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number fourteen

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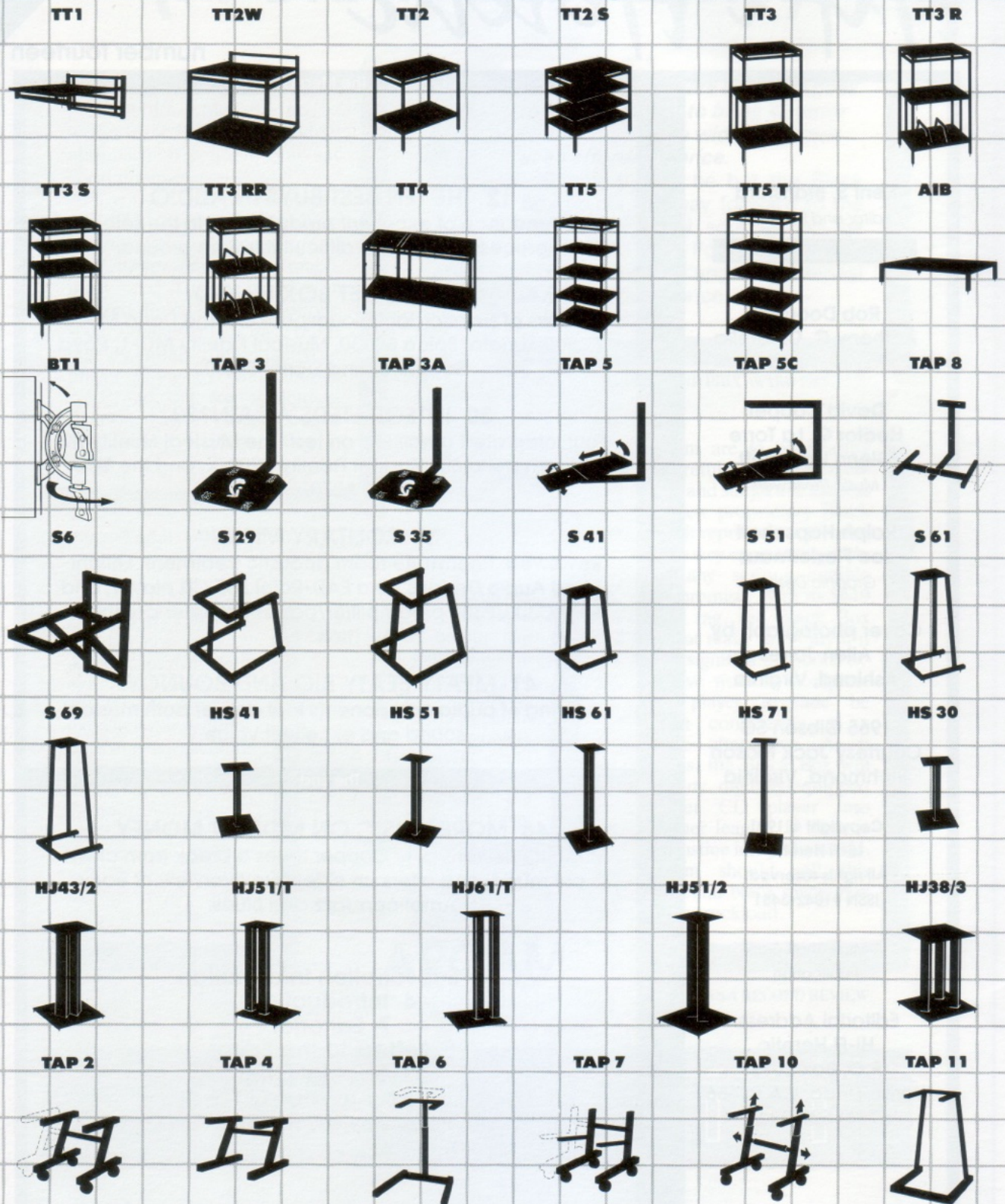
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**14**



## INTRODUCTION

Last issue, I gave you a thumbnail sketch of the economics of small magazine publishing from the production end of things. This time, I'd like to briefly discuss a different, but equally important, aspect of magazine publishing — sales and marketing.

The single greatest misconception people have about periodicals concerns the issue of "product". For the sake of this discussion, let us define "product" as that which yields profit. Most people assume, logically enough, that a publisher makes a profit through revenues generated by retail and subscription sales of its magazine. Hence the magazine is the "product". This is most assuredly not the case. For the vast majority of commercial periodicals (i.e., ones that accept advertising), direct profits from magazine sales are almost nonexistent. If this is true, what exactly *is* a magazine's product? *You* are.

Before elaborating, let's first consider how periodicals are sold in this country. There are two basic ways you can purchase a magazine; buy it at retail outlets (newsstands, book stores, supermarkets, etc.), or buy a subscription and have it mailed to your home. Retail sales are unprofitable because the publisher must share his profit margin with both the distributor (who sells the magazine to retail outlets) and the retailer (who, of course, sells the magazine to the public). Specialty audio publications, for example, typically sell magazines to their distributors at 50% off cover price. In short, one half of the cover price goes to the publisher, and the other half is split between the distributor and retailer. For a small magazine, with its inherently high production costs (see Introduction in Issue Thirteen), it is not uncommon for the distributor and retailer to both make more profit per copy than the publisher. From the publisher's point of view, retail sales are a bust. Their only saving grace is that they might generate new subscriptions.

Subscription sales certainly *look* more promising, and are indeed more profitable for a magazine. Here the publisher sells directly to the public, and thus keeps all of the profit generated by the sale. Of course, subscriptions entail additional costs for mailing (envelopes, labor to stuff and sort, postage), but subscriptions still end up being more lucrative than retail sales. Unfortunately, though, not as much as you might think. The public expects subscriptions to be sold at a substantial discount relative to single-copy retail prices. Given that subscribers prepay for the full term of subscriptions (and thus compensate publishers for some issues that won't be mailed for months), moderate discounts certainly seem to be in order.

The key word here is "moderate". Discounts should never reach the point where publishers can't earn a reasonable profit from subscriptions. Yet one need only glance at a newsstand, or flip on the TV, to see that publishers are offering ludicrous discounts and incentives in order to garner new subscribers. *Sports Illustrated* offers extremely low subscription rates, and as a bonus throws in idiotic telephones or banal videocassettes, *Time* and *Newsweek* offer as come-ons sad little clock-radios and other equally useless dreck, *Life* promises to include their special *Life Celebrates the Nipple* retrospective issue, and on and on. One of my favorite offers came from a British audio magazine, *Hi-Fi Review*, which promised a **free cellular car phone** with every two-year subscription order!

How can these chuckleheads make any money on subscriptions? They can't, and guess what — they don't care. Why? Because the *serious* money, the real *elephant dollars* (as Nick Lowe so eloquently put it), the oh-my-God-I'm-finally-going-to-get-my-Porsche (invariably pronounced "Porsh") money, the hey-baby-want-to-see-my-new-Jacuzzi? money, comes from *advertising*. Your subscription payments help keep the office lounge stocked with Evian. Period.

Now let's get back to my remark about *you* being a magazine's product. Advertisers need your attention so they can persuade you to buy their products. The first problem advertisers face in this noble quest is determining who you are, and how to find you. Companies spend millions of dollars on demographic surveys to learn what sort of person is most likely to purchase their products. Once that's accomplished, they next have to gain access to the desired target audience. *Special-inter-*

*est* publications are an obvious choice in terms of desirable reader demographics; automobile manufacturers naturally advertise in car magazines, athletic equipment manufacturers perforce run ads in sports magazines, audio companies ditto in stereo magazines, etc.

Advertising rates are largely based on a magazine's paid circulation — the more warm bodies a publication can deliver to an advertiser, the more the magazine can charge for its ads. (And make no mistake, these rates can be astounding; *Stereo Review* charges upwards of \$25,000 for a *single*, full-page color ad.) You, dear reader, are one of those warm bodies.

If advertising is key to a publication's profitability, some interesting questions arise. Can a magazine serve equally well both the interests of its readers and its advertisers? To what extent do those interests coincide? If circulation is crucial in setting ad rates (and thus determining profits), might a magazine compromise or dilute editorial content in hopes of broadening its sales appeal, and thus increasing readership? The answers are: "No", "Very little", and "You bet your ass, Sparky.", respectively. Which is why 90% of the magazines on the market are utter crap.

As I hope you've noticed, *Hi-Fi Heretic* is different. Its subject matter is *music*, and the high-quality audio products that enable us to enjoy it in the home. That's it. No video, no car stereo, no bullshit. *Hi-Fi Heretic* is published solely for the benefit of its readers — *HFH* is not an advocate for the audio industry. The fundamental goal of this magazine is to help excellence flourish, and mediocrity perish.

You may have noticed that *HFH* carries little advertising. For the reasons discussed above, this is purely by design. (That said, I am disappointed by the lack of even *modest* financial support given by the specialist audio industry. But that is the topic for next issue's Editorial.) As a primarily reader-supported magazine, subscription monies are of vital importance. *HFH* is so efficiently run that it can operate on laughably minimal revenues, but to *grow* and *prosper* it must have many more subscribers. On pages 32-33 of this issue, you'll find information on two incentive programs designed to increase circulation. If these programs seem vaguely weasel-like, rest assured they're honest, economically sensible attempts to help *HFH* improve. Your support really *does* matter. — Kent Bransford

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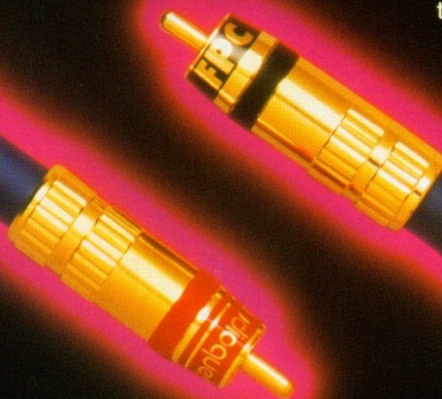
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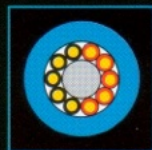


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## EDITORIAL

Back in 1985, when my thirtieth birthday reared its ugly whatever, I was confronted with a most disturbing realization. Despite being athletic all my life, after college I'd progressively let my fitness deteriorate to the point where I ultimately achieved a striking resemblance to Jabba the Hutt. Clocking in at a good thirty pounds over my college weight, I decided it was time to get serious and melt off some blubber.

