of another car and was launched into the air at over 150 MPH to crash into a full grandstand.

To make matters worse, the 300SLR had a body made from a magnesium alloy which was ignited by a fuel fire and sent white-hot burning metal throughout the crowd. At least 83 people were killed and well over 150 were badly injured in what still stands as the worst racing crash of all time. Mercedes-Benz withdrew its other car (driven by Moss and legendary Argentine driver Juan Manuel Fangio) from the race and subsequently withdrew from all motor racing for decades after.

# ARE YOU LISTENING YET?



Listen on iTunes



# Back in Time

A MUSIC LOVER CAN NOW DANCE AGAIN

It was several years ago that by chance I walked into a small, unassuming hifi shop – Sound Hounds – in Victoria, B.C. to have my life changed for the better in a most profound way. The place felt more like a home than a store, and those inside seemed more family than co-workers (*This ad is more than 40 years old, and some pictured therein are still working at the shop*). I was directed to take a load off, and relax; this is how I met owner Terry Crabbe, who would help teach me to focus on timbre, tone, and music, not on solid state or tube, or digital or analog. Terry lived life through the beauty of music, and spent decades sharing that love with audiophiles near and far. Sadly, after a long battle with illness Terry left us in December, 2017. Wherever he is now, he's got the music loud, and he's dancing.

What do a math honors graduate, a ham radio operator, a technician, a rock guitarist, a bush pilot, a black belt and a water skier have in common?



They all love music.  
 They all work at **SOUND HOUNDS.**  
*a great place to buy a hi fi system*



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FROM  
THE LAND  
OF  
ICE AND  
SNOW

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAN ZESCHKY

S BEST GIN

LIMITED RELEASE  
THOR'S  
BARLEY WINE  
HAMMER  
Conditioned

CENTRAL CITY  
BREWERS & DISTILLERS



Thor's Hammer brewer Gary Lohin at Central City Brewers + Distillers.

**V**alhalla, I am coming... Battle cry or orgasmic wail?

With Robert Plant, it's often so hard to tell.

But this ambiguity is very well suited to the subject matter of Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song." For the marauding Vikings who sought to "drive our ships to new lands," as the song describes, there was likely some sort of sexual gratification in the domination of distant shores; even in the wild abandon of placing your life in the hands of the gods as you rushed into combat.

And let's be honest: You're going to have balls of cast iron if the Norse gods got your back. After papa Odin, for starters, you've got his kickass wife Frigga; the god of war Tyr; Heimdall, guardian of Asgard; and, of course,

Thor, everyone's favourite hammer-wielding god of thunder and Asgard's No. 1 stud.

Where am I going with this? Just the fact that if you were going to name the ideal beer for a post-pillaging pint, it would be Thor's Hammer barley wine. And damn straight, Vikings would guzzle an 11-per-cent ABV beer by the pint.

Sadly for them, the first barley wines weren't brewed until the early 18th century. But perhaps there was something of a hedonistic Norse influence in the style's origins in England, which had seen many raiders and settlers from across the North Sea in times past.

As the name implies, barley wine was created as a wine substitute in grape-starved England, where it was expensive to import bottles from

France and Spain (whom the English were also at war with at any given time, seemingly). Rather than being a great way to get drunk, barley wine was treated with reverence as the prime gauge of a brewer's skill. That's because making a beer this big and boozy while making sure it doesn't taste like solvent-laced beef tea is a very difficult thing to do. What helps the process is a long period of cool aging that helps this strong ale's many flavours develop, deepen and harmonize.

Over the years, classic examples took hold of the English market, such as Thomas Hardy Ale, J.W. Lees Harvest Ale and Theakston's Old Peculier. But the style very much waned in popularity as the 20th century progressed.

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When the beer renaissance took off in the U.S. in the 1980s, small-batch brewers ravenous for inspiration once again found barley wine as a test of their skills. And in true American style, they added even more hops to their recipes, creating powerful malty ales with a thunderous blast of resin and fruit tang from West Coast varieties.

But while some aimed for flavour-fulminating heights, others honed their barley wines to balanced, nuanced and complex depths like those legendary English ales of old. Enter Gary Lohin, who says the name of Thor's Hammer just popped into his head as he was discussing the barley wine he was brewing for Sailor Hagar's pub in North Vancouver, B.C.

As names go, it's very apt. While it's Thor you might fear, it's his hammer you respect.

Thor's Hammer, now brewed at Central City Brewers + Distillers in Surrey, B.C., where Lohin is part owner, has remained one of the West Coast's most respected barley wines for its 20-year existence. You might even call it legendary, like Mjolnir the hammer itself, earning fistfuls of accolades for its owner.

Pour it into a snifter glass and you'll find out why. It's an alluring garnet colour topped with an enticing foam that beads on the glass when you give it a swirl, as long, thick legs slide slowly downward.

Take a sniff and you will know you are in the presence of malt. (Six varieties, in fact.) Caramel, toffee and molasses make up the base aroma but on top there are some yeast-driven esters giving

off notes of dark fruit and steeped berries, while the booziness comes through in a light spiciness.

Take a sip and you might come close to understanding what Robert Plant was wailing about. Aged almost a year before it's released, Thor's Hammer boasts a smooth, seamless journey of a flavour profile. Again, the malt is a huge presence, but it's more in the vein of vanilla-laced toffee, rye bread and figs. The yeast esters and alcohol come through as a tangier fruitiness alongside a cinnamon-laced spice and an almond nuttiness.

Yes, it's pretty much a meal in itself, but no meal is complete without cheese. And you're going to want some cheese with this; and the only cheese you're going to want is the most pungent Stilton you can lay your hands on. (Seize it from Thor's jockstrap itself, if you dare.) The brininess of the English blue is a magical foil for the deep sweetness and fruitiness of the beer. There's a harmony of tanginess and creaminess, while the carbonation cleans up the palate after every bite.

Had enough cheese? Time to open the humidors. Get comfy: You'll want to linger long over the interplay of flavours offered by this mighty ale and a woody, spicy maduro cigar.

In fact, you might as well just load yourself in the longboat, cast yourself adrift and wait for the flaming arrow to light your pyre, because life likely won't get much better than this – and chances are very good that they brew Thor's Hammer in Valhalla, too. **T/O**





# £500 Gorilla

THE ELECTRIC RECORDING COMPANY  
MUSIC FOR VIOLA AND CELLO  
HERBERT DOWNES/JACQUELINE DU PRÉ

We all have favourite LPs that we turn to in good times, and bad. Our music is there to comfort, or soothe us, to inspire, or energize us. Sometimes it is there to provide solace from the white noise that seems to steadily erode the sanctity of aural harmony we seek to balance our lives with. *Music for Viola and Cello* featuring Herbert Downes and Jacqueline Du Pré is an album that has become my shield against the gray, and ordinary that life can try to pile upon one. This is because it is a truly extraordinary recording, mastering, and pressing. Perhaps even,

the best I have ever heard. When The Electric Recording Co. sent it to me I assumed that a £500 (\$700 USD) LP should sound great, but I was wholly unprepared for the startling dynamics, and depth of emotional connection that this album is imbued with. Easily the quietest pressing I possess, it is not only a thing of beauty to hear, but to hold as well. Sourced from the first-generation master tapes, recorded with a 1950s EMI all-valve Lyrec tape machine, cut with an Ortofon DS522 head, and limited to a pressing of 300 numbered copies, the attention to detail is so

steadfast, that a vintage letterpress is employed to create the sleeve artwork by hand. ERC founder Pete Hutchison, himself a self-professed vinyl junkie known to spend in excess of \$70,000 USD on classical albums alone in a year, started the company to help address his purist approach to LP collecting. A perfectionist by nature, ECM's offerings reflect that, as I find this album to be as close to perfect as I could imagine. While pricing does put these pressings within reach of a select clientele, I'd argue they are worth every pence.

—Rafe Arnott

# Enjoy the Silence

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFE ARNOTT

## ENTREQ OLYMPUS TELLUS GROUNDING BOX

**T**hey say absence makes the heart grow fond. Or not.

From personal experience I'd have to agree with the latter.

For the record, I'm talking about electronic noise here, not significant others. Incoming power grid hash, or AC crud, radio-frequency (RF) interference, and grounding noise to name but a few of the sources that can plague the ultimate transparency to source we seek from modern (or vintage) high-fidelity playback equipment.

Mobile phones, switching power supplies on laptops, bulb frequencies on halogen lamps... these all contribute an intense amount of audible pollution to the delicate signals we covet so highly from our gear because of the shared current path it all feeds from in our homes.

Some power-focused souls put in dedicated AC lines for their stereo equipment, but even that is no guarantee of a contaminate-free power source.

Who here hasn't dabbled in power conditioning of some kind? It's like a 12-step program for many budding audiophiles. It usually starts when one realizes that power cables actually do sound different from one another.

Continued on **PAGE 49**





Then maybe it's a hospital-grade wall receptacle. Our focus then shifts to the ancient power bar we have everything plugged into, and we start considering dropping serious coin on power conditioners, and regenerators or AC isolation solutions.

But what about grounding?

I have to be honest, after steadily improving my AC cables, and power conditioning, I thought I was done. Turns out I was wrong.

Enter the Entreq Olympus Tellus grounding box, and Eartha Cables courtesy of Edward Ku at Element Acoustics, and Wynn Wong of Wynn Audio. They told me I had to check it out, and refused to say what, exactly I should expect from it.

I was skeptical, but I kept an open mind, and picked up the beautifully-crafted 100-pound, waxed-wooden box (one of their largest models) that is the Olympus Tellus (OT) from Ku, and waited for Wong to ship the Entreq cables to me.

I set up the unit on the floor in

front of my rack about a week later, and proceeded to hook up my preamp, phono stage, CD players, DAC/streamer, and power/integrated amps with the various Eartha cables – without connecting anything to the Olympus Tellus's five solid-silver binding posts – and finally plugging the OT into my PS Audio P10 via a special single-pole copper AC grounding plug.

I did some critical listening with one of the CD players first, then connected it to the OT, and queued up the last track again... annnnnnnnd there was no change. I listened again, and still couldn't discern any change.

I went back to my writing, and let the album play.

It was during the fourth or fifth track of *Only The Lonely* (Capitol CDP 7484712) that I suddenly looked up from my work because Frank Sinatra's voice had opened up, and gotten what sounded like an octave lower, his trademark croon emanating even deeper from his chest.

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Ditto, the upright bass, and strings accompanying him. I went and sat down on the sofa to listen more closely, and got a weird sensation of vertigo: I felt like I was falling forward into the recording because it had opened up, and enveloped the room completely. Subtle nuances in string pressure on individual bows in Nelson Riddle's orchestra were apparent to me for the first time ever on "Willow Weep For Me." By the time "Blues In The Night" played my skepticism had been completely replaced with genuine disbelief. This was an order of magnitude in sonic improvement – not a change mind you – but a further absence of background noise that allowed more of the recording to be presented. The opening up of the sound stage, and the depth with which the recording

could now be lensed was difficult to not be impressed by.

I proceeded to connect the pre-amp, and phono stage, and throw an LP on (*Oscar Peterson – The Lost Tapes Speakers Corner/MPS 529096-1*).

"Gravy Waltz" sounded as I remembered it, same for "Squeaky's Blues," and "Let's Fall In Love." But when "Stella By Starlight" came on it was like a curtain was being slowly pulled back to reveal the true recording.

With "Moanin'" playing the transformation was complete, and again it sounded like a window had been thrown open onto the recording session: Peterson's piano cemented itself in 3D space about 10 feet in front of me, and exuded such realistic solidity in its felt-hammer-on-

## "By the time "Blues In The Night" played my skepticism had been completely replaced..."

### RAFE ARNOTT

Both said they let potential buyers audition whatever Entreq model they are interested in, and draw their own conclusions within the context of their own system.

OK, so it works. But what is it?

Entreq designs components that are focused on ensuring ground points that are as free from stray, contaminating high-frequency voltages, and the magnetic fields they introduce, as possible.

Why should you care, and how do they do it?

The Entreq website says: "Our ground boxes/Eartha cables are designed to resemble and work like a bit of Mother Earth in concentrated form and offer the simplest and fastest route for this high-frequency noise to reach an earth point."

You should care if you're serious

about getting the best from your high-fidelity setup and how they do it exactly, is a secret – which when you've poured in thousands of man-hours, and your own money to research & develop, is something I respect – but basically, they are specially designed, and constructed waxed-wood boxes that contain a proprietary mix/proportion of minerals, and metals that are arranged in specific ratios/distances from one another to act as the most perfect attractor for said contaminating high-frequency voltages, and their associated magnetic fields.

I get that some people would be nervous about technology like this because it doesn't come with a specification chart or a bar graph, so I contacted Entreq owner, and lead designer Per-Olof Friberg in Swe-

den who graciously answered a few questions for me (responses have been edited for brevity/spelling/grammar).

string presence as to leave me low whistling. I switched to the DAC/streamer, and experienced the same slow noise wipe, and timbral/sonic saturation that a drop in noise floor/background noise had revealed via the other sources. When I added the power amp into the mix, it went slightly blacker, but not to the same degree that it did by adding the Olympus Tellus to the sources, and pre-amps.