I've always enjoyed running, so that was the obvious activity of choice. Of course, it had been many years since I had done any *serious* running, a point driven home during my first workout. At 5 a.m. on a muggy August morning in Virginia, air essentially has the consistency of mud. After only a few hundred yards, I had a real desire to cough up a lung. I kept at it, though, and within a week or two I actually started to enjoy myself. Sort of.

Before long, I was clicking off three miles a day without any trouble. A couple of months later, I had moved up to six miles every day. Bad idea. Running on the steeply crowned roads of rural Virginia placed all sorts of interesting torsional loads on my left leg, and this combined with my too-rapid mileage increase to send dire warnings to Mr. Knee. A mild ache soon developed into a stabbing pain, and though I quit running for several weeks in hopes of healing up, the pain never went away. Even now, when I climb stairs my knee sounds like a maraca.

I quickly had to find an alternative form of exercise, and turned to bicycling. Like any good compulsive-neurotic audiophile, I first loaded up on magazines to research the market before making a purchase. My only previous contact with "quality" bicycles had been the purchase of a Schwinn Varsity when I was in the sixth grade. To say I was out of touch with the current state-of-the-art would be an understatement. I was immediately overwhelmed by the variety of models, and the technologies they represented: chrome-moly or manganese steel, straight gauge or double- (or triple-!) butted tubes, Columbus vs. Reynolds steel, investment-cast vs. stamped lugs, small-diameter bonded (Vitus) vs. large-diameter TIG-welded (Cannondale, Klein) aluminum frames, etc. What about frame geometry? Rake and trail, seat and head tube angles, short wheelbase vs. long — Lord, it was endless.

When I had dutifully absorbed all of this information, I was more confused than

ever. I soon realized that no matter how much I boned up on this stuff, I was never going to be able to make an intelligent choice based purely on *reading*. It was time to actually ride some bikes.

The first two dealers I visited didn't seem to care about much beyond what I could afford to spend. They showed me some bikes in my price range, confidently claiming they were all fine values (if they carry it, it must be good), and pointed out the ones on sale. I brought up the subject of test rides, and they unenthusiastically agreed to same. After riding a few bikes, none of them really *felt* right. Both dealers shrugged their shoulders, and remarked that these were very popular models. I left both shops without making a purchase.

The third dealer I visited (Hampton Schwinn in Hampton, VA) was different. The salesman was friendly and attentive, and seemed more interested in what I wanted in a bike than how much I had to spend on it. We chatted about the different design philosophies of the bikes on display, but the salesman was obviously eager for me to test ride a number of models, in order to get some idea of the differences in feel between them. I rode a couple of nice steel-framed models, and they felt good, but a little "dead".

Then I tried an aluminum Cannondale, and was instantly in love. Featuring one of the stiffest framesets in the world, the Cannondale seemed to rocket forward when I spun the pedals. There was no slop or flex in the system, just direct transmission of power. No matter how hard I jumped, the chain refused to rub on the front derailleur, indicating superb bottom bracket rigidity. (Some frames flex so much the chain can actually jump off the chainring on hard climbs, instantly converting your gonads into guacamole.) True, it rode like an ox cart — you could roll over a dime and tell what year it was minted. I didn't care. This was the feel I wanted, with the bike seemingly alive under me. Even though it was priced about thirty percent higher than my budget allowed for, I happily shelled out the extra money.

In the months to come, I made innumerable trips to that bike shop. As my riding skills developed, I became interested in ways to improve my gorgeous blue steed. I eventually added an SIS (indexed shifting) kit, Look pedals, a Pearl Izumi Flolite saddle, Michelin Hi-Lite Comp tires, SLR aero brake levers, Teflon-lined brake cable

housings and trick brake pads, an Avocet cyclocomputer, a beautifully polished seatpost, ultralight water bottle cages...well, you get the idea. I was in the throes of serious Hardware Lust.

Funny thing is, all of these purchases actually improved the functionality of my bike. Some more than others, yes, but all were worthwhile to some degree. The shop's salesmen steered me away from foolish or wasteful purchases, discreetly reining in my acquisitive urges. They also gave me a small but significant discount on all of these sales, because they knew I was a loyal customer. I could have bought virtually any of the above items for less money from a mail-order company. I was never tempted. Hampton Schwinn maintained a remarkably complete inventory of parts on hand, allowing me to actually paw the merchandise before handing over my money. I felt like a kid in a candy store.

The net result of all this was a bicycle that, for all intents and purposes, disappeared beneath me. Every day I would go out for a hard and relatively fast (22 m.p.h.) run over one of three 25-mile courses I had mapped out, and the bike simply *wasn't there*. Hampton Schwinn had so helped me tailor the machine to myself that I could concentrate completely on the ride, without the bike ever calling attention to itself. It was, basically, perfect.

What does all of the above have to do with the wiggly world of audio? Simply this: No magazine, no "golden ear" reviewer, no self-proclaimed "expert", no mail-order cowboy, *nobody* can ever be as helpful and valuable as an honest, intelligent dealer. Yes, they are damn rare, but most things of great worth usually are. Your loyal support and patronage is absolutely *crucial* to the survival of such dedicated dealers. Without it, they will simply become extinct.

— Kent Bransford

# LETTERS

## TO THE EDITOR

### Salted Beef

As a recent subscriber, I must say it is a relief to find a magazine regularly reviewing high-quality audio equipment that, (a) is geared to the American population earning less than the cost of an MX missile per year, (b) uses music I actually listen to in its reviews of equipment, and (c) is generally not full of...soup, to use my mother's euphemism.

That last point is more important than some readers might think. When some writers and editors show their clear biases in their magazine's articles, it makes their product reviews suspect. The reader then has to know enough to take such reviews with more than a few grains of salt. At the price of most audiophile magazines, this should not be necessary.

Thank you for stating your few biases up front. Your straight talk is much appreciated.

**Lawrence J. Raffaele**  
Howard Beach, NY

### In Praise of Punk

I especially enjoyed Rob Doorack's history of punk rock. I look forward to the next installment. Although perhaps lacking the subtlety and nuance of orchestra or cham-

ber music, punk rock is music to me. I see no reason why I should not enjoy any form of music to the fullest, as can only be done with a quality system. I appreciate your recognition of this, and also thank you for your lack of condescension for my musical tastes. Who the hell were the Weavers, anyway?

**Timothy Todd**  
Fitchburg, MA

P.S. Your editorials are to be commended.

### Leery Leary, Cheery Leary

Just a note to thank you for your excellent magazine. Your editorial position in opposition to the "audio squids" and the "expensive turds" that they sell has my wholehearted endorsement. The squids are of course in illustrious company (Joe Isuzu, Spiro T. Agnew, and the directors of just about every S & L in Texas, to name just a few), but at least most people *know* not to trust these characters. Sadly, with the audio world being one of the great refuges of scoundrels and con artists, most audio consumers wandering innocently into some showroom have about as much hope as your average warm-blooded critter at Count Dracula's birthday party.

The good news is that there are exceptions to the rule, and I have recently come across one of them. Those of you living in

the New York region should check out an outfit called *Accent on Music*, run by a very nice chap named David Wilson. His shop is in Mt. Kisco, New York [telephone (914) 242-0747].

This outfit is first-rate. They carry good gear, will cheerfully demo at your home, don't rush you into a decision, are system-oriented (rather than the all too common approach of, "Yeah, sure. This component sounds great in *any* set-up."), and will not try to push you over budget ("If you think the XYZ 700 was great, yer gonna die when you hear the XYZ 2000. It's only thirteen hundred more and..."). The bit I like best is that David actually likes music. No hi-fi nonsense spoken here. Operations of this quality and integrity (yes, I said *integrity*) are, unfortunately, few and far between, and they deserve our support. In short, I would say that *Accent on Music* easily qualifies for "Best Buy" status. Highly recommended.

In closing, let me wish the gallant band at the *Heretic* good fortune in their battle against all things slimy in audioland.

**Chris Leary**  
Hoboken, NJ

P.S. How about a *Hi-Fi Heretic* motto? I offer *Semper Contra Squidlii*...sorry.

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## Perceived Value

Congratulations on your decision not to increase the price of your magazine. I loved the insight you offered when you choose to treat *us* subscribers as *you* would want to be treated — that is, *you* wouldn't pay \$7.00 for a magazine! This is great — and very revealing of your direction. I'm one of those that took the bargain subscription, so if you were to raise the price, I wouldn't be affected for a while. But I *still* wouldn't want to see it raised for another "selfish" reason. I want *new* subscribers to continue to increase — to keep the magazine alive! I know how tough it is — magazines come and go as swiftly as the seasons. This magazine deserves to succeed. It's such a breath of fresh air I feel it can't lose. (But I know I can't count on feelings alone.)

With this in mind, I don't mind the cost-cutting changes you've made. If photos eventually get cut out altogether, how about substituting them with line drawings? (Even just a crude representation would be better than nothing.)

I also congratulate your Issue Thirteen Editorial!! Let's see *Stereophile* or *The Absolutely Godly Sound* print an editorial like that! You really hit pay dirt with that one. "Perceived quality" is an issue I often see where people get taken advantage of. I have a wealthy stepbrother who bought a new home in Santa Monica, and he wanted a new "stereo". He is *not* an audiophile. He has young toddlers and an infant running around his house. He simply wanted a stereo where he could push one button (with the FM tuner set to "The Wave", a New Age/wallpaper music station) and *leave it alone*.

So with this wish list — one-button turn on, absolute reliability, remote capability, simple "bring it home, plug it in, and forget it until background music is needed for dinner" operation — he went to a local audio dealer.

They tried to sell him *McIntosh tube gear*, with all the mustard, relish, and onions to go! They told him he wouldn't be happy with their mid-fi rack system (and besides, it wouldn't accept the exotic cables they push). He asked to see the NAD system I had recommended (and which is about three times better than his old system). He almost bought the dealer's line that if the \$1500 NAD system wasn't enjoyable, he could rest assured that the dealer's pro-

posed \$9000+ system would certainly provide three times the value, and three times the enjoyment! He didn't know a tube from a boob! Luckily, he decided to confer with me first, and didn't "get taken".

One final story. I tried to sell a car in the paper, putting it at a very low price. I wanted to sell it fast, and hopefully to the first caller — I hate selling a car, so I priced it low to go fast.

I got *no* calls! Being a Karmann Ghia, it had some collector's value, but I bought it as a *car*, and priced it to sell as a *car*. None of this "Oh, golly, it's the first year with disc brakes so its worth a million" bullshit. A friend suggested I *double* the amount I was asking, and then I would get some calls. He said to run the ad again, and I did, at twice the previous asking price. Well, you know the rest. I got three calls that Saturday, and sold the car to the first arrival. People need to feel like they're getting a valuable item. Sure, they want a bargain, but they often get hung up in the "perceived value" trap.

I wish you all the success.

John Kidwell  
Los Angeles, CA

## Snake Oil & Balderdash

Your publication is refreshing, especially in its explanations of technical principals and its music articles.

I am less certain of the reviews. Having long ago concluded that other "High End" publications are a combination of cult catechism and snake-oil marketing, I wonder if yours is not a somewhat lower-key marketing vehicle for the budget "High End" companies.

As a former psychology student, I am all too aware of the virtual total inability of "golden ear" types to tell an expensive MC setup from an average MM one in rigorous blind tests, and even more, to discern between electronics in similar tests.

Nevertheless, I did buy my Quad ESL's because they sounded so good, and am aspiring to B & W 801 Mk. II's for our second system for the same reason. But I do not appreciate learning that the Kenwood KD550 turntable, which was highly rated (well, as a budget alternative) by *TAS*, etc. five or six years ago is now suddenly treated as if it smelled bad in these same circles. (Some balderdash about the

poor main bearing — I do technical translation, and can see no reason whatsoever why any bearing except perhaps for a Mars lunar lander could possibly cost more than \$100-\$150!!) They advocate \$2000-\$4500 turntables!

When one fifth of *your* country goes to bed hungry, perhaps its time to be a little more realistic, and tell a snake-oil industry just where to get off.

Erich Keser  
Sudbury, Ontario

P.S. I am married to a concert pianist, and through her have met many professional musicians and composers, some with dozens of records out. It is rare indeed that even the wealthiest of them would bother to spend more than one or two thousand dollars on their whole sound system — even when their instruments are worth more than the average house!

## Fog Cutter

Please keep up the straight talk about hi-fi. You cut through the fog of hi-fi enthusiast delusions with great clarity. Thanks.

David Jones  
New York, NY

## Bestest With The Mostest

It was great to hear from you and Issue Thirteen. Your publication is the best and most enjoyable by far. Regarding your publishing costs — I'd be happy to pay more for your magazine if necessary. Hell, I'd have no problem augmenting the special subscription rate which I took advantage of if it meant the continuance of your fine magazine. *Keep up the good work.*

Ed Klingler  
East Chatham, NY



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October 1990, Vol. 13, No. 10*

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# THE TEN BEST BUYS IN AUDIO

This marks the second time *Hi-Fi Heretic* has taken the bull by the horns and attempted to name the ten audio components that offer both remarkable sound quality and superb value for your money. Four of this edition's honorees are repeat winners (Rega RB300, Arcam Alpha II, Spica TC-50, and Audible Illusions Modulus 2D), while three others (Thiel CS1.2, ProAc Studio 1 Mk. II, and B & K ST-140) just barely missed making the list for a second time. Without further ado, we give you the Ten Best Buys in Audio:

## REGA RB300 TONEARM \$325

Rega have an annoying habit of manufacturing audio products that not only soundly (sorry) trounce the competition, but cost less to boot. The RB300 is a prime example. Utilizing a sophisticated, one-piece cast aluminum arm tube, an innovative spring-loaded tracking force scheme, and superb quality bearings, the Rega arm challenges many tonearms costing hundreds, sometimes *thousands*, more. Neurotic audiophiles decry the RB300's captive arm cable and tedious height adjustment, but few can argue with the little Rega's superb sound quality. Rather in the nature of "Is this glass half-empty or half-full?", the RB300 challenges audiophiles to examine their own beliefs about value. Is the Rega RB300 incredibly underpriced, or are the majority of audiophile

tonearms on the market absurdly overpriced?

## SPICA TC-50 LOUDSPEAKER \$549

The Spica TC-50 has become something of a legend among music lovers. It's astounding imaging qualities are joined by a superb sense of clarity and openness, which combine to give music breathtaking presence and immediacy. The TC-50 is extremely critical of proper set-up — stands of the proper height must be used, or the Spica can sound thin and bright. Bass power is quite good for a small speaker, though some audiophiles swear the TC-50's true magic is only achieved when it is partnered with subwoofers from Spica or Kinergetics. Regardless, bass *quality* is excellent, the TC-50 boasting outstanding crispness and rhythmic pace and drive. One of the most musically satisfying compact speakers available, the Spica never calls attention to its remarkably low price.

## ARCAM ALPHA II INTEGRATED AMP \$379

The integrated amplifier market is becoming increasingly competitive, but the little Arcam keeps on keeping on. Its nearest competitors cost at least \$100 more, a substantial difference among budget products. Amazingly well-built for the price, and boasting

Arcam's deserved reputation for superb reliability, the Alpha II is unbeatable for the price. The sound is quick, dynamic, and punchy — far better than you would expect for the money. Don't dismiss the Arcam because of its low price. This is a sophisticated piece of engineering. It is also, still, the best value integrated amplifier in the world.

## B&K PRO-10MC PREAMPLIFIER \$699

B & K is on a roll, cranking out superb products at a steady clip. First came the MC-101 preamp and M200 mono power amps. Now, just to make life even more difficult for the competition, B & K has released the Pro-10MC Sonata preamp. Essentially a stripped-down MC-101, the Pro-10MC offers stunning clarity and detail without sounding thin or bright. Bass power and drive is excellent, too. Construction quality is astoundingly fine for the price. Among American electronics manufacturers, B & K is kicking butt and taking names.

## ROTEL RCD-855 CD PLAYER \$399

Yes, all the hype and hoopla you've heard is fully justified. The Rotel 855 really is *that* good. The 855 combines fine clarity and transparency without sounding aggressive or relentless. Rhythmic coher-

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ence is marvelous—uptempo rock tracks really move along. Build quality is surprisingly robust for a budget machine, too. Now with the availability of EAD mods (see review this issue), the 855 is even more compelling. Audiophiles have waited for years for a truly inexpensive CD player to deliver the sonic goods. The Rotel does so in spades, outperforming many models costing several times as much.

**A.I. MODULUS 2D  
PREAMPLIFIER  
\$945**

The Audible Illusions Modulus 2D doesn't get older, it just gets better. Long considered one of the best affordable preamps in audio, the latest Modulus is now considered one of the best preamps, period. Offering an expansive, dynamic sound that lets music open up and breathe, the Modulus makes many other preamps sound coarse and congested by comparison. Build quality is absolutely staggering, humiliating products costing thousands more. The Modulus is quite simply one of the best values in audio. And it proves American workmanship is not dead.

**MUSICAL FIDELITY B1  
INTEGRATED AMP  
\$499**

Musical Fidelity has had an on-again, off-again presence in the United States, but the B1 should put an end to that. This

is a real shocker of an integrated amp, offering dynamic impact and bass drive that would do a pricey power amp proud. The B1 also boasts a marvelous blend of warmth and detail, giving music extra body and resonance. The styling is kind of neat, too. For those who think inexpensive integrateds lack guts and dynamics, the B1 will provide a rude awakening. At \$499, the B1 will utterly decimate many pre/power combinations costing several times as much.

**VANDERSTEEN 2Ci  
LOUDSPEAKER  
\$1195**

Quite possibly one of the most popular products in the history of specialist audio, the Vandersteen 2Ci is the decathlete of loudspeakers. Competitors may outpoint it in specific performance areas, but the 2Ci reigns supreme when it comes to offering exceptional overall sound quality at a very reasonable price. Imaging is superb for a large system, and clarity has improved with the latest revision. Bass can get a bit heavy, but the right power amp and careful room siting help here. In terms of raw value for the dollar, the Vandersteen is an utter marvel, blowing away a number of competitors costing thousands more.

**REGA PLANAR 2/3  
TURNTABLES  
\$489/\$650**

In production for well over a decade, the Rega Planar turntables surely qualify as classics. In a time when many audiophiles talk about buying their "last" turntable, the Regas' proven durability and reliability take on additional significance. More importantly, they sound damn good. As the prices of superdecks like the Linn LP12 and Roksan Xerxes continue to escalate, the Regas (the Planar 3 especially) look more and more attractive. The tonearms on both models are outrageously good, and continuous refinement over the years has improved the table considerably. Among affordable turntables, the Regas simply have no competition.