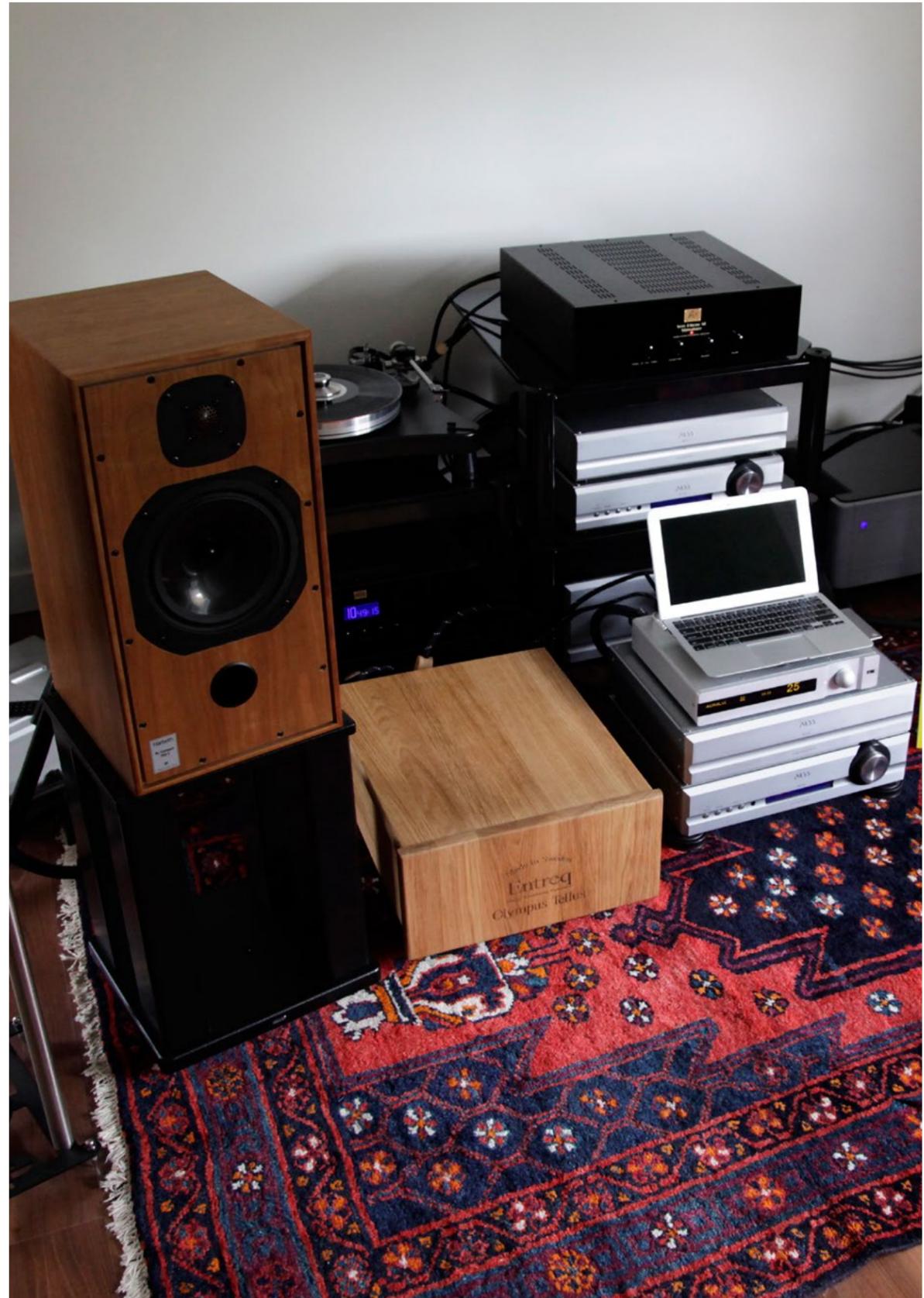
The fact that it took about 25 or 30 minutes for this slow bleeding-out of the noise floor to occur wasn't lost on me.

I spoke with Ku, and Wong a few days later about what I was hearing, and they agreed that they too had experienced similar results, as had their Entreq customers.

den who graciously answered a few questions for me (responses have been edited for brevity/spelling/grammar).

**Rafe Arnott:** *Many people will want to know exactly how the Ground Boxes work. I'm not asking you to reveal the secret of the sauce (so to speak) of what's inside the boxes, but if you could shed some light – in laymen's terms – on what the Entreq boxes do specifically, that would be very helpful.*

**Per-Olof:** For me to give you a correct answer, I will expose some of our secrets, but on the other hand you deserve as accurate an answer as possible to your questions.



# Bricasti Design

*Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication*



## The Spin

INTERVENTION  
RECORDS  
JUDEE SILL  
HEART FOOD

Judee Sill learned to play piano in her father's bar before a fractious home life led to a teen crime spree and reform school. She picked up the guitar along with a husband, and a heroin addiction. Transforming into a songwriter, Sill toured with Graham Nash and David Crosby. She made the cover of *Rolling Stone*, and put out several LPs, including *Heart Food* before dying in 1979 of a drug overdose. This Intervention Records 2x45 180-Gram 'AAA' redux was mastered by Kevin Grey at Cohearant Audio and features original artwork, Stoughton gatefold printing, and was pressed at RTI. Featuring lush, dynamic production, it is a heart-breaking concept album full of sad, poignant lyrics sung with aching beauty.

MSRP \$55 USD.

—Rafe Arnott





Overture



# In Deference WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFE ARNOTT to Music



Japan. There's a lot of things Japanese that I'm fascinated with. Japanese, whiskies, Japanese art, Japanese films, Japanese culture in general – especially their cult-like devotion to vinyl records, and their practically religious reverence for American jazz music from the 1950s, and 1960s – both vices I share. Having developed a predilection for high-efficiency Japanese horn speaker systems over the years, I've come away with a constantly renewed respect for this particular path of recorded-music worship.

I guess that's why I'm fascinated most of all with sub-40 watt Japanese tube amplifiers, and preamplifiers – some in particular are the rare offerings of Kondo Audio Note, a company started by Hiroyasu

Kondo in 1976 within Tokyo's Saiwai Ward.

Few circuit designs get listeners as close to the recorded event as those based around valves in my opinion, and after low-power tube amps were relegated to the history pile of hifi in the early '70s (watts are cheap), it was a dedicated group of Japanese audiophiles, and engineers like Kondo who laboured to bring back traditional single-ended triode (SET) valve-amplifier designs which had enjoyed a vaunted run from the '20s to the '60s (along with push-pull valve designs which after the adoption of negative feedback in circuits allowed PP amps to deliver more power) before being unceremoniously swept aside by most for the convenience of solid state circuit pathways.

Continued on **PAGE 59**



**“It was this experience in Munich that cemented my desire to hear a Kondo-based system in my home.”**

**RAFE ARNOTT**

Usually spoken about in hushed reverence by valve acolytes, Kondo circuit design execution is more art form than technical achievement in my mind.

In Munich last year I encountered Kondo’s musical prowess firsthand through the KSL M-77 Ongaku-Pre in the Living Voice demo room, and the Kagura 211 power amplifiers paired with the G-1000 preamplifier, Ginga turntable, and IO-M cartridge in the Kondo demo room. I was so impressed there that I lingered far longer than my schedule allowed for to listen.

The relatively new Kondo Overture II integrated amplifier (32 watts/channel, Class-A, push-pull circuit design) was on display near the Kaguras, but sadly, only in static form. It was as gorgeous as a plain metal box could be, and the solidity, and attention to the most minute details of construction were apparent, which at \$30,000 USD (current exchange rate), can be more the exception, than the rule.

It was this experience in Munich that cemented my desire to hear a Kondo-based system in my home, and fast-forwarding to October, Lawrence Lin of Excel Stereo in Toronto contacted me about just such a review opportunity.

An Overture II arrived within weeks, soon followed by the GE-1 Phono Amplifier, Operia SPc-2.5 speakers cables, KSL-VcII interconnects, ACc-Per-simmon, and ACz-Avocado power cables.

Continued on **PAGE 61**

Having what amounted to a holistic Kondo system in my home, and seeing firsthand the meticulous workmanship of their point-to-point wiring, thick solid-copper chassis plates, and painstaking attention to detail right down to the screws used to affix the top, and bottom casework covers, left me deeply impressed with the level of commitment to design integrity the company imbues its products with.

But it was, ultimately, the Kondo gear's fidelity to musical reproduction that had the greatest affect upon me.

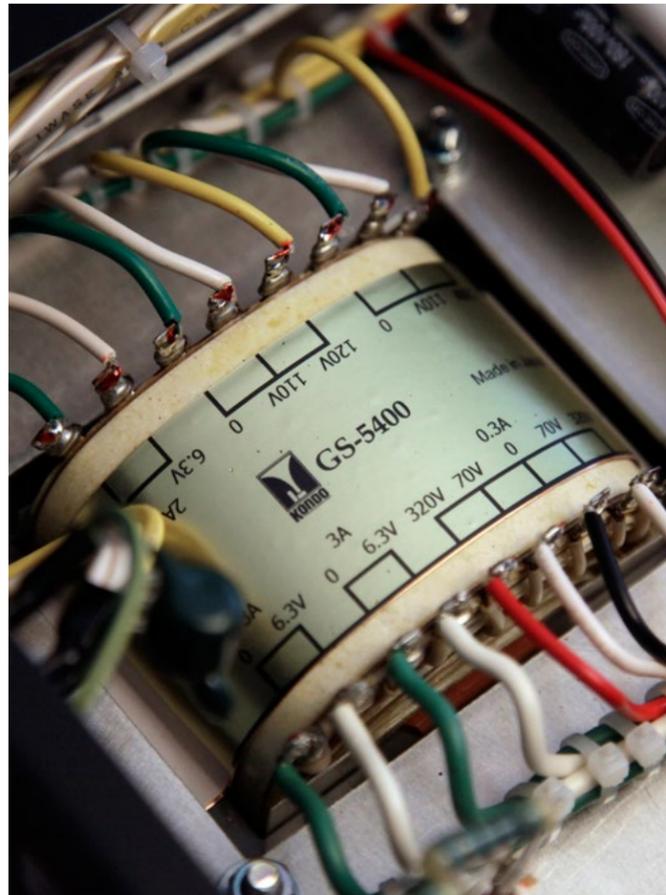
I started with adding only the Overture II to my current system, the inclusion of which instantly brought about a smoothness, along with a subtle ripening to tonality, and timbre that I had rarely experienced personally (I kept thinking about the difference between the first sip of a fine wine, and how much better the second sip is once your palette has adjusted). Next was lower-octave definition, and here I was reminded of the variance between approximation of piano or standup bass notes, and the actual, live playing of these instruments.

The amp features four EL34 pentode output valves, two 12AY7, and two 12BH7 valves for the line/input stage. Input valves are Electro-Harmonix, and output valves were branded Svetlana Electron Devices. All are from Russia.

Through the Overture II instruments took on a more human presence to their playing – a forcefulness if you will – but not only that, a competence to the playing that I had not been able to recognize previously.

Continued on **PAGE 63**





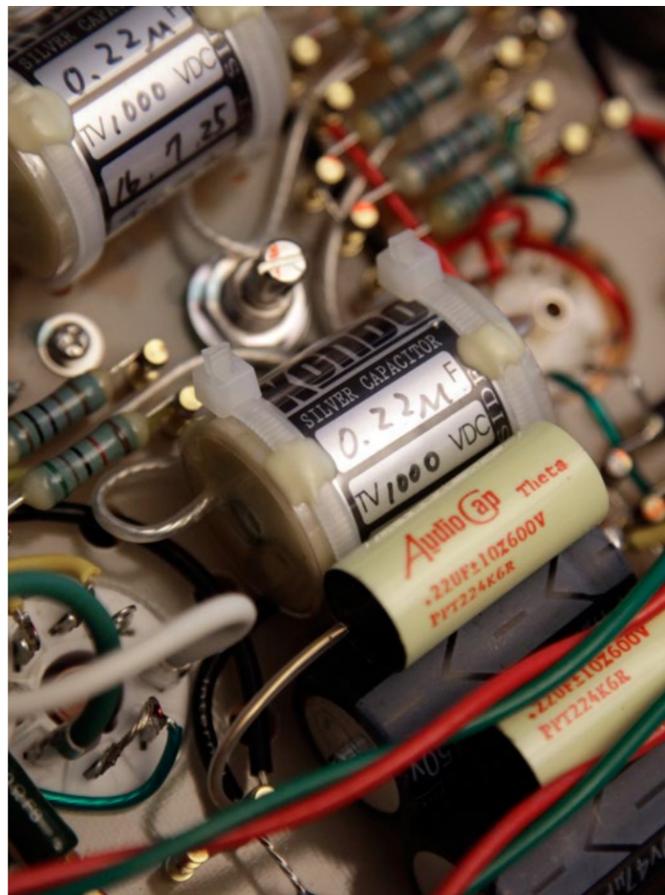
Recorded jazz quartets, quintets, and solo performances took on each artists intent during listening sessions, imbuing every CD I played with a palpable emotional connection that left me spent after the first hours-long sit down with the amp. I then substituted in the ACz-Avocado power cable over the plain-Jane stock cables I use initially with reviews, and was greeted with an even more transparent window onto personal renderings of songs. Peter Gabriel's *Passion – Music for The Last Temptation Of Christ*, (CD Geffen GEFD 24206) is an album long used by audiophiles for critical listening. In the best systems it becomes a deep, layered

soundstage where a visceral, living, breathing entity writhes with aural complexity. In lesser systems it tends to dry, crisp, and flat in its presentation. *Passion's* opening cut "The Feeling Begins" features an intricate percussive interplay between Manny Elias' surdo bass drum play, and Hossam Ramzy on tablas, and duff drums. Through the Overture II with the ACz power cord in place the tension created between Elias, and Ramzy can be felt as the tempo inexorably builds to a crescendo, and comes crashing down into silence. It is this silence, or blackness, I'd like to touch on next.

Continued on **PAGE 134**

**“Through the Overture II instruments took on a more human presence...”**

RAFE ARNOTT



# WHAT FUN

DO GEAR OBSESSIONS AND AUDIO TRIBE BELIEFS OBSCURE SIMPLE PLEASURES?  
WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JOHN STANCAVAGE



LEFT: This is circa 1977 – me with my JBL L36 speakers, Technics receiver, Technics SL-1300 turntable, Radio Shack cassette deck and Koss 4AA headphones. To the right is my dad's tubed, monophonic console hi-fi system he hand-built in the garage around 1960.

I meet more serious audiophiles in a year than most people do in a lifetime. Covering all the major audio shows while wearing a press badge leads to dozens of impromptu conversations each day, as well as me being able to observe – in classic fly-on-the-wall mode – hundreds more hobbyists.

You'll notice I kicked this column off by saying "serious" audiophiles, and, more often than not these days, that's what I encounter. Serious. Ultra serious. *Ultra dead serious.*

I see these listeners wracked with insecurity about the components they have in their current systems, and sweating every technical detail about the gear they are auditioning.

As these audiophiles sit in the near-darkness, eyes squeezed shut, back rod-stiff, feet solidly planted on the floor, I wonder what they are thinking as their all-too-predictable selection plays. "No Sanctuary Here." "Keith Don't Go." Or, God help us all, the Sheffield

Drum Record. Then the questions start: "Doesn't the upper bass seem attenuated by about 3db?"

"What's the impedance graph look like on those speakers? There's a slight dip at about 15,482 Hz, right?"

"Why are you using the Japanese reissue instead of the 1977 German first pressing? I happen to have a copy with me..."

They remain grim-faced throughout the entire audition. They mention that they have Diamond Eardrum Gold Mk. II speakers, but already have arranged with their dealer to upgrade to the forthcoming Mk. III. They haven't actually heard the Mk. IIIs yet, but two reviewers wrote that the improvements blow the Mk. II away.

Yes, these listeners say, interjecting as the host begins to open his mouth, they know this will mean their amplifier, DAC and cable will be all wrong. They are handling that. They just hope to get the wire swapped out by the time their new mono blocks and processor arrive.

Continued on **PAGE 67**



Their previous models, now at a creaky 18 and 11 months old, respectively, were hopelessly falling behind.

As the visitors turn and shuffle out the door, even more grim-faced, staring at their exhibit guide book, the thought strikes me: When was the last time these audiophiles actually had fun in this hobby. A hobby, after all, is defined as, “An activity done regularly in one’s leisure time for *pleasure*.”

Those last two words are the key. For *pleasure*. We are supposed to be having fun here. It’s easy, though, to get caught up in the “rules,” the audio-tribe beliefs and rituals, and all the polished steel faceplates and blinking lights. There’s a point where the original desire to hear your favourite music played in a way that excites your ears and soothes your soul gives way to a single-minded obsession to achieve the “absolute sound.”