**B&K M200 SONATA  
POWER AMP  
\$1796**

"M200" means never having to say you ran out of power. The M200 mono power amps are a revelation, melding brute force with remarkable delicacy and subtlety. Bass power and definition are superb, but the B & K also impresses with its imaging and clarity. Audiophiles with difficult loudspeaker loads are natural candidates for the M200, but virtually any speaker benefits from the M200's sense of control and authority. The M200's combination of grunt and finesse is unique in this price range, and indeed puts the hurt on many exotic "High End" models at far loftier prices.

— Kent Bransford



  
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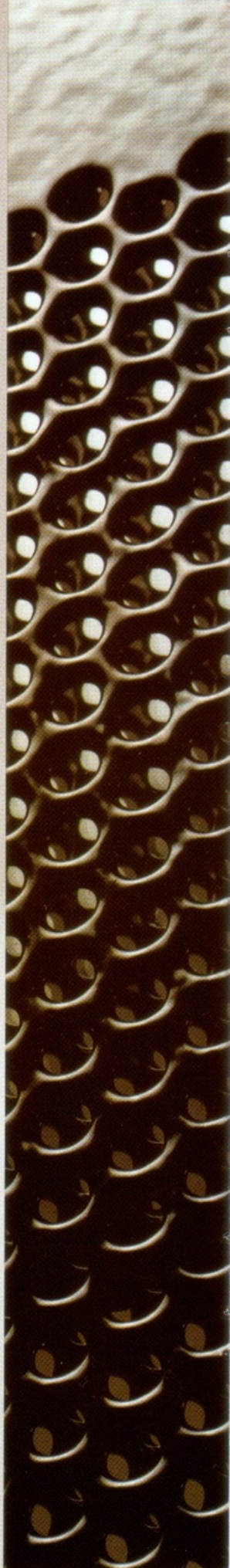
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# BUDGET BOX BINGO

The affordable loudspeaker market seems to be heating up, with new players like Signet and Musical Fidelity making a strong impression in this issue. Royd Acoustics scored well with the Sapphire this time around, and they'll soon be sending samples of the affordable (\$425) 7. Ryan Acoustics have just redesigned their popular MCL-1 (now \$529); we'll have a review in Issue Fifteen. The new Epos ES11 (\$850) is said to be a real winner, outperforming its larger (and more expensive) sibling, the ES14. A review pair should arrive here any day.

Coverage of more expensive loudspeakers is also planned for Issue Fifteen. Watch for full reviews of the Vandersteen 2Ci, the new ProAc Studio 1 Mk. II, the Taddeo DM-1, and others as they become available.

Issue Fifteen will also have reports on a broad range of interconnects and speaker cables, as well as several impressive phono cartridges.

— Kent Bransford

## Loudspeakers

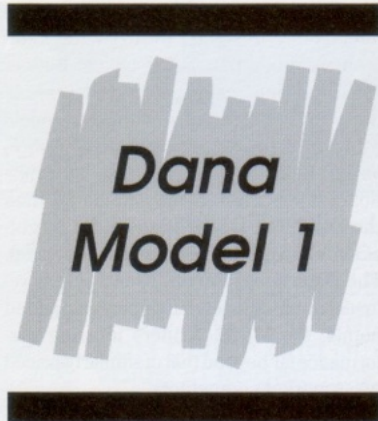
Dana Audio are a small loudspeaker manufacturer who have chosen the rather unorthodox route of offering their products directly to the public. Dana believe that by eliminating the dealer (and his consequent profit margin) from the equation, they are able to offer more value to the consumer. While persuasive enough in theory, in practice such an assertion is certainly debatable. Dana would argue that, for a given retail price point, they are able to spend more money on high-quality parts and materials (and thus offer better sound quality) than a manufacturer who must factor dealer profit into his product's retail price calculation. Dealers would argue that, in the real world, their expertise and experience are invaluable in helping the consumer choose the proper products for his individual system.

While I find merit in both arguments, my support ultimately is with specialist audio dealers. Buying a hi-fi system can be daunting under the best of circumstances, and a knowledgeable and sympathetic dealer can save his customers a great deal of money (and heartache) by helping them avoid expensive mistakes. Given this, and the enormous cost of operating a proper retail environment, one can hardly begrudge dealers reasonable and adequate compensation for their efforts.

Actually, in the case of Dana Audio the above observations may be only marginally relevant. Dana's Model 1 retails for a mere \$179, a price point that many specialist audio dealers choose to ignore altogether. As such, it is arguable that Dana pose any real threat to the sales (and hence livelihoods) of specialist dealers.

Offered with a 15 day money-back guarantee, Dana allow the consumer the opportunity to audition the Model 1 in his own home, within the context of his own particular system and acoustic environment. This is vitally important—under no circumstances would I endorse purchasing audio products via mail order without the express provision of a money-back guarantee.

The Model 1 is a small (14.75" H x 8.75" W x 7.5" H), two-way loudspeaker utilizing a sealed-box enclosure. The Dana's 6.5" bass/midrange is partnered with a .75" titanium dome tweeter. The former is a Taiwanese-built Versa-Tronics, the latter a French-made Audax. Built on a sturdy stamped-steel basket, the bass/midrange carries a polypropylene cone terminated



by a butyl rubber surround. A hefty magnet is also featured. The tweeter is ferrofluid cooled and damped, and sports a plastic diffuser/protective grille. These drivers are of extremely high quality for such an inexpensive speaker system.

The Dana's minimalist crossover is built of good-quality components, with a ferrite-core inductor rolling off the bass/midrange's upper range, and a simple resistor-capacitor pair setting tweeter level and low end roll-off. Solid-core wire is used throughout, and all terminations are soldered (a nice touch). Loudspeaker cable termination is via gold-plated five-way binding posts.

The cabinet's interior is densely packed with polyester fiberfill. Said cabinet is built entirely of 15mm MDF, quite remarkable at this low price point. The Dana's exterior is nicely finished in textured black vinyl

vener, save for the rear cabinet edges, which are painted black. Built of black stretch cloth over an MDF frame, the Model 1's grille fastens to the speaker with Velcro tabs. Sound quality is preferable *sans* grille, and thus all auditioning took place with the grille removed. Overall fit and finish of the Dana are excellent for this price range, though even more impressive is the quality of the Model 1's drivers and cabinet materials. The real beauty of the Dana lies more in its engineering than in its appearance.

Rated sensitivity is 88dB/1 watt/1 meter.

The Model 1 can be sited either on a bookshelf or on a stand — Dana Audio have specifically designed the speaker to work well when placed against the wall. For my auditioning, I placed the Danas on Sound Organisation speaker stands, which are roughly 24" high. Placement within the room ended up being a compromise between bass power and image depth. Placement against the wall augments bass power with little degradation of bass definition, while siting out in the room enhances depth of soundstage. I settled on a position approximately 20" out from the rear wall, a few feet from the side walls, with the cabinets slightly toed in towards the listener.

Dana Audio have designed the Model 1 as an antidote to the "boom and sizzle" boxes that assail the budget shopper. Budget mass-market speakers often have thudding, uncontrolled bass and screechy, aggressive treble, precisely what you *don't* want to partner with inexpensive Asian electronics. Budget mass-market receivers and integrated amps aren't able to control woofers properly, and often suffer from harsh, piercing HF performance. Budget mass-market CD players can sound incredibly thin and strident.

The Dana Model 1 will not exacerbate such faults in associated equipment, and thus allows the budget shopper to assemble a system that actually delivers music. The Dana's firm, solid bass and smooth, easy tonal balance deftly complement mass-market electronics.

When I first listened to the Dana, I was immediately impressed by its bass solidity and power. Many minispeakers sound a bit anemic when placed out into the room, but the Dana's bass punch and smooth overall tonal balance combined to offer a big, full-bodied sound. Holst's *The Planets* was quite satisfying, as the Model 1 conveyed tym-

**Price: \$179**

**Contact:**

**Dana Audio**  
**P.O. Box 1**  
**Austin, TX 78767**  
**(512) 251-7701**

pani and bass drum with fine power and impact. Note attack on these instruments was just slightly blurred, however. Strings and brass were warm and smooth, but lacking a degree of clarity and presence. This tended to distance the listener from the performance somewhat, and a lack of recording acoustic and ambience exacerbated the problem. Not an unpleasant effect, really, but it did rob the music of some of its excitement and energy. Soundstage width and depth were excellent — the Dana easily outperforms its like-priced competition here.

On the *Rickie Lee Jones* LP, her vocals were warm and full-bodied, if sounding slightly distant. On the other hand, the Dana's smooth delivery helped to ameliorate the vocal harshness and stridency that characterize the CD version of this album. That's one of the keys to the Dana's appeal — the ability to salvage musicality from less-than-optimum recordings and ancillary equipment.

Rhythmic pace and drive were very good on "Danny's All-Star Joint", though note attack and dynamics were a tad lacking, slightly undermining the tune's bouncy, spirited feel. Separation of musical lines on this LP was a bit of a problem, it being difficult to follow the individual instruments and how the musicians played off one another. Imaging was again very impressive for a budget model, with no tendency for the musicians to be clumped together around the speakers. Overall, the music here was full-bodied and quite energetic, if coming up a bit short in terms of clarity and immediacy.

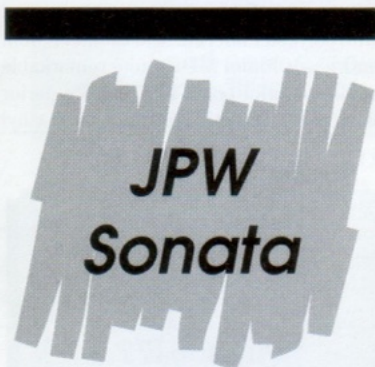
*Robin Trower LIVE!* is an excellent example of how powerful a three-piece rock band can be, and the Dana was particularly effective in its ability to convey the power and impact of this performance. Kick drum and bass guitar were solid and deep, though a little blurred in definition. Trower's guitar came across with a nice blend of smoothness and clarity — a welcome change from most budget speakers, which lend it a piercing, strident edge. Uptempo tracks like "Too Rolling Stoned" and "Lady Love" pounded along with verve and punch. On slower tunes like "Daydream" and "I Can't Wait Much Longer", the Dana's laid-back tonal balance tended to undercut the airy, atmospheric feel of these performances. As a result, the music sounded a bit lifeless and distant.

In sum, I find the Dana Model 1 to be an

excellent budget loudspeaker. It has been intelligently designed to avoid the common maladies that befall typical budget speakers, thus making it far preferable to the ubiquitous "thump n' screech" models from mass-market companies. To be sure, an excellent low-cost model like the Celestion 3 offers more detail and clarity than the Dana, but is less forgiving of brightness or hardness elsewhere in the system. The Dana's big, smooth sound simply refuses to induce listener fatigue. As an added bonus, the Model 1 offers imaging performance far beyond that of similarly-priced mass-market competitors.

As good as the Dana is, it is *not* a \$500 loudspeaker for a fraction of the cost. Compared to the Rogers LS4a or the Spica TC-50, the Dana sounds somewhat muddled and ill-defined, lacking a degree of clarity and insight into the music. As an entry-level speaker to be used in concert with quality mass-market or budget specialist components, it is a clear triumph. As a speaker to reveal the merits of sophisticated audiophile electronics, it is rather out of its league.

With that proviso, I find the Dana eminently recommendable, and indeed the Model 1 handily garners a "Best Buy" rating. It is without doubt the best under-\$200 speaker on the market today. ■



Aside from being one of the nicest guys in audio, JPW's Peter Wanstall is also notable for his unwavering commitment to manufacturing affordable loudspeakers of exceptional quality. Far too many hi-fi companies look upon the budget sector as vaguely distasteful, deigning to offer inexpensive models only for marketing purposes (as in, "Screw it, we need a price-leader to bring the suckers into the showrooms."). By contrast, Wan-

stall actually cares about investing all of his products with integrity and value, regardless of price.

Like most of the models in this test group, the Sonata is a compact unit, measuring 12.75" H x 9" W x 8.5" D. A two-way, sealed box design, the Sonata carries a 6.5" bass/midrange driver and a .75" soft dome tweeter. Built on a lightweight, stamped-steel basket, the KEF-sourced bass/mid features a paper cone terminated by a PVC surround. The Audax tweeter is ferrofluid cooled and damped, and carries a plastic diffuser/protective grille. Overall driver quality is very good, if not remarkable, for the price. The minimalist crossover uses high-quality components, which are hard-wired together and mounted on the input terminal block (which carries five-way binding posts). Internal wiring is multi-stranded, and all connections are soldered (an impressive touch for a budget speaker).

More impressive, though, is the Sonata's cabinetry. The enclosure is built entirely of 15mm MDF, veneered on both sides for added stiffness. Glued dovetail joints (actually, they look more like tongue-and-groove joints to me — whatever) ensure a solid, rigid structure. This level of cabinet build quality is absolutely amazing in such an inexpensive speaker. The cabinet's interior is damped by polyester fiberfill. Both the drivers and the input terminal block are tightly fastened in place with machine screws and t-nuts, rather than simple (read: cheap) wood screws. I told you Wanstall takes the quality of his products seriously, didn't I?

An interesting side note: JPW manages to offer superb cabinetry on a tight budget by having their enclosures built by, ah, *guests of Her Majesty*. In other words, inmates at England's Dartmoor prison.

As noted, the Sonata is finished in real wood veneer. Just for the sake of change, I requested my review pair in blond ash. They were quite beautiful, considering how "difficult" blond ash finish can be. Without a vivid grain pattern, it can all too easily look like unfinished plywood. JPW's blond ash is better than many, but I suspect most of you would be happier with either the walnut or black ash finish instead. In any event, overall fit and finish quality of the Sonata are absolutely superb for the price. The Sonata's grille is your basic wood frame/black stretch cloth arrangement — and the speaker sounds better without it.

## Loudspeakers

Rated sensitivity is a moderate 87dB/1 watt/1 meter.

As with many speakers, the Sonata's only obvious rules for placement are to keep them away from corners, and site them on stands that will put the tweeters around ear height. I used 24" tall Sound Organisation stands, and they worked fine. I ended up with the Sonatas close to the rear wall, as this beefed up bass power with little penalty in definition and crispness. Final placement was about 8" from the back wall, and roughly three feet from the side walls, with the speakers pointed straight ahead.

The JPW turned out to be a solid performer, with a big, smooth sound that belied



**Price: \$325**

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**Audiophile Systems**  
**8709 Castle Park Drive**  
**Indianapolis, IN 46256**  
**(317) 849-7103**

the Sonata's compact size. The Rolling Stones' *El Mocambo* set (from the *Love You Live* LP) came across with real power and impact, as tracks like "Around And Around" and "Mannish Boy" showed off the Sonata's crisp, powerful bass performance. Charlie's kick drum had fine snap and punch, while Bill's bass was tight and tuneful. Keith and Ronnie sounded quite crisp and clear, with the slide guitar on "Little Red Rooster" conveyed with a nice balance of clarity and body. Jagger's vocals sounded resonant and clean, if a bit remote. Indeed, the Sonata had some problems in capturing the immediacy and presence of this live performance. I noted a lack of recording acoustic and ambience, and this tended to distance me from the music somewhat. The recording's "you are there" feel was rather lacking.

There were also difficulties in capturing both gross and subtle changes in volume level—the Sonata tended to compress the dynamic range of the music. In this respect the Dana Model 1 was clearly superior. On the plus side, the JPW did an excellent job of conveying rhythmic pace and drive—"Around..." moved along with great spirit and vitality. The JPW has a fuller, warmer sound than the excellent Celestion 3, and this pays real dividends on bright recordings like Television's *Marquee Moon*. While Tom Verlaine's vocals can sound a bit relentless through the 3, the Sonata gave them some welcome body and resonance. Both Verlaine's and Richard Lloyd's electric guitars sounded quite smooth and clean, though their vivid attack and presence were diminished slightly. The atmospheric title track suffered from the Sonata's somewhat laid-back character. The spare, mesmerizing sound of this tune lost some of its tension and drama, as again the JPW fell somewhat short in retrieving detail and ambience.

On large orchestral works, the Sonata was more impressive. The JPW's full-bodied sound served the Shostakovich well, lending a feeling of substance and warmth to the orchestra missing through the Celestion 3. Strings and brass came across with body and resonance, with no tendency towards thinness or stridency. Tympani and bass drum were surprisingly solid for such a small speaker, though the Dana was ultimately preferable here. Soundstage width and depth were very good, though depth was a bit foreshortened, due at least in part to the JPW's near-wall placement. I again noted a slight lack of presence and air, but it was more than offset by the Sonata's smooth, full-bodied presentation. More troubling, though, was the dynamic compression I again heard. The Sonata seemed to limit the orchestra to a narrow range of volume levels. To be sure, the JPW will play very loud for a budget minispeaker, but dynamic range is clearly limited.

Despite my quibbles with certain areas of the Sonata's performance, I nevertheless found it a satisfying speaker in the long run. It has a sweet, relaxed sound that is particularly well-suited for use with budget electronics. Where the Celestion 3 might sound a bit thin or forward with modest electronics, the JPW offers an attractive blend of tonal smoothness and bass power. Through higher-quality electronics, the more incisive character of the 3 might be preferable.

As with the Dana Model 1, the Sonata is a triumph of intelligent design. In the context of a budget system, its strengths are of great value and its faults relatively benign. The JPW's unobtrusive near-wall placement and absolutely gorgeous cabinetry should make it especially popular with music lovers who expect hi-fi components to easily blend into their domestic environment. While I feel the Dana offers better overall performance, the Sonata is unquestionably one of the best models in this price range, and certainly merits audition. ■



The SC-30 is the third and newest member of the Spica line, joining the highly-acclaimed TC-50 and Angelus models. A budget unit, the SC-30 is designed to work well with modestly-priced associated electronics. Thus the SC-30 offers high sensitivity (for a sealed box design), an easy impedance load, and good bass extension to ensure that even moderately-powered receivers will produce satisfying results.

Buyers making their first foray into the wiggly world of specialist audio will certainly be impressed by the sheer size of the Spica. Clocking in at 23" H x 10" W x 11.75" D, the SC-30 dwarfs competitors like the Rogers LS2a and JPW Sonata. This will surely make a positive impression upon those weaned on the mass-market philosophy of "bigger is better".

As noted earlier, the SC-30 is a sealed box design (as are all of Spica's models). Driver complement consists of an 8" bass/midrange in concert with a 1.5" cone tweeter. Built on a rather lightweight steel basket, the bass/mid carries a paper cone terminated by a foam surround. The magnet structure consists of two units bonded together, and a third magnet of opposite polarity glued to the back of the driver, to

intensify the magnetic field in the voice coil gap. The Peerless-built tweeter (which features a polypropylene cone) might properly be called a "cone/dome" (*a la* Bud Fried), as the button-like dust cap at the apex of its cone may well act as a dome radiator at higher frequencies. Driver quality here is good, if not exceptional, for the price.

The Spica's cabinet, however, is remarkable. Built entirely of 18mm MDF, the SC-30's enclosure is far stiffer than that of many other comparably-sized models in this price range, which typically employ bog-standard particleboard. This should pay real dividends in reduced cabinet vibration, and hence lower coloration. Internally, the Spica is damped by generous quantities of wool wadding. A square plastic sheet bonded to the bottom of the cabinet carries the crossover componentry. Glued to this plastic sheet, the components are arrayed around its periphery to minimize electrical interaction. Internal connections are via twisted-pair, solid core wire, and all terminations are soldered. Loudspeaker cable termination is by five-way binding posts.