Music-buying choices begin to revolve

around that goal. Idle thoughts focus on the next upgrade. Listening sessions are spent pondering micro dynamics, midrange palpability and the pitch fluctuations of reverb trails.

I know. For a while, I was that audiophile.

But it wasn’t always so.

My first memory of audio is from when my parents bought me a “crystal” radio. It was cheap plastic, about the size of a pack of cards, and had two small cables running out of it. One had an alligator clip and the other a single earpiece. You attached the clip to something metal, like a drawer handle, and moved the quarter-shaped tuner to find a strong AM station. If you were lucky, screechy music would flood your ear, often the megawatt country station transmitting a few miles away from our house. This toy barely qualified as a radio, but it was fun.

When I was about 12, I got a portable AM/FM/cassette recorder. It had a built-in mono amp and speaker, and weighed about five pounds. Most importantly for this budding audiophile, it came with a microphone that plugged in to the side and had a 15-foot cord. I built a mic stand from a coat hanger, set it up in front of our console television and used that unit to gleefully record every Partridge Family song, much to my dad’s chagrin.

I moved on to a \$129 “quad” system (with a built-in 8-track player).

I bought four-channel “matrix” tapes and had my friends over to hear Edgar Winter’s “Frankenstein” circle the room. More fun.

In high school, I managed to upgrade to a Yamaha receiver, Technics turntable and tape deck, and JBL speakers. I had begun to appreciate that some gear sounded better than others, and that it could be tweaked for more improvement.

I spent many afternoons at Radio Shack shopping for 14-gauge speaker wire to replace the lamp cord that came with the JBLs.

Continued on **PAGE 69**



I sanded the finish off my JBLs and stained them cherry, then built matching speaker stands to get them off the shag carpet. I bought a 10-band equalizer that had tiny red lights on each slider. Boy, was that fun.

I created an isolation platform for my turntable, and used wire salvaged from a bowling alley to make a huge FM antenna I draped above the porch. And I began taping everything: records, King Biscuit Flower Hour radio concerts, Sunday-night album broadcasts (Young Americans. Dark Side of the Moon). Even more fun.

But after college, making a steady pay check, I began visiting the stereo shops with higher-end gear. Stuffy salespeople laughed at my

system. They took me into dark listening rooms and taught me the “rules” of proper two-channel. “Do you see any tone controls on this preamp?” sniffed one. “This is what you need to start reading,” another said, handing me a small magazine. Its staff list included a “philosopher in residence.”

I dove into that publication and others. I learned what cartridges went with what tonearms and turntables. I learned what speakers were supposed to match what amps. I learned why my first CD player didn’t sound too good, and what I needed to do, which involved using a modified LaserDisc machine and an external DAC. One new DAC, the reviewers said, made ordinary CDs sound like remastered audio-

phile editions.

This is how it started. The next year, the DAC that was raved about was “clearly surpassed” by a newer model. There was something called jitter to worry about now, although its nature was murky. Class A amps were the way to go. That bass! Remote controls, which had been shunned for years, were showing up in preamps, and the results were now acceptable, the writers reported.

I spent many, many afternoons at high-fi salons, auditioning. I went to the Stereophile-sponsored audio show in Los Angeles in 1992. I carefully auditioned everything. I closed my eyes. I didn’t move. I was an audiophile, dammit. This was serious.

## “They took me into dark listening rooms and taught me the ‘rules’ of proper two-channel”

JOHN STANCAVAGE

I returned from that event and bought my first high-end system. I set it up in my living room, I got out my tape measure and positioned the speakers to the inch. I carefully raised my \$4,000-plus cables off the floor and put them at right angles. I plugged my latest-greatest-rated DAC and my pure Class-A amp into a power conditioner.

Then I reached for a stack of CDs. These were six or seven discs I’d taken with me on my auditions for the past two years. I knew every track inside out. I could identify a lack of palpability in four notes. These were my favourite well-recorded tracks prior to this high-end obsession. Soon, though, they’d been used so many times as test

tools that I was sick of them. But that’s what I played. Elton John’s *Tumbleweed Connection*. That was one of my most treasured albums, but it was relegated to the closet. The LP I had was muddy and scratchy and the early CD was too bright. About 70 percent of the rest of my record collection also was unworthy. But I was a real audiophile.

One day, I discovered an old cassette tape I’d recorded on my Technics deck. I’d captured a Best of the Biscuit show featuring Dire Straits, live in San Francisco in 1979. I remembered I’d taped it in the middle of a thunderstorm. The station’s signal strength wavered throughout and the speed of my deck had gone off, too. The result was shifting

waves of background static and Mark Knopfler’s voice being lowered noticeably on playback.

Being a rabid Dire Straits fan, I transferred the tape to CD, using a Pioneer Elite recorder. I wouldn’t play CDs through this unit, mind you. That task had to be handled by my reviewer-approved transport and DAC. But I decided I wanted to make concert recordings and mixes like in my younger days. The first glimmer of audiophilic recovery was appearing.

I popped the homemade bootleg CD into my carefully assembled, high-resolution, two-channel system. I pushed play. What came out had little bass, the pitch was off and Knopfler’s guitar tone was thin and metallic.

Continued on **PAGE 139**

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**THE  
PATH**

**OF**

**SHINDO**

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFFAEL ARNOTT



“Start at the core, and build a system that doesn’t need band-aids.”

MATTHEW ROTUNDA



Abdul the Uber driver laughed, and pointed over his shoulder at the 80-foot cliff face that dropped away a couple yards to our left as the minivan we were in veered across the road’s centre line.

The guard rails along this stretch of Highway 74 south of Palm Springs were punched through like frayed ribbons here and there, and I could just make out the wreckage of burned-out cars that dotted the canyon floors far below.

My girlfriend Karin’s head almost hit the side window while trying to video the ride with her phone, and my friend Chris pleaded with Abdul from the front passenger seat to keep his eyes on the road, but Abdul was in the middle of recounting his run-ins with snakes since he took up living in the desert, and

didn’t seem concerned.

“I killed a rattle snake with a baseball bat inside my house,” he chuckled.

A small laugh escaped my lips.

A sort of “is-this-how-I-die?” laugh.

As we swerved up the narrow cut-throughs, switchbacks, and sheer cliff faces that made up the almost 2,000-foot vertical climb into the mountains abutting the California desert, I pondered what had brought us more than a 1,000 miles to this possible end.

We had flown down from Vancouver that afternoon, and were en route from the airport to a small enclave of homes near Mt. San Jacinto that Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports, and Matthew Rotunda of Pitch Perfect Audio call home.

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The two met years ago while both working for hifi bricks-and-mortar shops in New York City, and have stayed fast friends since.

I was there to film interviews with them, and discuss the mystique of Shindo Laboratory high-fidelity gear, eat, drink, hike, and touch on the connection between playing records, and driving Porsches. We would also check out the Pitch Perfect showroom in Los Angeles.

Abdul finally dropped us at Halpern's place – although he wasn't home, he and Rotunda were at a concert up state – which is affectionately known as the "Spider House" because of its unique mid-century architecture. Perched at the highest point of his property, it offers almost 360-degree view.

The light and the space of this region of Southern California is captivating, and the scale of the surroundings seems to shift when you're thousands of feet above the twinkling lights of Palm Desert looking at mountain ranges lined

up like armies in the distance, with the sun throwing shadows for miles across the valley floor.

Silence overtook us momentarily, and then we realized... silence. "Let's get some tunes going!" Chris said.

So began one of the most enjoyable high-fidelity adventures I've been on.

I'd hung out with, and broke bread with Halpern, and Rotunda a number of times previously but always around a trade-show environment, so spending quality time on their home turf was a treat. Chris is a long-time customer of both, but had never had a chance to meet either in person, so when he heard I was flying down he joined in. Because of my fascination with vintage single-ended triode, and pentode tube amplification designs, and high-efficiency speakers, Shindo Labs, which Halpern imports, and Rotunda sells (among a number of other high-end companies such as Line Magnetic, Auditorium

23, J.C. Verdier, Sugden, and Leben to name but a few) had been on my radar for some time.

Shindo, for those not in the know, is a family-run hifi atelier near Tokyo, Japan which has been around since 1977. It specializes in hand-made preamplifiers, amplifiers, and speakers the designs of which centre around both new old stock, and vintage resistors, tubes, capacitors, and wiring – loudspeaker drivers are vintage, rebuilt, and modified.

The bottle green chassis, and component naming conventions formed around company founder Ken Shindo's predilection for fine French red wines: Haut-Brion, Corton-Charlemagne, Vosne-Romanee... more art than product, and more about emotions than measurements, Shindo gear is aimed at a niche market segment of those who think 10-30 watts of pure Class-A amplification is enough.

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Sadly, Ken Shindo passed away in 2014, but his wife Harumi, sons Takashi, and Yoshinobu have taken the reins, and continue the work, which is being built on with great success.

Halpern and Rotunda met the elder Shindo in 2005. “He was very private... a man of few words. When he said something it was always very poignant, and had a lot of impact,” Halpern said.

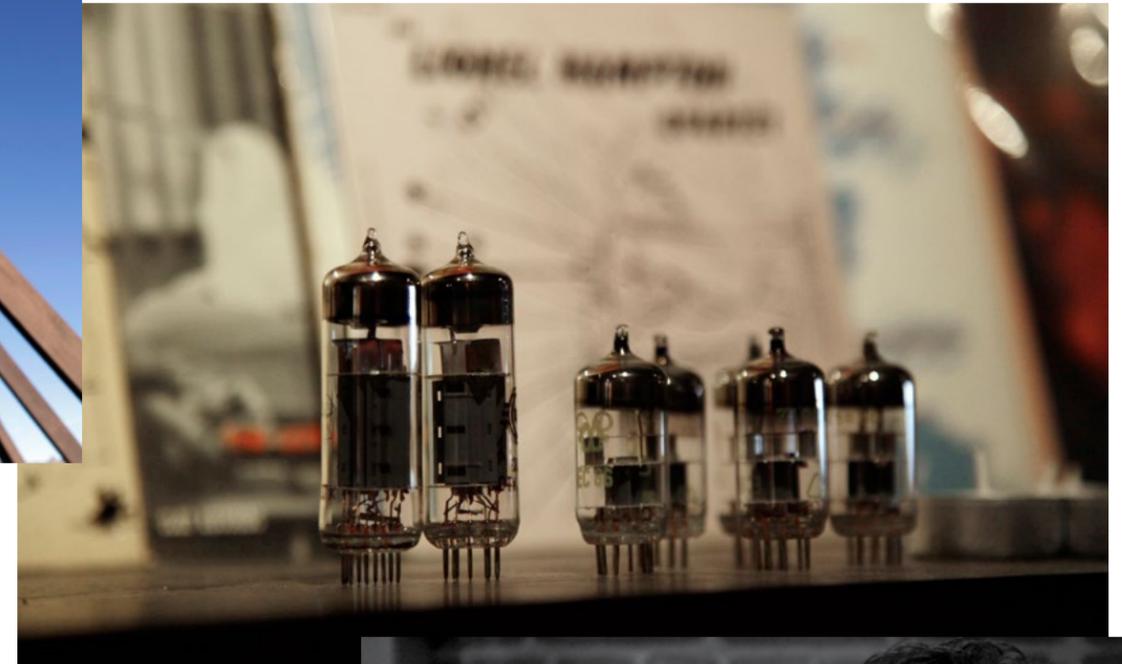
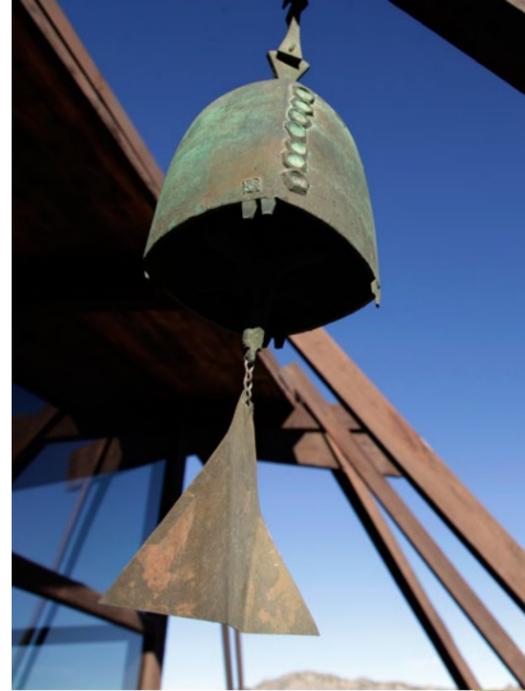
“Sometimes you had to think about what he said for a long time. Sometimes it took years to recognize what he was really trying to convey.”

According to Halpern, he didn’t get to know Ken Shindo as much as he liked, and he’s still looking to know more, adding that he explores him through his products, and what he was able to express emotionally through those products.

“Shindo has a certain quality to it, it allows you to forget about the system. It’s not so much about ‘listen to the size of my sound stage,’ or ‘wow, I’m completely blown away by that sparkling treble.’ When you put the music on, it’s more like a live acoustic event,” said Halpern, who in describing the Shindo listening experience compared it to closing his eyes, and losing track of time completely like he had at a small concert he had taken in a few days earlier.

“The room disappeared, it was pitch black, and I was completely involved in the music, and that’s something that a well set-up Shindo system is able to do for me... it’s almost a meditative state.”

Indeed, it’s this type of listening experience that I feel music lovers like myself seek out from their sound systems, as opposed to those who would be conventionally wooed by ever-vanishing specifications of distortion, and the further piling on of watts in pursuit of power over musicality.



**“I like to go fast, I also appreciate subtlety...”**

**MATTHEW ROTUNDA**

That’s not to say that amazing sonic results cannot be achieved by properly designed, and powerful solid-state circuit paths, but there is a magic to the emotional connection that low-powered tubes can create from recorded events in my opinion.

I’m reminded again of this type of organic relationship involving transportation (of the *physical* kind, as opposed to the *metaphysical*) with man-made products during a film session with Rotunda in his 1988 Porsche 911 on Highway 74.

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# DESIGN Comment

WORDS FROM FERN & ROBY'S CHIEF DESIGNER CHRISTOPHER HILDEBRAND

The Fern & Roby horn system is the latest evolution in our journey & exploration in audio—but developing horns has actually been the foundation for everything else I've been working on for the past four years.

I'd always loved the idea of horn speakers and when I experienced them for the first time I was hooked. They sounded effortless and natural, detailed, yet rich.

I lost myself in the music and melted into my chair.

The first thing I did after that was set out to start making my own concept of a simple two-way horn speaker with a compression driver. This was the very beginning of my adventure into audio; it was fun, exciting, and a complete and utter failure.

Failure isn't an unusual starting point for me and, in fact, this first attempt just spurred me to start learning more about audio engineering. So you could say that horns are the reason I started making high-fidelity products in the first place.

Although it's not uncommon to hear people say that horns can sound very directional and are known for beaming sound into a small sweet spot, all of the great horn systems I have experienced are enveloping, inviting, and engaging to listen to; offering an enormous soundstage and no adverse directionality.