The SC-30's drivers are placed tightly together (with the tweeter offset to one side), and mounted low on the front baffle. Both units are fastened in place with wood screws. My review samples were finished on all surfaces with a rather vile black vinyl veneer. At the price, and given the exceptionally high quality of the cabinet proper, I know I shouldn't complain, but still...The grille is black stretch cloth over a particleboard frame. The SC-30 sounds better without it, and thus the grille was left off for all auditioning. Overall build quality is very good for the price — cosmetic fit and finish are rather less impressive.

Rated sensitivity is 88dB/1 watt/1 meter.

While the Spicas can be used placed on a bookshelf, best sound will be obtained when stand-mounted. Despite the Spica's large cabinet, relatively high stands must be used to place the tweeter (near the midpoint of the cabinet) at ear level. I chose the Target ST 50 (a superb stand, by the way), which is roughly 20" tall, and it worked perfectly. Best sitting within the room turned out to be approximately two feet out from the back wall, as this provided the best balance of bass power and image depth. Bass lovers may wish to move the SC-30 closer to the wall, as this augments bass power somewhat without impairing defini-

tion to any significant degree. The Spicas were roughly three feet from the side walls, and turned in towards the listening position.

Unfortunately the SC-30's sound quality turned out to be somewhat disappointing. Tonal balance was rather forward and bright, proving a bit tiring over the long haul. John Prine's *Bruised Orange* certainly came across with good clarity and presence, but did so at the expense of warmth and body. Acoustic guitars sounded thin and hard, with diminished resonance, while the natural rasp of Prine's vocals was exaggerated. Note attack and dynamics were very good, with both guitars and drums coming across with fine snap and vitality. I

a strident edge to their sound. Imaging here was quite good, though the width of the orchestra seemed a bit foreshortened. Depth was more impressive. The martial cadence section of the fourth movement in *Symphony No. 11* was convincing in its tension and drama, the Spica doing a solid job of conveying the pace and drive of the strings.

The Neil Young/Crazy Horse album *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* is one of my favorites, with the tune "Down By The River" a particular standout. This is a tremendously atmospheric track, mesmerizing in its intensity and drama. Alas, the Spica did not fare too well here. Both Young's and Danny Whitten's electric guitars took on a piercing, strident edge that made it difficult for me to be drawn into the music. Young's vocals were a bit hard and thin, and this too tended to push me away from the tune. On the plus side, bass guitar and kick drum were very well defined and tight (the bass on this track can get boomy on mediocre speakers).

On more densely-orchestrated tunes, like Lynyrd Skynyrd's "I Know A Little" (from the *Street Survivors* LP), the Spica again showed some problems in keeping the various instrumental lines clear and distinct. As a result, the track sounded a bit cluttered and busy. The SC-30 did a fine job of capturing the pace and drive of this uptempo song, however.

Please understand the context of the above criticisms—compared to the average mass-market loudspeaker, the SC-30 is an exceptional performer indeed. Against more polished models from specialist audio manufacturers, however, the Spica can sound a bit rough and unrefined. The little Rogers LS2a (\$399), for example, offers a significantly smoother, more sophisticated presentation, and is better built in the bargain.

To some extent, the SC-30 finds itself between a rock and a hard place. Its forward tonal balance makes it less than ideal for use with budget mass-market electronics, which often suffer from harshness and stridency themselves. More sophisticated specialist electronics will mate better with the SC-30, but any music lover who has invested in quality components would do better to spend a little more (\$150) on speakers and bypass the SC-30 in favor of Spica's superb TC-50. As such, no recommendation of the SC-30 is possible. ■

Price: \$399

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did note a problem with separation of instrumental lines, as the numerous guitar parts on this album tended to smear together somewhat. Kick drum and bass guitar were crisp and tight, moving uptempo tracks along quite nicely. Overall, the performances on this album sounded energetic and immediate, but lacked warmth and substance, lending the music a somewhat sterile, uninvolved character.

Similar results were noted on the Shostakovich symphonies, where the rather threadbare tonal character of the Spica tended to undercut the orchestra's feeling of substance and power. Massed brass sounded a bit thin and forced, without proper gutsiness and power. Strings were certainly crisp and vivid, but again a lack of resonance and body tended to lend



## Loudspeakers

Over the past several years, Musical Fidelity (previously known as British Fidelity in the U.S.) have had a difficult time establishing proper distribution in the United States. As a result, Musical Fidelity products have never achieved significant notoriety or market penetration here. Musical Fidelity are now taking a more active role in coordinating efforts with their new U.S. distributor, Eaton Imports, and this should ensure greater public awareness of the marque. MF offer a broad range of products, including four preamplifiers, six power amplifiers, five integrated amplifiers, one tuner, and five loudspeaker systems.

The MC-1, the least expensive speaker in the Musical Fidelity range, is a compact (14.75" H x 8.25" W x 9.75" D), ported model. Its driver complement consists of a 6.5" bass/midrange and a .75" dome tweeter. The SEAS-built bass/mid features a polypropylene cone with inverted butyl rubber surround. The driver's basket is made of cast magnesium, and carries a beefy magnet assembly. Also built by SEAS, the tweeter sports an aluminum dome, along with ferrofluid in the voice coil gap for cooling and damping. A wire-mesh grille protects the dome from rough handling. Both drive units here are of exceptionally high quality — drivers of this caliber are rarely found in moderately-priced speakers like the MC-1.

The MC-1's high-quality crossover components are mounted on a small glassfibre board, which is in turn glued to the input terminal block. The latter features the ubiquitous five-way binding posts. Multi-strand wire is used for internal connections, and all terminations are soldered. A small amount of polyester fiberfill damps the interior of the MC-1's cabinet. Said cabinet is built entirely of particleboard, with an 18mm baffle and 15mm walls and rear panel. The speaker's port sits above the tweeter on the front baffle; the port tube is made of plastic. Both drivers are fastened to the baffle with wood screws, and neither driver is flush-mounted.

Cabinet finish of the review samples was in black ash vinyl veneer (I believe walnut vinyl is also available). This covers the cabinet walls only — pebble-grain black vinyl is applied to the baffle, and the rear panel is painted black. The MC-1's grille is a basic black-cloth-over-particleboard affair. No particular effort seems to have been made to minimize grille diffraction, and thus, not surprisingly, the MC-1



sounded better with the grille removed.

Overall fit and finish of the MC-1 are very good, if not remarkable for this price range. In terms of build quality, the Musical Fidelity's cabinet is far less impressive than its drive units. As we'll see later, this turned out to be of some consequence.

Rated sensitivity is 89dB/1 watt/1 meter.

The MC-1 is intended to be stand-mounted, and I ended up using 24" high Sound Organisation units. I also tried using the excellent Target ST 50 (20" high), and obtained good results, though this put the MC-1's tweeter below ear height. Best sitting in the room was well out from the back wall — moving closer to the wall impaired bass definition noticeably. The MC-1 produces an impressive amount of bottom-end power for a compact speaker, and thus really doesn't need bass augmen-

tation from near-wall placement anyway. I ended up with the MC-1 about two and a half feet from the back wall, roughly three feet from the side walls, and aimed at my listening position.

It didn't take long for me to realize the Musical Fidelity is an outstanding performer. The MC-1's most obvious asset is its lively, dynamic character. The Rolling Stones LP *Love You Live* is fairly worthless (*Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out!* is vastly superior), but this concert double album does offer one good side of material, recorded live at Toronto's El Mocambo club. Here the Stones go through some of the material that made up their early club sets, including tunes like Chuck Berry's "Around and Around" and Willie Dixon's "Little Red Rooster". The little Musical Fidelity was remarkable in its ability to capture the immediacy and presence of these tracks. Both the lascivious slide guitar on "Little..." and the pumping riffs of "Around..." came across with excellent clarity and note attack, lending the music real power and vitality. Kick drum and bass guitar were gratifyingly deep and tight, adding to the rhythmic punch and drive of "Around...". The sound here was upfront and lively, but not to the point of sounding thin or bright. At high volume levels, though, things got a bit ragged. More anon.

Though relatively unknown by many rock fans, the LP *Johnny Winter And Live* is one of my favorite live albums. Rather like the J. Geils Band's *Full House*, this album ain't exactly sophisticated, but it sure is fun. Here the MC-1 continued to impress, though I again noticed some coarseness at high volume levels. On Winter's cover of "Johnny B. Goode" (this track absolutely cranks), the MC-1 imparted some harshness and stridency to Winter's vocals. Both Winter's and Rick Derringer's guitars sounded slightly hard and thin. Separation of instrumental lines became somewhat confused and indistinct. When I backed off the volume, these problems were significantly ameliorated. I strongly suspect (the operative word here is *suspect*) that the MC-1's rather lively cabinet was contributing a fair amount of distortion to the sound. Despite this raggedness around the edges, the music here was great fun.

On the Shostakovich symphonies, the MC-1 again impressed with its open, dynamic presentation. The more bombastic sections of the fourth movement of *Symphony No. 11*, for example, came across with fine power and impact for a small

A graphic with a dark, textured background. At the top, there is a large, solid black downward-pointing triangle. Below the triangle, the text is centered and reads: "Price: \$549", "Contact:", "Eaton Imports", "P.O. Box 334", "Bridgeport, NJ 08014", and "(609) 467-5588".

speaker. In such forceful passages, however, I again noted the MC-1's tendency to coarsen up. Tonally, the MC-1 was not as warm and full-bodied as the Signet SL260, and this tended to thin out the sound of massed brass slightly. Note attack and dynamics were superior to the SL260, though, and this gave both strings and brass an exciting crispness and alacrity that imbued the music with vitality and energy. On the down side, separation of musical lines did become a bit congested and blurred during powerful passages, with the high degree of cabinet vibration again suspect as the cause. Soundstage width and depth were both exceptional, enhancing the orchestra's sense of scale and power.