The real challenge of designing and implementing a horn system is one of technical knowledge, physical size constraints, engineering complexity and control.

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To arrive at a result that delivers an amazing sonic experience, one has to know exactly how the drivers will perform, how to control them, and what their best form of amplification entails.

Developing a design that allows for phase alignment and orientation of the separate drivers is also a challenge. Horns tend to be huge and demand a large room. One of our goals was to make a horn system that could comfortably fit into a medium to modest-sized room. There is no way to do all of this without a ton of experimentation.

Our design process always starts with inspiration from materials, mechanisms and the processes around us.

The design of the prototype was about simplicity to allow for the flexibility of raising and lowering the horn, as well as being able to pan and rotate it. I liked this so much that I decided to keep it as an integral part of the final design. The  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plate flame-cut steel stand with the long vertical slot and turned hardware for the pivot allow for easy positioning and phase alignment. These are all made by hand in our shop here in Richmond, VA.

After selecting the drivers and horn design, we just started working through the other complexities, and necessary pieces step-by-step until we felt we got it right.

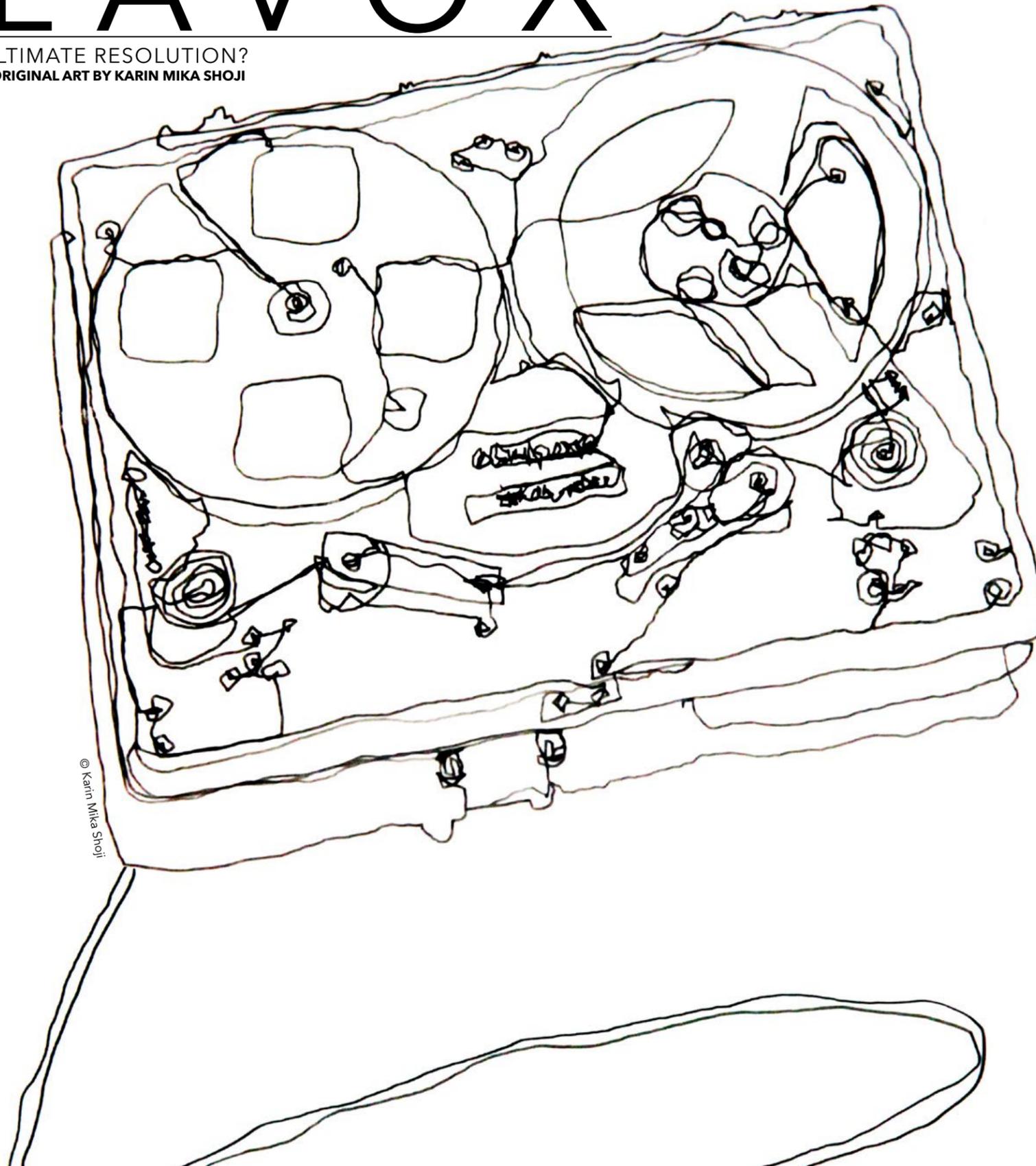
We're thrilled that we are launching this product line after so much hard work, dedication to craft, and are excited to see where it goes. **T/O**



# STELLAVOX

IS REEL-TO-REEL THE ANALOG ANSWER TO ULTIMATE RESOLUTION?

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAFE ARNOTT/ORIGINAL ART BY KARIN MIKA SHOJI



It was a dark and stormy night, and the only sound other than Ella Fitzgerald's haunting voice playing back at 15 IPS off the Stellavox reel-to-reel player through my speakers was rain hitting the living-room window, and thunder in the distance.

I've always wanted to start a story that way.

Luckily I live in Vancouver, B.C. and it rains a lot, so it's never long between such evenings.

This particular night last spring followed my return from AXPONA in Chicago a few days previously, where I had connected once again with friend, audiophile, and analog-tape legend Charles King.

King and I usually share a beer or two, talk music, and BS about the hifi industry for awhile when we see one another at various trade shows throughout the year. We then arrange a time to meet for a listening session in whatever lucky manufacturer's room he's chosen to plug one of his heavily-modified R2R decks into.

These sessions invariably see me sitting slack jawed near the sweet spot after taking in King's demo. He usually has a mix of master dupes, on smaller reels that play for about 10 minutes before requiring a swap out; not ideal for extended play, but perfect for a show venue where you'd want to highlight different music for various tastes.

This get together was just like several previous ones I enjoyed with King over the past few years, the big difference this time was that when I said good-bye, King give me one of his characteristic mischievous grins, and laid one of his custom-modified Stellavox 5i-KC decks, and several tapes on me to take with me for a few months to try out in my home.

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Cue the tape ahead several weeks, and I've been able to front a number of systems that have been through my listening room for review with King's 5i, with the same results each time: analog domination of the circuitry being used to channel the magnetic information baked into the spinning reels. Regardless of how good the cartridge, step-up transformer, phono stage, CD player, or DAC, and streamer used, nothing could match the immediacy, the air, and delicacy, midrange liquidity, and innate organic textures, or the thunderous bass that King's tape deck, and various reels were capable of reproducing.

Because all the reels but one that King sent me home with were five-inchers, I had to jump up, and switch tapes every 10 minutes or so. Not ideal for an extended listening session, but about the same as when I was spinning my collection of 45 rpm remasters, so it didn't really phase me. But when I decided to finally play what I was told was a dupe of a master (or remaster) of The Beatles' *Rubber Soul* on a full-sized reel, well that's when everything changed.

Being able to hear a full album in one sitting without having to get up made the experience more akin to CD or computer audio in its time frame, albeit with an almost doubling (to my ears) of impact, tactility, nuance, and expression to the recorded performance.

I have listened to *Rubber Soul* innumerable times over the intervening decades since I was a child laid out on the rug between my father's speakers hearing it for the first time, and I can tell you without hyperbole that I've never heard The Beatles sound like this. The space around Paul McCartney and John Lennon's vocals on "Drive My Car" precisely placed both of them within the confines of my living room, Ringo Starr's kick drum, and stick work had visceral snap, and hair-raising texture on the skins: I felt like I was in the studio watching the recording take place. George Harrison's double-tracked sitar playing on "Norwegian Wood" popped defiantly apart from the accompaniment of his 12-string guitar, and that of Lennon's acoustic six-string.

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“This isn’t like any other high-fidelity source out there... it’s geared toward serious analog addicts.”

RAFE ARNOTT



There was no longer any doubt who was playing what, or where they were on the sound stage, the detail, depth, and transparency of the recording became startlingly apparent with each progressive song spooling through the tape head.

Not only was this tape achingly beautiful to hear, but it was exciting. My heart was beating faster, I felt giddy, and I was on the edge of my sofa... not something I do often I can tell you. I felt like I do when I see a live performance.

This sounds intriguing you say, but what about price, and availability of tapes you ask? Well, a year ago I'd have said, it's crazy expensive, and properly-sourced tapes are rarer than hen's teeth. Today I say it's crazy expensive, and properly-sourced tapes are slightly less rare.

King's exceptional selections not forthcoming, companies like Analogue Productions or The Tape Project offer anywhere from a dozen, to 30+ selections but prices are in the \$450 USD range per album if they even have

them in stock, otherwise join the growing wait list. And what about the actual machines themselves? Bank on spending \$3,000 USD at the very minimum, with properly restored Technics, Otari or Marantz decks running into the \$12,000 USD range.

This isn't like any other form of high-fidelity source out there, and to me it's geared towards serious analog addicts with deep pockets, those who must have the best, and don't care what it costs, or people who have the ability to source, and restore not only tape decks, but have an in with studio, or production-facility technicians with access to tapes.

Does that scarcity make it any less amazing to hear this type of sonic reproduction? No. If anything it adds to the addictive nature of hearing reel-to-reel playback, and should help it maintain cult status for years to come.

I can only wrap by saying that you go down this rabbit hole at your own financial risk (and reward)... *you've been warned.* **T/O**

*Read an interview with Charles King on page 131*

# THE X

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN STANCAVAGE

# FACTOR



REVIEW

**D**o you want the hernia or the double hernia? The voice on the phone asking that question was Bryan Stanton, a communications specialist who works with Pass Labs.

A few weeks prior, we had begun chatting about Pass sending me one of its X-series amps for review. I had agreed, and now Pass wanted to know if it should ship the 127-pound X350.8 stereo amp or a pair of the top-of-the-line, 123-pounds-each X600.8 monoblocks.

I didn't hesitate for even a second. "Oh, the X600.8s. Definitely," I told Stanton. Apparently, my lack of hesitation to go for the big mono amps was the source of some amuse-

ment around the Pass office, with the punch line being that reviewers are a rather predictably size-obsessed bunch. (Careful what might end up in an email thread, guys...) I didn't take it too personally. After all, there is some truth to that – quite a bit, actually. My particular fascination tends to be less about dimensions, however, and more about performance. I, like many audiophiles, always am curious about the state of the art. If a manufacturer has one product in the middle of its line that's impressive, what does the flagship sound like? I might not be able to afford it, but I want to hear it nonetheless.

Pass, a pioneer in solid-state power,

makes a mind-boggling number of amplifiers. I suspect the explanation for the company's exhaustive catalog is that its founder, legendary designer Nelson Pass, is a man who is constantly tinkering and getting new ideas.

In my mind, I imagine Pass as kind of the Neil Young of high-end audio. In the same way that Young, after decades working at his craft, continues to issue albums at a relentless pace, the industry-veteran Pass has a comparable and seemingly bottomless well of creativity. As a result, Pass has at least five separate lines of amps – with each containing many models – plus an entire second brand, First Watt, for his additional experiments.

**“... the punch line being reviewers are a rather predictably size-obsessed bunch.”**

**JOHN STANCAVAGE**

The chiropractor-pleasing X600.8s I received are, at \$26,000 USD a pair, the top of the X.8 high-voltage series. They are not, however, the ultimate expression of Pass Labs technology, as there stand the pure Class A Xs300 monos at \$85,000 USD a pair. Still, the X600.8s are formidable in their own right. While many Class A/B amps operate in A for a handful of watts before switching to B, each X600.8 stays in room-heating Class A for the first 50 of its massive 600 watts of output (into eight ohms).

I've had plenty of high-current, high-watt amps in my home. For many years, my reference amps were either a Krell KSA-150 (150

watts, all Class A) or a Krell FPB 300 (offering 300 WPC, although with a sophisticated A/B switching circuit). I remember when I first hoisted the Dan D'Agostino-designed FPB 300 out of the box (with a lot of help) and connected it, I was afraid to push the "on" button. The thought of unleashing so much power was a bit frightening.

That feeling came back as I set up the X600.8s. First of all, Stanton was right about the double hernia. The heavily muscled Fed Ex man sighed loudly and gave me an eye-roll when I asked if he would mind hauling the boxes through my front door. Grudgingly, he carried them about 3 feet and plopped them

down in the hallway. There they sat for a while, mocking me, until I talked a pair of home handymen (helping with a remodeling project) into moving them into the listening room. Standing clear and watching their faces as they wrangled these amps was a little hard on my ego, I have to admit. Still, discretion is the better part of valour, and all that. They'd saved me from injuring myself, or so I thought...

The X600.8s are handsome amplifiers. The casework is gorgeous, with a tall, polished-stainless faceplate sporting a huge, circular VU meter illuminated by a blue glow, underneath those is an on/off button.

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On the back, the amps have two sets of output binding posts. The arrangement is a little unusual, with each pair (positive and negative) arranged vertically on one side. The posts are well-marked, however, and are extremely robust.

Near the top is a single RCA input, and below that, an XLR jack for balanced operation. The XLR plugs come with a shorting pin that should be left in if the RCA connection is chosen.

I disconnected my Merrill Audio Thor monoblocks and inserted the X600.8s using two-meter XLR runs of AudioQuest Lapis. Next, I attached my Transparent Reference XL speaker cable, which was a little difficult with the vertical location of the outputs and the thick, stiff wire. Finally, I plugged the heavy, supplied power cords into my

new PS Audio PowerPort wall receptacles which I added when I had three 20-amp dedicated lines installed during remodeling.

The X600.8s now were fully integrated into my reference system, which also included a Mark Levinson 380s preamp, Musical Fidelity M1 CD transport, Mark Levinson 30.5 DAC and Revel Studio loudspeakers. Other wire included AudioQuest Sky XLR from the DAC to preamp, as well as Kimber/Illuminati Orchid and MIT Reference digital cables. My turntable was out for modification, so I listened only to CDs.

As I sat on the couch for a few minutes, still somewhat intimidated to flip the switches on the Pass Labs behemoths, my wife came in to check on me. "Oh my God, you're bleeding," she said, looking at a blood-soaked white sock on my left foot.

Continued on **PAGE 121**

# Now Read This

33 1/3

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Ever wanted to know the goods on one of your favourite LPs of all time, but didn't have the time to commit to 914 pages of in-depth music geek-speak analysis? Perhaps the 33 1/3 series of LP biographies are just the ticket then. Written by various authors, but all with a dedication to detail, facts, and historical context, the 33 1/3 series digs deep into the dirty grooves of some of the greatest rock, jazz, blues, pop, country, and soul works of the 20th Century (and beyond). Tinged with first-hand emotional connections to the subject matter, many of the writers infuse a healthy dose of melancholia into their accounts of first hearing the LP under examination within the 130-odd pages (or so) that make up each, precious volume of this series. A truly inspiring read. Available online through Amazon \$10-\$13 USD.