On "smaller" music like Carol Kidd's eponymous LP, the MC-1 fared better. Kidd's vocals had a fine combination of warmth and presence—in this respect the MC-1 was the best of all the speakers in this test group. Kidd's backing musicians were equally well-served, with drums and bass guitar displaying fine snap and rhythmic push. There was a degree of "boxiness" to the bass guitar, which blurred the pitch of the instrument slightly, but this was not a major problem. Sandy Taylor's piano was crisp and clear, with excellent resonance and body. Uptempo tracks like "It Isn't So Bad" and "Yes, I Know When I've Had It" moved along with fine pace and sass. All told, the performances here came across with great immediacy and verve.

The Miles Davis LP *Kind Of Blue* highlighted the MC-1's excellent rhythmic coherence, with the track "So What" showing solid pace and drive, aided by the exceptional crispness and clarity of the double bass line. That said, I again noted a slight tendency for the MC-1 to add some extra resonance to the bass, making its timbre less easy to discern. Saxophones were remarkably open and detailed, their "breathiness" easy to hear. Tonally, they struck a fine balance between warmth and clarity. Davis' trumpet was equally impressive.

As should be obvious, I was very impressed by the MC-1. It manages to split the difference between the Signet and Royd, blending elements of the SL260's full-bodied, dynamic sound with the Sapphire's speed and detail. The MC-1 boasts a big, punchy sound that utterly belies its size and price. Music through the MF has exceptional energy and vitality, quickly drawing the listener into the performance.

There is but one fly in the ointment. While sounding fine at moderate listening levels, turn the wick up and the MC-1 turns somewhat coarse and ragged. Instrumental lines become smeared, tonally the speaker sounds a bit strident and harsh, and bass becomes blurred and growly. This obviously tends to make the MC-1 rather less than ideal on large symphonic music or megadecibel rock. I try not to play Monday morning quarterback, but I can't help but think a stiffer, more solid (MDF?) cabinet would mightily help here. If this would raise the MC-1's retail price by \$100 or so, I say go for it. The MC-1 is an excellent speaker, poised on the edge of greatness. I'd hate to see it held back by cost-cutting in the cabinetry.

Regardless, the MC-1 as it now stands certainly qualifies as one of the best speakers in its price range. Its punchy, dynamic sound gives music a marvelous sense of life and presence. At \$550, its most obvious competitors are the Spica TC-50 and the Rogers LS4a. While the Spica reigns supreme in imaging, and the Rogers is a better *all-around* speaker, the MF is competitive by virtue of its exciting, involving presentation. Once you've heard it, you may not be able to give it up. Highly recommended indeed. ■



## Royd Sapphire

"Speed thrills" might well be the personal motto of Royd's designer, Joe Akroyd. Over the past few years, Royd loudspeakers have proven to be some of the most exciting, musical performers in their price ranges. The little Coniston R (reviewed in Issues #2 and #4) amazed me with its superb bass power and dynamics, as well as its excellent note attack and crispness. Now comes the latest generation of compact Royd models, which includes the 7 (\$425), the Sapphire on review here, and the Sintra (\$899). The latter uses

essentially the same drivers as the Rega ELA (see review in Issue #13) and its near-twin, the floor-standing Royd Apex (\$1599).

The Sapphire truly falls in the minispeaker class, measuring a mere 12" H x 8" W x 7.5" D. While nominally a two-way, ported design, such a mundane description hardly does the intriguing Sapphire justice. Two unusual design features immediately distinguish the Royd from its competitors. The first is the bass/midrange driver, similar to that used in the iconoclastic Rega ELA. Carried on a rigid cast alloy frame, the driver's 5" cone is made of paper, and terminated by a rubber surround. No dust cap is fitted, thus one can easily see the aluminum voice coil former which protrudes slightly forward of the cone's throat. Both the use of a paper diaphragm and the lack of a dust cap are in the interests of minimizing moving mass, and thus improving transient response.

The second striking feature of the Sapphire's design is its port tube. Mounted low on the cabinet's rear panel, the tube is a heavy (and expensive) Sorbothane molding. Such an extravagance can be understood when one considers the tube's vital role in the performance of the Sapphire. Beyond its obvious function (as with any ported speaker, the tube vents the back wave of the cone into the listening room), the tube also serves as a structural brace. Unique in my experience, the Sapphire's port tube is bonded directly to the back of the bass/mid's chassis (windows molded in the tube allow the acoustic energy within the cabinet to exit via the port). By providing a solid (though extremely well-damped) brace between the driver and the cabinet's rear panel, the Sorbothane tube greatly reduces movement of both the driver's motor assembly and the enclosure.

Remember that the output of a driver's cone is determined by the movement of the voice coil relative to the motor assembly. Vibration in the driver's chassis causes the magnet structure to move, changing its position relative to the voice coil, and thus inducing spurious output from the driver. By keeping the Sapphire's motor assembly as immobile as possible, the Sorbothane tube ensures that only the amplifier's signal in the voice coil, and not movement in the chassis, directs movement of the cone.

As noted above, the tube also braces the rear panel of the cabinet. This adds structural integrity to the enclosure, allowing

## Loudspeakers

particleboard (less expensive, and less rigid, than MDF) construction to be used without an obvious penalty in cabinet flexure. Additionally, lightweight particleboard implies less energy storage, and hence *theoretically* less time-smear distortion from delayed cabinet vibration.

Of course, there is a reason why more designers don't install braces between drivers and cabinets. The brace acts as a direct path for vibration between the enclosure and drive unit. To wit: the acoustic energy of the driver's back wave excites the cabinet into resonance, which then enters and passes through the brace into the driver at the brace's other end. This excites the motor assembly into movement, and distortion results. Royd's solution is elegantly simple — make the brace (port tube) out of Sorbothane, one of the world's most energy-absorbent materials. The tube molding is thick enough to be rigid (and thus fulfill its mission as a brace), yet the highly-damped nature of Sorbothane means vibration will not pass through the brace, but be dissipated as heat. Not only does the Sorbothane prevent energy from being passed between driver and cabinet, it also damps those vibrations inevitably present in the cabinet (from the back wave of the bass/mid unit) and driver (from the Newtonian action/reaction forces arising from the movement of the bass/mid's cone).

On to more prosaic elements of the Sapphire's design. In addition to the Royd-built bass/midrange driver described earlier, the Sapphire also features a soft dome tweeter made by Vifa, which is ferrofluid cooled and damped. The Sapphire's high-quality crossover components are hard-wired together, and mounted on a phenolic board bonded to the cabinet's rear panel. This board also carries the Royd's five-way binding posts, which handle speaker cable termination. Mounting the crossover and binding posts on the same board simplifies construction, but increases vulnerability to rough handling. As the posts stand proud of the speaker's rear panel, bumping the speaker hard on its back could conceivably crack the phenolic board. Use a little extra care when moving the speakers about.

Multi-stand wiring is used for internal connections, and all terminations are soldered. A generous quantity of polyester fiberfill damps the enclosure's interior. The Royd's cabinet is built entirely of 12mm particleboard (veneered on both sides for added stiffness), save for the 12mm MDF

rear panel. At this price I would have expected to see at least an MDF baffle, if not an all-MDF enclosure. That said, I should note that the wide mounting flange of the bass/mid's basket helps to reinforce and stiffen the baffle. Given the Royd's unusually short (and thus inherently stiff) cabinet walls, I suppose the lack of MDF is not of earthshaking importance. Certainly the little Sapphire showed scant evidence of cabinet vibration.

As noted, the Sapphire's cabinet is finished in wood veneer — my samples were in black ash, with walnut and rosewood also available. Veneer covers all surfaces except for the rear panel and back edges of the cabinet walls, which are painted black. The Royd's grille is a basic particleboard/

Price: \$625  
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black stretch cloth piece, though the inside edges are bevelled for reduced diffraction. Royd specifically design the Sapphire to be used with the grilles in place — with the grilles removed, raised lips around the baffle present nasty diffractive edges. Overall fit and finish of the Sapphire are very good, though well short of the standards set by the Signet SL260.

Rated sensitivity is a highish 89dB/1 watt/1 meter.

The Sapphire is specifically designed for near-wall placement. This substantially augments bass power with very little degradation in bass definition. True, image depth was foreshortened when sited thusly, but I deemed it a worthwhile trade-off. When moved out into the room, the Sap-

phire sounds somewhat thin and lacking in body. I used Sound Organisation Hi-Stands (24" tall) to support the Sapphires, and these worked well — their design allows the speaker to be placed very close to the rear wall. Final placement was roughly six inches from the rear wall, and three feet from the side walls. The cabinets were pointed straight ahead.

When it comes to transient quickness, the Sapphire is an utter screamer. The attack and decay of musical notes have an alacrity and crispness through the Royd that is quite remarkable. This was true across the frequency spectrum, from driving kick drums and bass guitars to violins and cymbals. Listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Ain't No Good Life", I was astounded by the Sapphire's ability to absolutely *naïl* the rhythmic drive of this track. Through most speakers, this mid-tempo blues sort of shuffles along in an amiable way. With the Sapphire, the kick drum-guitar-bass riff was stunningly tight and sharp, giving this tune's raucous, sexy edge full due. Now the track didn't shuffle, it *swaggered*. Lead guitar lines came across with remarkable presence and attack, adding to the tune's excitement. Tonally, however, the electric guitars were a bit lacking in body and substance. Steve Gaines' vocals were crisp and upfront, but his gruffness was somewhat exaggerated. Therein lies the Sapphire's only significant flaw — its somewhat forward tonal balance.