—Rafe Arnott



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2017 Product Of The Year,  
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2017 Best Office Cat,  
Lulu Bear

CLASS A Recommended  
Component, gibbon 3XL  
—Stereophile Magazine

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2017 RMAF International HiFi Press Award:  
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# THE ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST



PHOTOS BY BRIAN HUNTER/WORDS BY RAFE ARNOTT



**Z**ev Feldman is the Executive Vice President, and General Manager of *Resonance Records* in the United States. He lives in Los Angeles, California, and is well known in jazz-music circles for his work hunting down rare, or unreleased recordings of some of

the greatest legends in the genre such as Wes Montgomery, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, and Dexter Gordon to name but a few. Earning nicknames in the press like “jazz detective,” and “the Indiana Jones of jazz,” Feldman shrugs off the praise, and says his work unearthing these previously

unknown recordings is merely an extension of his passion for the music. I recently was able to engage Feldman in a Q&A after his return from a trip to Europe. I hope you enjoy this revealing interview, and glimpse into the shadow world of both old, and new jazz history.

*Rafe Arnott: You've been called a "jazz detective" among other things in the press. Is this an apt moniker? Do you consider yourself a sleuth or is it more like Professor (Indiana) Jones where you're trying to educate people through lost works of jazz antiques, and there's adventure thrown in outside the view of the classroom?*

*Zev Feldman: I'll take it all! First and foremost, it's pure enjoyment for me. I'm a very lucky person in that I get to connect my personal interest in jazz to my career. Whenever I'm presented with a work opportunity, it's just natural for me to extend my passion and energy into it.*





I have so much fun doing it. As far as being considered an archeologist like Dr. Jones, it's cool. It's all positive. At the end of the day it really is like ethnomusicology. I'm always doing research to be able to tell the stories and provide a history on how these recordings I work on came together.

If you look at any of the packages I've produced, not just with Resonance, there's always a story attached. I'm constantly searching for new things and constantly learning all along the way. I don't claim to have all the answers, so I just try to make the best efforts possible to preserve and present the music in the best way I know how. I must say, Resonance's founder and president George Klabin has made this all possible through his philanthropy.

**RA:** *Your title at Resonance Records is Executive Vice President, and General Manager. What exactly do titles like that entail when it comes to the big picture at the company, and how does that translate for you in the day-to-day operations of Resonance?*

**ZF:** For me it really means wearing every single hat imaginable from A&R and production to marketing and sales. I work hand-in-hand directly with staff, and the responsibility comes down to me in terms of decision-making and overseeing the company's direction in all aspects.

**RA:** *Talk to me about the importance of the Xanadu Series of reissues that you've been involved with. Why do you feel these performances are so important, and what is their context within the history of jazz music in America? Is there a current series you're working on that compares?*

**ZF:** The Xanadu Records reissue

series was a very important mission. First of all, we had an immediate call-to-action, which was to rescue many of these tapes in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Many of the tapes were destroyed during the storm.

The Xanadu catalog had been largely out of print for a long time and in my estimation these were very important recordings that needed to be preserved. Then, in 2013, I started discussions with principals of Elemental Music in Barcelona, Spain. I still do production work with them to this day, most recently reissuing the Sonny Rollins on Impulse! LP that came out on Record Store Day in 2017. We've also released Jimmy Giuffre 'The New York Concerts and Red Garland Swingin'' on the Corner among many other interesting projects.

In the case of Xanadu though, what's important to note about that catalog is that it captured a very important period of time when jazz was going through major stylistic changes. In the 1970s, the traditional, straight-ahead jazz players were competing against a new wave of jazz musicians playing 'fusion,' which became a very popular genre. As a result of the rapid dominance of fusion, many of these straight-ahead artists weren't recording as much as they used to.

Xanadu founder and producer Don Schlitten followed his vision and went after, and recorded many of these musicians who were key figures in the creation of be bop, hard bop and post-bop jazz music. Schlitten provided them an outlet to record and captured their voice.

The output of work artists such as Charles McPherson and Barry Harris did for Schlitten, just as an example, are worth their weight in gold. I can't overstate the importance

of providing that service of preserving the music. The Xanadu label was very much its own separate thing.

At Elemental Music, we've reissued 25 of the titles, and it was a major undertaking. There was a lot of different work that needed to be done on many different levels, including the recreation of the album's art files. Many of the original negatives were destroyed in the Sandy flood, and tapes had to be cleaned, or in cases where they were completely destroyed, we had to create other masters. I'm currently in talks with companies in Japan about releasing even more of these titles.

Schlitten is one of my heroes in music and one of the greatest jazz producers of all time. He did much more than just have the music recorded, he also created original artwork and captured a unique look and feel of jazz. He left an indelible stamp on all his productions, and it was very exciting to have the opportunity to work with him on these reissues.

It's really hard to say if anything else I've done compares to that particular endeavour. I've considered taking on other such record-catalog projects, for instance at Resonance we spoke with Jim and Susan Neumann of Beehive Records in Chicago and considered working on those albums, but it went to Mosaic Records and they did a wonderful job on it. I couldn't be more happy for them. Aside from that it's hard to identify any other labels at this time, but I'm always looking!

**RA:** *You were a part of Concord Records at one time, you helped worked on the Rudy Van Gelder series of albums. What was it like to be involved with some of most important jazz albums ever recorded?*

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*Does that type of project differ radically from unearthing rare, or lost recordings and bringing them into the light? Or is it all about making sure people have access to as many recordings as possible?*

**ZF:** I would say it's a combination of the above. In some ways it's quite different to reissue something versus discovering something new, but the common thread is still that you need to choose the best recordings and give them the best presentation possible.

From 2005 to 2007 I was the national director of catalog sales and retail marketing, and during that time I was involved in various internal think tanks that were assembled to decide which titles would come out. I was involved in marketing especially in the retail sphere. But I want to be clear that I wasn't doing A&R per se for that label. I do have project assistance credits however on a lot of the Rudy Van Gelder reissues (the RVG Remasters series), as well as the Orrin Keepnews titles (the Keepnews Collections series). It was really exciting working in the catalog department while I was there.

I gathered so much valuable experience on how a record label operates, and working on the RVG Remasters series was an enormous thrill. As much of a hero of mine as he's been over the years, it wasn't until 2014 that I actually met him in his studio thanks to my friends Don and Maureen Sickler. I had the pleasure of eating pot roast with him at a local diner over a beer. I want to treat their legacies with the utmost respect in every way.

**RA:** *What's your take on the state of jazz music today? Is there musical growth, and exploration happening in modern jazz to the same degree as there was 50 years ago? Have we already heard the greatest era that the genre will ever experience? Who is currently creating work that has your radar screen lit up, or that you're working with, or would love to work with?*

**ZF:** I'm always inspired by musicians. I continue to discover new musicians and love the living artists as much as the ones who are no longer with us. I must say though, there's just something about the 1950s through the 1970s for jazz music, and I realize that I don't speak alone, that it was just a magic time. Something about that history, and to have lived through some of it, there's a special feeling and obviously a great level of creativity.

There are many artists I would like to work with, and I have various aspirations to work on many different kinds of projects. One goal I have is to produce a great piano trio recording with a pianist that I really like. I want to expand on that medium. The piano trio is a whole other sub-genre within jazz. If you go to Japan for instance, it's treated on an entirely different level than we treat it in the States. In terms of new artists I like, I'm a fan of the guitarist Yotam Silberstein. There are actually a lot of different guitarists I'm into.

I have the honour and privilege of co-executive producing a living artist right now with the legendary Quincy Jones. His name is Andreas Varady and he's an extremely talented artist that I've been very taken with of late. His new album is called *The Quest* and it's coming out on April 6th on Resonance Records. Andreas represents to me a younger voice who is making music that is influenced by his surroundings. He's from a different generation than mine, so it's been really interesting for me to hear how he plays. I love the record, and I'm sure a lot of other people will too when they hear it.

**RA:** *What sets jazz apart from all other types of music in your opinion? Why does it seem to have such a hardcore, loyal, and educated following of music lovers? Do you feel like the intricacies of tonal colour, and expression that jazz allows for is lost on millennials, and modern generations despite having more access to more jazz music than ever before in history?*

Continued on **PAGE 118**



**“I don't think any of this is lost on younger generations, including millennials.”**

**ZEV FELDMAN**

# Petit with Power

## AURALIC POLARIS WIRELESS STREAMING AMPLIFIER

The Polaris has everything one could want packed into a svelte 10lbs chassis that fits into my laptop bag. It's RoonReady, supports AirPlay, and Bluetooth, is a music server, DAC, stereo power amplifier, wireless streamer, pre-amplifier, phono/line stage, is configurable, and can be controlled from your smartphone via Auralic's Lightning DS app. The ESS Sabre DAC does Quad-Rate DSD, 32-bit/384K PCM via a WiFi network, and has enough digital inputs to satisfy the most hard-wired audiophile. A Femto Master Clock, hybrid volume control, and 120 watts into eight Ohms rounds out the specs, but it's the sound I got out of this "super amp" that so deeply impressed me. Paired with numerous loudspeakers of varying efficiencies, the Polaris proved itself to be one of the most capable integrated amplifiers I've ever heard. When you factor in the MSRP of \$3,799 USD it's truly difficult to think of a peer. Review to come.

—Rafe Arnott





# LOST IN SPIRITS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN HUNTER

It's the weekend and I find myself in the arts district of Los Angeles with a slight buzz. While this isn't supremely unusual in and of itself, the fact that I'm listening to a tiny animatronic bird tell dry jokes in a nondescript warehouse very much is.

It's all a part of the strange appeal of the LA startup *Lost Spirits*. They want to shake things up, do things differently, bring down some of that entrepreneurial freedom from Silicon Valley and plant it squarely down with a distilling business in Southern California. Their factory tour includes an original first-run copy of the Island of Doctor Moreau and is perhaps an appropriate metaphor for the operation as a whole.

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**“The finish is long and tingly, and lingers in the mouth for a good measure.”**

**BRIAN HUNTER**

The building as it stands now was introduced mid-2017, but an elusive tour of the Willy Wonka-esk facilities where they “reimagine” liquor has already managed to make its way onto the must-do list of every hipster this side of the 405, and with good reason.

The working partners started production on liquor roughly five years ago and have since sought out new ways to turn the aging processes (and distilling in general) on its head. The reservation-only, weekend-only tour is hosted by one of said working partners

personally, and begins in complete darkness. After a quick ounce or two of the brand’s Navy 61 rum, attendees are whisked off to a riverboat ride down to the heart of the distillation process.

Mind you, the arts district is not exactly the type of place you would expect to find an internal river amid the massive urban sprawl, so aside from the rigorous automation and robotic talking animals that inhabit the nooks and crannies of the mysterious drunken wonder world, the vibe is uniquely unusual to say the least.

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Like any good museum tour the experience ends in the gift shop, where a series of speaking automated birds lay out a parting sales bit like some Disney attraction on acid. It's all very refreshing in a manic, distorted kind of way, but I was also a few "samples" deep by this point so the whole thing could have just been a fabrication of my mind.

The souvenir bottle of the Lost Spirits Navy Style 61% Rum that I picked up turned out to be pretty real afterwards and is the subject of our scrutiny for this juncture. But let's start with the basics.

The rum focus from LS makes the Navy Style 61 the flagship spirit, and like most rums, it features molasses as the main jumping block from which all the alcho-goodness derives from. While claims of top-grade molasses, special yeasts and unique stills (two steps) surely contribute to the overall appeal, the aging process employed at the downtown location is surely where things get a touch of the mad science. Instead of aging their nectar of the gods in oak barrels, the company takes pieces of selected toasted barrels and fully immerses them into the liquor during the maturing process.

In order to shorten the timeline even further, the warehouse is equipped with some very powerful light sources that blast the mixture with copious amounts of wood-aging rays. The idea here is that since sunlight generally degrades things like wood decks, and doing so within the confines of the containment units will jump start and shorten the 25-year storage stage of well-loved liquors.

The results? The tour guides claim experts can barely tell the difference from real-time 23-year-old rums.

On the table the Navy 61 has a



brunette, syrup-like colour. It's far beyond caramel and very deep into dark brown. Hold it up to the light and one might get a hint of red, but overall colour resembles a nut-brown ale more than any liquid in a well tailored whiskey collection.

The label is fashioned in a way that appears very old-school sailor, American dollar-bill scripted style. It's clear that this sailor-inspired rum has a not only a look, but a taste providing clear and certain

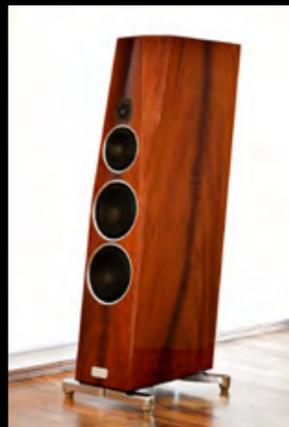
direction.

The 61% plays heavily on the nose. Some might wisely recommend a few drops of water or enjoying a pour over ice to clear out some of the windshield-wiper-juice clutter. Our sampling went onward without such crutches however, with small hints of old oak furniture and fresh bark mulch making their way through the bouquet with enough endurance.

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# LISTEN!

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The initial splash hits the mouth with a surprising jolt of smoke, and once again reiterates the feel after a full palate cleansing.

The experience is much smoother than the smell implies, and once the middle rushes in there it is definitely a slice of the true rum flavouring that greets you at the back of the throat. It's almost surprising in nature due to the complexity of the initial handshake, and one that could perhaps be mistaken for any well-aged, barrel-brewed liquor. There of course is plenty of that sticky molasses. If any citrus is to be found it would have to lean toward orange, but not lemon.

The finish is long and tingly, and lingers in the mouth for a good

measure.

At the end of the day it is rum, and offers light skeletal structure similar to its distant relative Bacardi 151, but for the most part is very far removed from this eye-watering relation.

It's comfortably drinkable and a great conversation starter to boot. If you can afford the luxury and have a thing for Mai Tai's then look no further. Neat or on the rocks makes for a great evening and the proof gets the party started with little-to-no effort involved.

The initial depth and smoke upfront is where this little gem really shines, offering a simple solution for an often complex question: *What are we drinking tonight?*



# Sign here please

## TOTEM ACOUSTICS SIGNATURE ONE LOUDSPEAKER

Mini-monitors have a reputation for imaging exceedingly well, but can struggle to pressurize a room, and often rely on a “mid-bass hump” in the crossover to compensate for it. It sounds pleasing, and can emolierate a lack of low-frequency extension. That doesn’t seem to be the case in the 87.5dB Totem Signature One monitors however, as I found their response to be very linear regardless of music type. They responded just as well to 18 watts of tube amplification as they did to 160 watts of solid state power, helped no doubt by their nominal eight-ohm impedance. Beautiful timbre, full-bodied midrange, and surprising bottom-end extension – even in a larger room – are hallmarks of this Canadian-made stand mount. MSRP \$2,650 USD. Review to come.

–Rafe Arnott

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**ZF:** For me, when I was first getting into jazz music, I had been listening to so much pop and what we call classic rock music now — Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, The Who, etc. — that at a certain point I realized something happened in terms of defining my personal preferences. I realized that when I was listening to music, I was paying especially close attention to the solos and improvisations going on. Rock artists like Jimi Hendrix and Pete Townshend were my bridge into jazz. In my opinion, they were actually great jazz musicians. There was something about their immense talent and soloing that drove me into jazz. And it wasn’t just acoustic and straight-ahead jazz, I’ve had life-altering experiences listening to the Mahavishnu Orchestra, which took me into another direction altogether.

I don’t think that any of this is lost on the younger generations, including millennials. When I go to Smalls or the Jazz Gallery in New York City, you see a whole generation of younger musicians playing really incredible, thoughtful jazz, and there are younger audiences there listening to it. I’m telling you, they’re doing interesting shit. So I don’t think it’s lost one bit. The music just morphs and evolves. The wonderful thing about jazz is the focus on individualism and the emphasis placed on finding your own voice. In some ways it’s very much a reflection of life itself. There are a lot of interesting parallels between life and jazz. Every year we keep seeing young artists appear on the jazz critics polls, and young people seeing them play at the clubs. So it’s very much like it’s always been in that regard.

**RA:** *If we were to look at a cross section of your record collection, what would we find? Is it predominantly jazz oriented, or do you give some play to blues, folk, rock, classical, etc? How big would you estimate your current collection to be? What are five of your favourite LPs that you own, and why? Do you have any personal stories of interest involving specific LPs that you own that you could share with us? Most rare LP you own?*

**ZF:** I’m a total omnivore when it comes to music. I’m all over the spectrum. I’ve spent a whole lifetime finding and researching music, and I used to read through the critics books so that I would spend my money wisely. Doing that turned me on to things that I might not have come across unless I was much older. It’s funny, so many of the classic recordings that I consider cornerstones of different genres of music, a lot of my friends didn’t discover until later in their lives. So I was ahead of the curve in a lot of ways.

To answer your question about my collection, I would say I have between 5,000-6,000 CDs and around 3,000-4,000 LP records. Within that you’ll find a whole variety of music. Growing up I was exposed to everything. Of course the Beatles were a huge influence early on. We had Abbey Road, The White Album and “Hey Jude.” I played them to death. My dad also had Cannonball Adderley, Nancy Wilson, Wes Montgomery, Jimmy Smith and Michele Legrand. My mom had Mercury Living Presence recordings and RCA Living Stereo classical albums. As much as I wanted to listen to pop music, my parents made sure we listened to classical and jazz music on public radio.

Music is also in my DNA, as I come from a big family with a heavy concentration of jazz and classical musicians. My great uncle Alvin “Abe” Aaron was the lead reed player in Les Brown’s Band of Renown which featured Jack Teagarden and Horace Heidt. His brother, Joseph Aaron, played jazz in the midwest and worked in the Milwaukee school system with music for over 50 years. I have several cousins who play in orchestras and symphonies in Milwaukee. My great grandfather wanted to see that all of the children played an instrument, and we even had a family band. I’m very much into family history and have done a lot of research. My interest lies in being a music collector.

A lot of people may not know this, but I have a large collection of classical piano recordings. Sonatas being a main area of appreciation, although I don’t consider myself an expert. My Prestige and Blue Note records are some of my most prized selections. A lot of my research and personal exploration was accelerated greatly by working for 11 years in record label distribution from 1994 to 2005.

I was involved with selling and marketing albums from so many record labels across all genres. I promoted artists ranging from the Three Tenors to 50 Cent, Shania Twain, Andrea Bocelli, Diana Krall, Eminem and even the Ken Burns Jazz series of soundtrack releases, just to drop a few names. We had record labels such as Mercury, A&M, Motown, Polydor, Verve, Island, ECM, Deutsche Grammophon, Decca, Philips, and let’s not forget, I also had a brief stint working at Warner Music Group and its catalog of labels including Warner, Electra and Atlantic.

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So I was able to collect study and learn. I was able to request one for myself, and I would also trade with friends of mine from other companies. I was able to amass quite a large collection during that time. But I don't just hold on to an LP or CD just to have it, I try to give it back if i don't want it. I have no need for stuff that just takes up space. I have gotten decades of enjoyment out of doing this research.

In terms of interesting stories about records I own, there was a very rare collection of records I went down to Arizona to pick up and bring back to my place in LA. I had to fly down there and fly back in seven hours. Many of those were autographed jazz 45s, including ones autographed by Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson, Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond and a host of others.

I'm always evaluating if I need

something though, as I said, I don't like being a pack rat. But I enjoy discovering, and collecting music – it's like food for me. I remember being a young boy and listening to those three Beatles records I mentioned earlier, and it was the White Album especially that became a major recording for me. My father never allowed me to touch our Dual 1017 turntable, but he got so tired of flipping that record that he dumped it onto a reel-to-reel tape for me so I could listen for hours on end. I would sit on the couch and be so relaxed and focused on that album. I was a very hyper-active kid, and music was the one thing that could get me to focus. I would put on my Koss headphones and just go to my happy place.

There were other periods in my life that were really impactful for me, like listening to Milton Na-

scimento's *Clube da Esquina*, The Clash's self-titled album, Miles Davis' *Round About Midnight*, Art Blakey's *Free for All*, Thelonious Monk's *Brilliant Corners* and many, many others: *Jascha Heifetz plays Tchaikovsky and Brahms with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra*. It's all about emotion and feelings for me. It's not a simple thing to articulate, but it gives me life.

I really enjoy nostalgia. Being reminded of another time in my life. Jazz is really interesting in that respect. I can gaze at these images and just feel things. Looking at a Blue Note album cover for example. It's why it's important to build these experiences with the packages I produce. I'm trying to replicate what those records made me feel like. I'm only doing what I know, and trying to make things as fucking great as possible. **T/O**

# Tone Imports

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Pass labs X600.8: \$26,000 USD/pair  
600 watts/eight Ohms  
Gain: 26dB  
Frequency response: 1.5Hz ~ 100KHz  
Distortion@full power: 1%  
Weight: 123 lbs/chassis  
www.passlabs.com

Apparently, I had accidentally brushed up against the X600.8s, which have dozens of sharp heat fins on their sides. The brand-new carpet now had a blood trail. Word to the wise: Either wear boots during set-up or try not to be as clumsy as yours truly.

I decided to kick-start the new amps with a raucous Keith Richards solo track, “As Wicked as It Seems.” As I cautiously brought the volume up, I forced my eyes back open and slowly looked around. The lights didn’t dim, my speakers weren’t melting and I hadn’t succumbed like a character targeted for a dirty deed by AC/DC. (High voltage!) So far, so good.

I switched to more ethereal fare, Miles Davis’ *In a Silent Way*, for an extended repeat-play period that lasted about a week. As I waited for the amps to burn in, I read up on what Nelson Pass was trying to accomplish here.

The Class A/B line of the Pass Point-8 Series, which consists of the X600.8 and four lesser-power amps, is the product of seven years of research. The new amps replaced the well-regarded Point-5 series.

In the owner’s manual for the X600.8, Nelson Pass writes that his goal was to advance the key elements of the older amps to the next level. This wound up involving more of everything. The X600.8 uses bigger hardware that is biased more deeply into the Class A operating region. The front-end circuit is more sophisticated and customized for each model. The power supply also is beefier. And, finally, there are those heat fins – larger and more abundant to carry off the extra heat.

The solid-state front end uses a mix of JFET, MOSFET and bipolar devices made by Toshiba. The parts actually have been discontinued, but Pass believes so strongly they are superior to anything else that he ordered a deep stock to allow both construction of new amps and repairs.

“The result is a front end with high stability, low distortion and (low) noise,” Pass says. “It has a very high input and is DC-coupled. There are no compensation capacitors -- in fact, there are no capacitors in the amplifier circuit except across the shunt bias regulators and the power supply.”



Since I’d blown the packing dust off with Keith Richards, it seemed appropriate to return to the same number to start my formal listening. “As Wicked as It Seems,” from Keef’s 1992 *Talk Is Cheap* LP, could easily have been a great Rolling Stones single. Here, Richards’ shaky, nicotine-ravaged vocals are ducked down in the mix. The X600.8 perfectly revealed the wisdom of that production decision. His five-string rhythm guitar had its trademark bite and swagger, however, matched by the equally crunchy lead work of LA session godhead Waddy Wachtel.

Several other things immediately stood out about playback of the song through the Pass Labs X600.8s. First, there was an effortless quality to the sound, even when Richards’ band, the X-Pensive Winos, shifted to full tilt. Second, there was a weight and solidity to the presentation that was combined with an unusual sense of depth.

I switched to the Cowboy Junkies’ slow, hushed cover of Lou Reed’s “Sweet Jane” from their chill-out classic *The Trinity Session*. The song was recorded live to RDAT in a Toronto church, with the four players circling a single Calrec Ambisonic microphone.

This spare 1987 song contains just bass, electric guitar, drums and vocal. On an exceptional system, however, the ambiance of the old venue is a key fifth element. The X600.8s recovered this ethereal quality to a remarkable degree, with Michael Timmins’ guitar echoing off the walls and sister Margo Timmins practically whispering the lyrics into my ear.

Probably because of the straight-to-tape nature of the recording, the vocals have some occasional sibilant issues. On the X600.8s, those sibilants were still there, but the lush midrange I attribute to the first 50 watts of Class-A power seemed to

minimize them. At the same time, both ends of the frequency extreme were equally as impressive, with Alan Anton’s bass having both depth and tunefulness and Peter Timmins’ subtle cymbal work portrayed with a silken sheen.

Another recording that really highlighted the X600.8s resolution and dynamic capabilities was jazz singer Lyn Stanley’s *The Moonlight Sessions, Vol. 2*. The second song, a cover of the American Songbook standard “The Very Thought of You,” begins with Stanley introducing the lyric over a tasteful piano line. Then bass enters, following by the swell of an orchestra. The X600.8s easily handled the dynamic shift, with the song getting louder but not aggressive. Stanley’s voice, which was recorded on Frank Sinatra’s old Neuman tube mic, had notable texture and the piano – a difficult instrument to capture – sparkled.

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Occasionally in reviews, I will rave about how a component created reverb trails that stretched far into the back of the studio. The X600.8s had that kind of sound-staging, but they did more than that. Track after track, each player's instrument was extremely full-bodied. It was easy to conjure the illusion of real people gathered in a room. The best way to describe it would be that the experience was the aural equivalent of witnessing live actors in a play, rather than watching the same production on a movie screen. One has people occupying real space on a large stage, while the other is a projection that doesn't extend behind a thin screen.

In comparison to my reference Merrill Thor monoblocks, the X600.8s had better-defined lower bass, more weight and a fuller midrange. The perceived dynamic range seemed wider, and the Pass amps had the uncanny ability to portray three-dimensional players in space.

a new depth to the Prodigy's magic midrange and both extended and polished the high frequencies.

At \$26,000 USD a pair, the Pass Labs X600.8s are the most expensive amplifiers I've ever had in my reference system. Heck, they are by far the costliest component of any kind I've ever unboxed. Yet, these unabashedly heavyweight powerhouses offered a fascinating opportunity to see what a gifted, veteran designer could achieve with fewer cost restrictions.

Perhaps the outstanding attribute of the X600.8s was their ability to portray musicians and their instruments as 3-D, full-size entities, realistically positioned left-to-right and front-to-back across the soundstage.

I've heard some other listeners describe the Pass house sound as "solid state with warmth." After a months-long demo, I think what they're hearing isn't really warmth, which to me would imply some degree of reduction in texture,

**“Simply put, the Pass Labs X600.8s are the finest amplifiers I’ve ever had in my home.”**

**JOHN STANCAVAGE**

The 200-watt Class D Thors, though, had a slight edge in overall smoothness. Finally, the X600.8s got much hotter than the Thors. If you have a cat, it won't curl up for long on top of these babies.

My Krell units, meanwhile, had superior bass slam, but showed their age in nearly every other category. To be honest, none of these matchups was a fair fight, since the most expensive of the Krell amps had half the watts and retailed for \$10,000 USD when new, while the Thors sell for \$4,800 USD and come second in the Merrill line to the \$12,400 USD Veritas monoblocks.

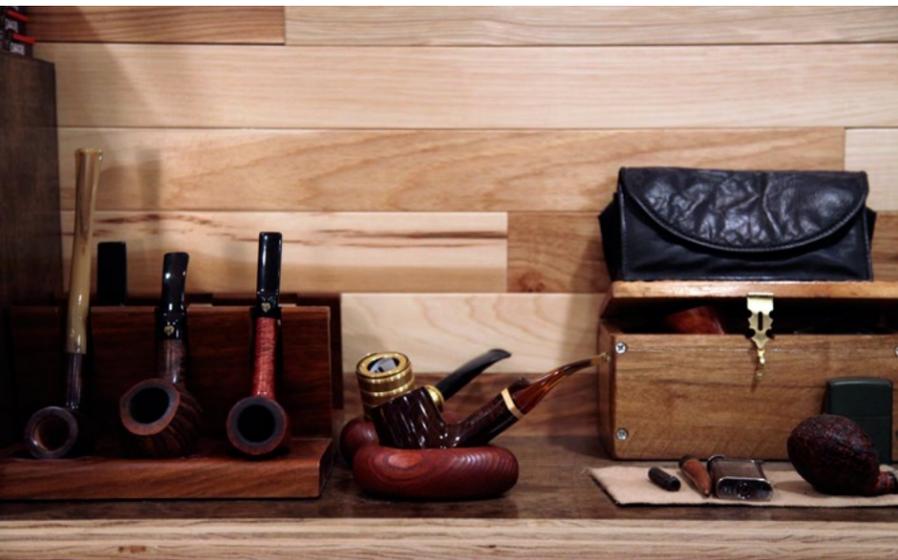
After swapping amps, I decided to see how the X600.8s would fare with speakers that are significantly different from my Revel Studios. I inserted a pair of MartinLogan Prodigy hybrid electrostatics, which have a nasty impedance dip that goes down to about 2 ohms. The Pass monoblocks' significant Class A power brought

detail and resolution. Instead, I suspect what they're reacting to is a remarkable, full-bodied presentation.

Pass amps – particularly the X600.8 – offer solidity without excessive thickness, detail without brightness, and dynamics without fatigue. Add to that stunning depth with realistic instrument layering, and you have quite a feat of engineering.

Simply put, the Pass Labs X600.8s are the finest amplifiers I've ever had in my home, and are on the short list of the best I've ever auditioned anywhere at any price. For those who can seriously shop at this level, they should be a must-audition. For everyone else, these monoblocks still deserve to be heard, if for no other reason than to attune your ears.

Audiophiles in the latter category, if it's any consolation, at least won't have to risk the double hernia getting them home. **T/O**

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The guttural snarl, and whine of the modified flat-six motor and five-speed gearbox as we power our way up, and down this stretch of road reaches me through the base of my spine, and is translated into adrenaline. “I like to go fast, I also appreciate subtlety,” said Rotunda. “And I think that whether it’s a high-end piece of componentry that’s handmade, or an air-cooled Porsche 911, there’s a shared tangible quality about the experience of the tactile sensation of turning on your audio system, and adjusting the knobs, and dropping the needle down on a vinyl record, as there is with sitting in the cockpit of a vintage car.”

Halpern’s wheels hail from Stuttgart too, but his ’64 356C, and ’87 911 coupe call New York State home.

Whether it’s in their choice of stereo system, or automobile, both men have a love, and deep appreciation of the finer, more esoteric things life can offer. Both their residences exude an air of refinement, and taste with a mid-century leaning that strikes a chord with me personally, and there was never a moment on the trip when I felt anything but at home.

After taking the maximum g-forces our bodies would allow on the road with the 911, and enjoying a spectacular dinner with Rotunda’s family, we woke early the next morning to make the roughly three-hour trip to Pitch Perfect Audio in Los Angeles for a full day of filming, interviews, and most importantly; listening to a full Shindo Labs system *in situ*.

Continued on **PAGE 127**



## Equipment list:

Shindo Monbrison preamplifier: \$12,500 USD  
 Cortese F2a stereo amplifier: \$12,250 USD  
 Shindo 301 Player System full setup: \$31,395 USD  
 Hommage T1 SUT – SPU: \$4,995 USD  
 Hommage T2 SUT – EMT: \$4,995,  
 Platine Verdier Turntable: \$14,000 USD  
 EMT997 tonearm: \$5,495 USD  
 TSD15 MC cartridge: \$2,400 USD  
 Tonapparate Equipment support: Starts \$9,995 USD  
 A23 Hommage 755 Loudspeakers: \$11,500 USD  
 A23 interconnects: \$795 USD/pair  
 A23 speaker wire: \$1,180 USD/three meter pair

Rotunda's shop is a continuation of his house stylistically, and the feel is more home than shop. The sheer amount of drool-worthy new, and historical hifi equipment on hand is staggering, and even after shooting hundreds of photographs, and doing hours of filming, I still felt hard-pressed to fully convey what a heavyweight analog temple he has built for worshipping music playback.

We moved between two turntables – a Shindo-modified Garrard 301, and J.C. Verdier La Platine, but remained rock-steady with the Shindo Monbrison preamplifier, and Cortese stereo power amplifier. Two transducers were auditioned: The Auditorium 23 Hommage 755, and Shindo's flagship Latour field-coil loudspeakers. Cabling was a mix of Shindo, and Auditorium 23.

There were no sound field optimizers, no stainless steel isolation feet under components, no cable risers, or dust covers, the amps, and 'tables sat on a Tonapparate rack, and room treatment consisted of some foam panels, rugs, and paintings on the walls.

Spending time in the sweet spot during listening sessions (or even off-axis) was an exercise more in maintaining emotional control than professional composure. Spinning a mix

of jazz, soul, rock, and blues, Rotunda, and Halpern took turns controlling the decades we visited through a system I can only describe as a time machine. The sheer physical presence of performers that was conveyed never faltered from recording-to-recording, and I couldn't help but shake my head while listening because every simile, and metaphor that I wanted to use to describe for what I was hearing seemed underwhelming in their ability to accurately communicate what I was experiencing.

"There's a lot of snake oil out there on the market, and a lot of it is just to feed the audiophile insecurities about how they can put a band-aid on a system to improve it," Rotunda said when I mentioned it. "Start at the core, and build a system that doesn't need band-aids." "It's about system synergy, and not fixing things that are wrong to begin with."

Writing this piece many weeks after visiting with Rotunda, and Halpern, I can still close my eyes and transport myself back to that listening session, and looking upon the visit, I see now that the light, and space of the mountains they call home was a fitting stage to cleanse my mental, and emotional palette for the path they took me down with Shindo Labs.

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When I started I was still a farmer, and the government was constructing a new highway very close to us, including a 600-metre long bridge. There were many geologists around the site, and I learned a lot from them regarding ground composition, the difference, and capacity between sand, soil, clay soil, alumina, and so on. The conclusion was that the actual earth has a lot of electrical pollutants.

Simply put, the ground can be overloaded with electricity in some areas. That was the reason I started to test a box which is like a cross-section of Mother Earth, but one that could be isolated. If the real Earth can handle such large electrical surges/noise consisting of many Kilo Volts and MegaWatts I should be able to create a box that can handle smaller currents that we would encounter in AC/speaker cables.

**RA:** *On the website you also say: "The construction and choice of materials in the earth box has a crucial effect on the result. In part, the minerals and metals involved have an effect, but*

*the relationship of proportion and distance between them also affects the result." I follow what you are saying in regards to how you come up with the ratios of materials, and their sequence/placement within the box, but why is that critical? What did you discover during the prototype stage that led to these design decisions?*

**PO:** In the beginning we used a kind of mineral mix (sand, or more correctly, a mineral mix from a mine in Sweden) and mix it with some aluminium and copper content. Since different metals are magnetic in one way or another, and all metals have their own grounding capacity it's important how they are placed in the mineral mix; how much, types of metals, and the distance between them to create the most efficient grounding quality.

We have made great strides about which metals to use, how to prep the metal before inclusion, and use a larger variety of metals – even gold – to get increased performance. **T/O**



Entreq Olympus Tellus grounding box: \$9,650 USD.  
Weight: 100 LBS.  
Connections: Six solid-silver binding posts, one solid copper AC ground post.



# Now Hear This

**AUDIOQUEST  
TREE SERIES  
OAK SPEAKER CABLE**

Featuring solid perfect-surface copper conductors and carbon-based multi-layer noise dissipation, the AudioQuest Oak speaker cables I've had on loan to use as my review reference for the past year have acquitted themselves with outstanding transparency, zero colouration, and the unerring ability to reveal the most delicate nuances of rare vinyl pressings, out of print CDs, and high-resolution computer audio files. Look for my upcoming long-term review. MSRP \$3,300 USD/eight-foot pair.

–Rafe Arnott



# REEL<sup>2</sup>REEL

## INTERVIEW: CHARLES KING

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFE ARNOTT



Above: Charles King in Denver, Colo.

**Rafe Arnott:** *You've been involved with analog tape, and rebuilding Stellavox reel-to-reel players/recorders for some time, can you give our readers some background on how you came to your current situation as not only a bespoke tape-machine artisan, but also an analog-tape spokesperson at many industry events, and shows?*

**Charles King:** My mentor and friend Rich Brown got me interested in tapes around 25 years ago. Back then, the source material consisted of 15-ips master dubs (if you could find them in pre-internet days) and two and four track commercial releases. It happens that two-track stereo tapes enjoyed a short lifespan from around 1953 to 1960 (and actually preceded stereo LPs by a few years). I came upon a few two-track

tape collections, and the medium "blew me away" so to speak, which encouraged further collecting.

My first tape machine was a Revox A77 which I dug into, and sonically "improved" (at least I thought so); mostly by parts substitution. Brown then introduced me to the Stellavox brand, as they were showing up surplus from the Canadian Broadcasting Service (CBC), and film sound/editing companies.

One listen convinced me of the superiority of not only that brand, but how good the medium, and well-designed tape electronics could sound. I started bringing one of their little, portable machines to shows, playing tapes in certain rooms, and trumpeting the benefits of analog tape where I could. Along the way, I became familiar with many professional tape machines

and re-introduced a well-respected tape pre-amplifier and upgraded electronics for my Stella's.

**RA:** *You, and I became acquainted a few years ago after I first heard your modified Stellavox reel-to-reel player/recorder. Being relatively new to the audiophile scene, I wasn't intimately familiar with the analog tape sound, and it left a deep impression upon me for it's inherently tactile, organic, and lifelike presentation. Are these characteristics what drew you to pursue perfecting the preamp section of the little Stella?*

**CK:** Yes. And I didn't realize how fortunate I was to choose that medium as my primary source. I still marvel at the immersion, attentiveness and amazement (to add to your verbiage) exhibited by many of

those who attend tape-listening sessions at the shows. I think the "magic" has to do with these folks being accustomed to hearing their music on LP (or CD), and now being able to listen "much closer to/into" the sound originally recorded on analog tape.

Remember that the music on any LP prior to say 1985, was first transcribed on tape; then its electrical signal was converted to a mechanical signal on the LP by the record cutter, then converted back again to an electrical signal by the cartridge in your turntable.

What if you could bypass that morass and listen to the original tape, or a copy only a few generations removed? And with no digital "artifacts?"

**RA:** *First LPs, and now (surprisingly for many) reel-to-reel is seeing a growing resurgence with serious audiophiles. Albums require an investment in the understanding of the high-fidelity playback chain. LPs require curating, and maintenance – never mind the knowledge needed to properly load, and service moving-coil or moving-magnet cartridges, setting up a tonearm, and the vagaries of phono stages. Tape takes this a step further in a sense of the proper storage of reels, the precarious operation (for many) of threading a player with tape, and depending on the recording,*

*and reel size, the onerous prospect of getting up every five or seven minutes to set-up another tape. Why are people clamouring to take on all this extra work?*

**CK:** I'm going to take issue with you here, as I'd opine that the tape medium requires LESS work. Granted, tapes do take up more storage space. But once you've had your transport overhauled/aligned by a competent technician, about all you have to do is clean the tape guides / heads at a regular interval.

All the commercial tapes available now are 10" and as each tape typically holds the musical equivalent of one side of an LP - it can run from 20 to 30 minutes. A number of the "little" tapes I made for the Stella machine you are using were single selections put on much smaller reels, purely for demonstration convenience.

**RA:** *What advice would you have for someone looking to dive into the world of reel-to-reel tapes? How important is it to have a specific type of sound system in place already? Is the addition of a Stellavox, for example, predicated on having a tube-based system? Solid State amplification? A certain type of speaker or preamplifier? What do people need to know before they start ordering tapes, and players off the Internet?*

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## “Going forward... I put my money on digital. There’s no (long term) money in analog.”

**CHARLES KING**

**CK:** Have to say that the great majority of those I know who have gotten into tape already have had very good systems. Including both tubed, and solid state.

We’re adding a whole new “front end” here, one which I’d say have capabilities different from, and better than adoptees current front ends.

Where to start... Oh man. Let’s talk the equipment first then move into the “software.” Two equipment paths here: buy a transport from one source with the playback head “wired out” and integrate it to a tape preamp from another source.

There are many good transports out there and trying to name them will result in me forgetting/pissing off someone, so I won’t name names. They cost anywhere from \$1K USD on up. Stand-alone tape preamps (tubed and solid-state) are available from a half-dozen sources and cost from \$1K up towards \$20K.

All-in-one machines are available from at least two sources and cost from \$7K to \$25K (I think). Let me make this real clear though: in this day of \$10K+ phono cartridges, you can equip yourself with a very good complete analog tape rig for around \$10K.

As for the tapes themselves, I believe that today there are at least a dozen entities producing reel-to-

reel tapes with the titles available reaching into the hundreds. Yes, their cost ranges upwards to \$500 USD per two-tape set. But consider that the tape / reels/ packaging cost around one third of this, not to mention the duplication cost and amortization of the duplicating equipment; and a real problematic cost – copyrights.

And yes, master dubs of tape are all over the web - caveat emptor. Here you go - get into tape with a friend(s) and share tape costs.

**RA:** *If having the most musical DAC, and accurate clocking is critical to getting the best from digital audio (as many suggest), and a properly-loaded moving-coil cartridge is a key aspect to LP playback, what is crucial to getting the best from a tape deck, and reels?*

**CK:** The important components of the tape playback “system” are the tape transport, the playback head and the tape preamplifier.

The transport’s job is to run the tape by a playback head at a steady, constant speed. Equally important, as most of the tapes you play are very valuable, the transport has to also “handle” the tape very gently so as not to stretch or break it, even during high speed forward or reverse winding.

The later generations of serious transports had sophisticated “con-

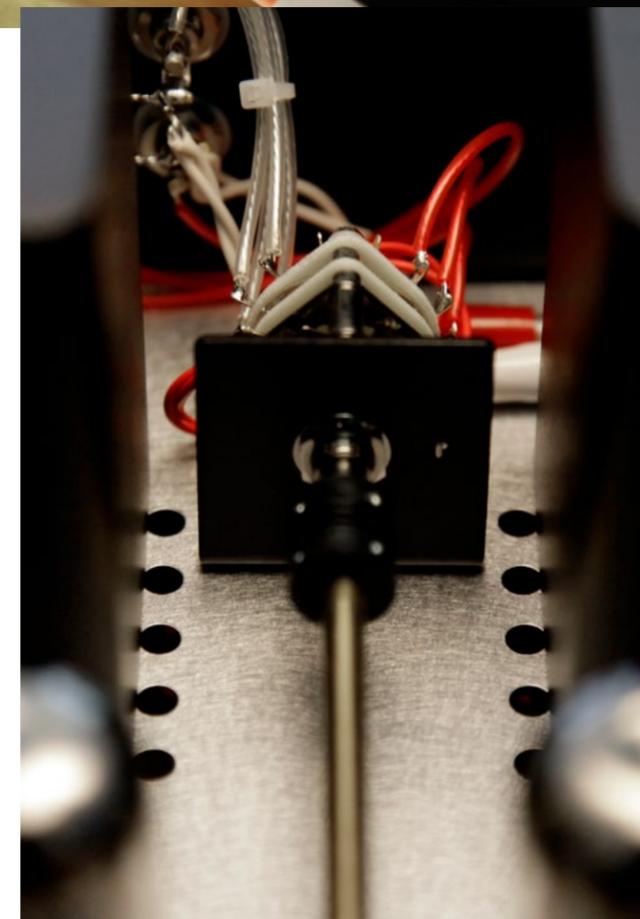
stant tension” tape-handling capability. The reproduction head also makes a difference. Think of it as just the coils in a moving-magnet cartridge - with the magnetism supplied by the tape.

Finally, there is the playback preamp which is like a phono preamp but with a different equalization curve and typically a little more gain. I’ve found that the most problematic sections in many tape decks are the playback electronics which have, shall I say “sonic deficiencies” that an outboard (or “stand alone”) preamp can rectify.

**RA:** *Is analog king, and will it always be king in the upper echelons of the audiophile world, or is digital making such aggressive inroads in sound quality, and convenience that we could see LPs or tapes eventually usurped from their throne at the top of the high-fidelity playback chain? What’s your personal take Charles?*

**CK:** I’d like to think that analog tape has given certain of your upper echelons a new lease on life. Every new format has offered reduced storage space and increased operating convenience. Cloud storage and file downloads are hard to beat from this perspective. Going forward from here, I put my money on digital. There’s no (long term) money in analog. **T/O**

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The Overture II is one of the quietest amps I’ve ever experienced, as I could have my ear next to the tweeters on my speakers and hear nothing.

Not all great tube amplifiers are capable of this feat, and to me this is crucial because the silence between notes being played conveys a huge amount of spatial information which translates into an accuracy, and realism of placement to performers within the recorded space. It is the accuracy of this information which to me allows for the most lifelike playback from a component.

The weight to the keystrokes of the 1860

concert grand piano from Maison Pleyel which Edna Stern plays on *Hélène De Montgeroult* (CD Orchid Classics ORC1000063) cannot, in my estimation, be overstated.

Every felted-hammer strike of the strings conveys an assertion by Stern that she is making this piano hers on these recordings, not Montgeroult’s, and it is the bloom, and decay of the notes into the mute background that gives the determination of the size, and placement of the instrument within the recorded frame of reference at the Philharmonie de Paris.

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Mixing in the KSL-VcII interconnects during listening showcased the attack on leading notes in the 12 Etudes included on the disc. The startling momentum of Stern's depictions made the Overture II a rival in speed to the solid state CH Precision L1 preamplifier/M1 power amplifier combination I reviewed in early 2017 (\$32,975/\$51,000 USD respectively), albeit with more refinement to the solidity, and texture of notes.

The final addition of the Operia SPc-2.5 speakers cables during an extended session with *One Flight Up* by Dexter Gordon (CD Blue Note RVG Edition 724359650524) produced noticeable frequency extension in those most upper octaves, and those most low. The SPc seemed to extend the boundaries of the recorded space, subsequently infusing more bloom, saturation, and decay of notes into the silent ether of background.

Art Taylor's cymbal, and high hat work took on more desert-air shimmer, Gordon's tenor sax became further imbued with tonal colour, and Donald Byrd's brassy trumpet work took on swagger – in my mind I could clearly see every change in embouchure. The bass licks that Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen lays down throughout “Tanya,” and “Coppin’ the Haven” took

on a playfulness, with a more definitive texture to his slaps, and fretwork.

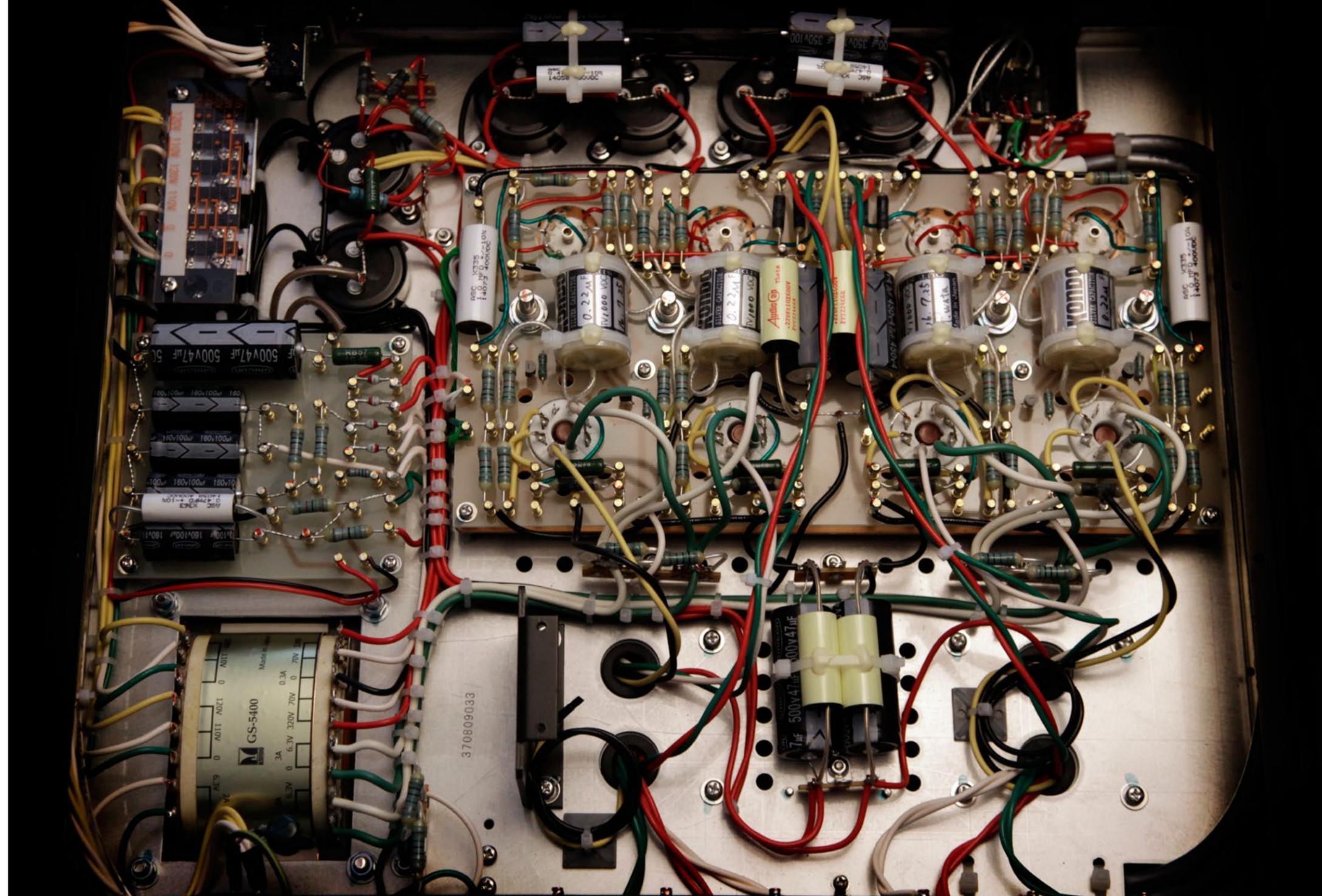
Turning my focus next to the addition of the GE-1 phono amplifier, I ran the KSL-VcII interconnects from it to the Overture II, and ran a step-up transformer into the GE-1 (34dB gain, and similarly equipped with Electro-Harmonix tubes, here it is a trio of 12AY7 dual-triodes) from my current long-term review turntable, and moving-coil cartridge.

The GE-1 is a moving-magnet phono stage, capable of switching between two separate cartridge inputs, with an adjustable input impedance selector, which I set to 50K Ohms.

Like the Overture II it is constructed to the strictest standards, possesses a solidity, and heft to its casework, and the same attention to circuit detail throughout. Aesthetically, it is a very pleasing match to the Overture II, sonically it provides the same emotional connection to music that had me wearing a path into my living-room rugs between my sofa, and sound system as I swapped out CDs.

The first thing I noticed going from digital to analog playback was almost no change in the palpability of each recorded performance – a nod to system synergy in my opinion.

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Kondo Overture II: \$32,250 USD  
 Kondo GE-1: \$11,750 USD  
 Kondo KSL-VcII interconnect: \$1,150 USD  
 Kondo Operia SPc-2.5 speaker cable: \$1,620 USD  
 Kondo ACc-Persimmon AC cable: \$1,000 USD  
 Kondo ACz-Avocado AC cable: \$1,000 USD

Associated equipment:  
 Thales TTT Slim-II turntable w/Easy tonearm  
 EMT JSD-VM MC cartridge  
 Auditorium 23 step-up transformer for EMT totaldac d1 integral DAC/Streamer  
 Audio Note UK CD4.1x  
 Audio Note UK AN-E SPe/HE loudspeakers  
 AudioQuest Wind interconnects  
 AudioQuest NRG-10 AC power cables  
 AudioQuest Oak speaker cables  
 AudioQuest Vodka RJ/E cable  
 PS Audio P10 Power Plant  
 Shindo Mr. T power conditioner



The corporeal impact, and sound stage of playback continued to shift from recording to recording as it should, as well, the lifelike scale of performers, and instruments maintained appropriate dimensions, and weight.

With *Art Blakey And The Jazz Messengers Keystone 3* (LP Pure Audiophile PA-008 (2)) spinning on the turntable, I lowered the cart into the run-in groove, and was fully immersed in the venue of this 1982 performance recorded live at Keystone Korner in San Francisco. Half-speed mastered by legend Stan Ricker, and plated, and pressed at RTI, this translucent red 180-gram pressing is dead quiet, and I couldn't help but make comparisons between the GE-1's paucity of background noise, and that of the *Overture II*.

Blakey's almost spiritual – and absolutely effortless – crash, and ride cymbal work on the opening of “Waterfalls” left no doubt who was on drums, or who led this sextet. Known to continuously

tighten his kit if it doesn't sound right, I've heard few of his performances that seem to present such taut skins as through the GE-1 here.

The power, and liquidity to Branford Marsalis alto sax work was only matched by the now obvious call-and-reply between his brother Wynton on trumpet in “A La Mode,” obvious because the Kondo phono stage revealed what had previously seemed merely energetic, was actually symbiotic.

Switching gears to new wave, I found my 2009 reissue of 1983's *Power, Corruption & Lies* by New Order (LP Rhino Records R125308) had taken on an anxiousness to the propulsive opening track “Age of Consent.” Where before I merely felt compelled to bob my head to Stephen Morris' incessant percussive intro, it now was tinged with apprehension, and lead singer Bernard Sumner seemed ill at ease vocalizing “*I'm not the kind that needs to tell you/ Just what you, want me to.*”

Regardless of what I played through this Japanese-amplified combination I was alternately left with tears running down my face, or spontaneously clapping, and jumping up-and-down on my sofa.

Few manufacturers are capable of invoking so much emotional response from me through playback of recorded events, but Kondo Audio Note did this every time I allowed the electrons to flow from source to transducer through their exquisite circuit topology, and in fact, despite their price point, both components had me contemplating a call to my bank manager regarding a loan to acquire the review pair.

In the end, they are simply beyond my financial means, but should you have the ability to procure such bespoke arbitrators of electronic signal reproduction, and consider yourself among those who value tone, timbre, and natural flow to music above all else, I implore you to seek out the *Overture II*, and the GE-1. **T/O**



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There was constant static and the volume rose and fell. I listened to “Down to the Waterline” and then “Wild West End.”

For the first time in a long while, I smiled. In the coming weeks, I played that CD almost exclusively. I cleaned my vinyl copy of Tumbleweed Connection and spun it. I bought a 1970s Marantz tuner with the glowing blue dial I used to worship in high school, plugged it into my remote-control preamp and tuned in the local jazz show on public radio. That was a helluva lot of fun.

That was a few years ago. More recently, I’ve converted a second-story bedroom into Listening Room Two. In there I have a Marantz 4400 quad receiver – yes, quad – along with four JBL speakers I refurbished, my old Technics SL1300, along with a McIntosh CD player. My plan is to change this up every once in a while, with a Marantz 7C preamp (already acquired), an as-of-now-undecided amp and Quad (the company) electrostatics or Altec Valentias.

Will I use that rig to review equipment for *Part-Time Audiophile*? Nope. I still greatly appreciate my downstairs “reference” system, but I don’t sweat that the current Pass Labs X600.8 mono blocks and X12 preamp are fed by an older DAC. I’ve kept the ancient Marantz tuner in this rig and recently acquired and modified a Thorens turntable made four decades ago. I’ve even been using my Marantz 7C as a tubed phono stage.

I still marvel at the resolution I’m able to achieve with those components and my newer Revel and MartinLogan speakers, but am I going to spend some hours upstairs every so often, listening to four old JBLs or maybe a pair of massive horns. You bet. With a grin on my face.

I’ve also plunged back into my music library. When I’m not evaluating a component, I try to switch off the analytical part of my brain and focus on the music. I marvel at Bob Dylan’s wordplay, the groove of old Stax/Volt records and the half-sloshed drawl of Lucinda Williams,

while not getting distracted by the roundness of bass lines and the blackness of backgrounds.

Lest you think any of this is high-end heresy, I would argue that’s exactly the problem I’m railing against here. What we forget is that the roots of this audio hobby were all about finding better ways to enjoy our favourite music. There also was much more experimenting and DIY. Building tube amps, cutting and soldering wire, doing modifications, trying crazy setups.

Even the legends of the high-end embraced this. For instance, the venerable Harry Pearson, founder of the Absolute Sound (the ‘zine I mentioned earlier with the staff philosopher), decades ago raved about using two pairs of Advent speakers, one on top of the other. Likewise, high-end pioneer Mark Levinson (the man, no longer associated with the company that bears his name) once created a loudspeaker system where each channel included two stacked Quad ESLs, along with a ribbon super-tweeter and separate 24-inch woofers. That’s hard-core.

I think we need more of that. Not so much being serious, but more serious fun. Explore all the great new equipment out there, but loosen up. Ask to have a tubed line stage connected to a solid-state amp. Pull your chair up close and try near-field listening. Explore homemade tweaks like putting cups under your speaker cables. Add a Bob Dylan bootleg to your Acoustic Sounds and Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab audition discs.

Tear something apart.

Build something.

Throw a classic component into your system. (I’m not the only reviewer doing this. *Stereophile* deputy editor Art Dudley recently lugged a pair of vintage, Craigslist-sourced Altec Flamingos to his new home.) Dig out your favourite, but scratchy, old records. Stream Spotify once in a while without feeling guilty.

Use your head, but listen to your heart, too.

And most of all, *smile*. **T/O**

# Pure and Simple

**PURE FIDELITY  
ECLIPSE  
TURNTABLE**

Designed, and built by hand right in my hometown of Vancouver, B.C. by hifi artisan, and long-time audiophile John Stratton, the Pure Fidelity Eclipse turntable – here sporting the K2 tonearm – exudes the kind of fit, finish, and componentry I’ve come to expect from offerings double the suggested \$4,290 USD price. Real-wood veneer, anti-resonance MDF sandwich plinth, bronze main bearing, CNC-machined aluminum sub-platter, Delrin main platter, external in-house built Maestro speed control unit, and a 12-volt AC-synchronous motor are just a few of the features Stratton has packed into this ‘table. Mine came fitted with a Benz Micro Glider SH. Look for upcoming review.

–Rafe Arnott



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# audio head

## HiFi Audio News and Reviews

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## THIS IS THE END

Here we are *again*.

On the last page of something I made with the help of my shipmates on this little high-fidelity boat known as *Part-Time Audiophile* – now with *The Occasional* back on deck.

This edition saw some changes in layout, and design: A maturation in my eyes of what we can achieve.

This issue is bigger than the first at 142 pages, and I'd like to think it's taking shape from something more than an idea, and into a concept.

Perhaps not a fully-formed concept, but headed in the right direction at least.

As I said before, the idea is that this just keeps getting bigger, and better as we continue forward, and with outstanding contributions from the likes of Brian Hunter, Dr. Panagiotis Karavitis, John Stancavage, Jan Zecshky, industry wunderkind John DeVore, publisher Scot Hull, and artist Karin Shoji, I can't see this going anywhere but up.

My thanks to all who helped make this issue happen, and my thanks to you – the reader – without whom we'd all still just be sailing in circles.

–Rafe Arnott