The Doobie Brothers LP *Toulouse Street* was a delight through the Sapphires. This is a marvelously crisp and clear recording, and the Royd fully captured the immediacy and vigor of the performances. "Listen To The Music" moved along with exceptional pace and drive, the bass guitar and kick drum coming through with superb crispness and punch. Tom Johnston's vocals were detailed and alive, with great presence, but I noted a degree of thinness and coldness — too much throat, not enough chest. An exceptionally punchy, exciting track, "Cotton Mouth" sounded glorious through the Sapphire. The funky rhythm of this tune was handled flawlessly, making it vastly more entertaining and fun than when played by garden-variety speakers. The atmospheric "Toulouse Street" was well served by the Royd's open, airy sound. Acoustic guitars displayed exceptional note attack and dynamics, and this made the music all the more mesmerizing and hypnotic. The excellent retrieval of recording acoustic and ambience also helped here. Again, though, the guitars (acoustic this

time) lacked a degree of warmth and resonance. On the plus side, image width was very good, and depth only slightly less so — a pleasant surprise given the Royd's near-wall placement.

On the Shostakovich, the Sapphire was somewhat less impressive. While bass drum and tympani were surprisingly pow-

**Price: \$750  
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erful for such a small speaker, the orchestra's strength and impact just didn't come through especially well, due in part to the Royd's forward tonal balance. Strings and brass sounded marvelously crisp and incisive, with thrilling note attack and dynamics, but they lacked convincing body and warmth. Violins had a slightly piercing quality to them, while massed brass came across somewhat pinched and thin. As a result, the sheer "gutsiness" and substance of the orchestra was undermined — dynamic passages in the fourth movement of *Symphony No. 11* sounded a little strained and forced. To be sure, this is a fairly common flaw with minispeakers, but the Royd's forward balance exacerbated the problem.

One characteristic of the Royd remained impressive regardless of the type of music being played: far more than most speakers in this price range, the Sapphire has the ability to get the *timing* of music right. On the *Rickie Lee Jones* LP, the performances took on extra dimension because I could not only easily follow each instrumental line, I readily grasped the interplay between the musicians. In this respect the

Royd was unquestionably the leader in this test group. On "Danny's All-Star Joint", the way the electric piano, drums, and horns played off one another was obvious, giving this uptempo track even greater verve and snap. On the CD version of this release, Jones' vocals are hellishly thin and hard, and the Sapphire was all too happy to drive this point home. The Royd is not a particularly happy camper when used with less-than-smooth Compact Discs (or CD players). Judicious selection of associated components is called for here. When it comes to brightness elsewhere in your system, the Royd will cut you no slack.

If the Sapphire places greater demands on its associated equipment, the rewards are certainly worth it. Rather like the excellent ProAc Super Tablette, the Royd can sound truly magical, or it can sound rather diabolical. Bright, thin electronics are to be avoided like the plague. Driven by a PS 4.6 preamp and an Adcom GFA-555 power amp, the Sapphire would fry your ears. Drive the Royd with a smooth performer like the Naim NAIT 2 integrated, and this little speaker will positively sing.

Ultimately, the Sapphire's most impressive asset is its uncanny ability to render the beginnings and endings of musical notes convincingly. The *shape* of the notes is easier to hear, and this makes music sound more human, less mechanical. The Royd's tremendous bass snap and drive give a rhythmic coherence and direction to music that is compelling — once you've heard it, music through many other speakers will sound amazingly sluggish. While not cheap at \$625, the Sapphire offers a great deal of musicality for the dollar, and thus merits an enthusiastic recommendation. ■



Signet (a division of Audio-Technica U.S.) are certainly well-known for their

high-quality phono cartridges, but the SL260 (and its larger sibling, the SL280) represent Signet's first serious foray into loudspeaker manufacture. Designed in the U.S. by Signet's engineering team, both models evince an admirable commitment to intelligent engineering and superlative build quality. Despite Signet's putative links to Japan, these speakers are in no way related to the marketing-driven "boom and sizzle" boxes that relentlessly flow from the Far East.

Measuring a petite 15.5" H x 8.25" W x 12.75" D, the SL260 is a compact two-way, ported system featuring a 6" bass/midrange driver partnered with a .75" aluminum dome tweeter. The Vifa-built bass/midrange employs a polypropylene cone terminated by a butyl rubber surround. Sporting a sturdy cast magnesium frame and hefty magnet, this driver is of exceptionally high quality for a speaker in this price range. Riding low on the cabinet's rear panel, the Signet's port is built of cardboard tubing.

The aluminum dome of the SEAS tweeter is terminated by a soft polyamide surround, and ferrofluid fills the voice coil gap for damping and enhanced power handling. Protection from prying fingers is provided by a stiff wire-mesh grille. An elegantly-cut acoustic foam pad is placed around the tweeter to minimize diffraction. Both the tweeter and bass/midrange are mounted on the baffle with long wood screws.

The SL260's crossover is built on a glass-fibre board, utilizing high-quality components such as polypropylene capacitors and air-core inductors. The crossover board is glued to the input terminal block, which carries gold-plated five-way binding posts for speaker cable termination. Heavy multi-strand OFC (oxygen-free copper) internal wiring is used, but I was slightly disappointed to see that slip-on connectors, and not solder joints, were used to terminate the wire at the drivers. To be sure, this was the *only* example of cost-cutting I noted in the SL260 — in every other respect the construction of this speaker is nothing short of extraordinary for the price.

Which brings us to the Signet's most impressive feature, its enclosure. Many speakers in this price range make do with a particleboard cabinet, perhaps with an MDF front baffle for enhanced rigidity. The SL260 is built *entirely* of MDF (veneered on both sides for added stiffness),

## Loudspeakers

with 18mm walls and rear panel and a meaty 25mm front baffle. The relatively narrow width of the Signet's baffle increases rigidity still further (as well as improving imaging).

Internally, the Signet's cabinet sports a 12mm MDF brace between the tweeter and bass/midrange driver. This stiffening brace is placed asymmetrically, to scatter the frequencies (and thus reduce the amplitude) of cabinet wall resonances. If the brace simply bisected the cabinet, the frequencies of the resonances would be doubled, but the amplitude of the resonances would not be significantly reduced. The brace also acts as a partitioning wall, helping to break up standing waves within the enclosure. Internal damping is via open-cell acoustic foam.

Fit and finish of the Signet's cabinet are absolutely extraordinary for the price. All surfaces save the baffle are covered in "rift-sawn", red oak wood veneer. I'm not sure what "rift-sawn" means, but the grain pattern of this oak is absolutely gorgeous, one of the best I've seen at any price. The baffle is finished in vacuum-formed textured black vinyl, and this too is of extremely high quality. The Signet's grille consists of a plastic frame (with rounded outer edges to reduce diffraction) covered in a handsome grey stretch cloth. All told, the SL260 offers build and finish quality to shame many speakers at twice the price.

Rated sensitivity is 88dB/1 watt/1 meter, and nominal impedance is 8 ohms.

The SL260 is intended for stand-mounting, and Signet offer a purpose-built stand (the ST-260, \$159). Built of MDF, this stand is a single-pillar design that comes complete with adjustable floor spikes. Finished in matching oak veneer, it makes an attractive cosmetic match for the SL260. The ST-260 raises the speaker roughly 27" off the floor. This was a bit high for my seating position, placing the tweeters somewhat above my ears, but this was not a major problem. (Indeed, these stands helped augment image height nicely.) Target ST 50 stands (20" high, a bit low for this application) were also used for auditioning, with similar sonic results, though the Targets did seem to tighten up bass performance slightly. The Signets sounded best when placed well away from the rear wall — bass definition suffered noticeably with near-wall siting. Final placement was roughly three feet out from the rear wall, a similar distance from the side walls, with the speak-

ers slightly toed in towards the listener. All auditioning took place with the grilles removed. The ST-260's pillar was filled with sand for greater stability and a degree of structural damping.

Signet rate the SL260's bass response as down 2dB at 45 Hz, and indeed my initial listening confirmed that the SL260 offers generous bass power for a compact loudspeaker. Orchestral works had a gratifying sense of power and body, which combined with the Signet's fine dynamics to give large-scale music real impact. The bombastic sections of the fourth movement in Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 11* came across with great weight and force, the

**Price: \$650**

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bass drum and tympani displaying exceptional muscle for a small speaker.

The Shostakovich also highlighted the Signet's smooth, full-bodied tonal balance. Brass had excellent body and power, trombones displaying their characteristic "blattness" to great effect. Excellent small speakers like the Spica TC-50 and the ProAc Super Tablette can sound a bit threadbare and strained when called upon to reproduce the gutsiness of massed brass, but the SL260 had no problem in that regard. On the down side, the Signet lacked a degree of clarity and presence compared to the Spica or ProAc, with strings sounding smooth but a bit distant, and a diminution of recording acoustic also apparent. On balance, though, the Signet excelled in terms of conveying the sweep and power of the orchestra.

The Signet's aforementioned bass power did come at a slight price, alas, as note attack and definition were a bit lacking. On the *Rickie Lee Jones LP*, for example, bass guitar lacked a degree of snap and drive, sounding a tad blurred and "slow" compared to a speed demon like the Royd Sapphire. "Danny's All-Star Joint" didn't have quite its usual sass and spirit, though it still moved along quite nicely. On tracks like Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Ain't No Good Life" (the unofficial *HFH* corporate anthem), from the *Street Survivors LP*, the Signet was unable to fully capture the tremendous tightness of the bass guitar-kick drum-rhythm guitar riff that anchors the song, and gives this simple blues such power. Consequently, the song lagged a bit, sounding slightly lethargic.

Bear in mind that I freely admit to being an utter anal-retentive when it comes to bass tightness and definition, and indeed I suspect most people will find the Signet's combination of bass power and bass definition very attractive indeed.

The Signet's most obvious strength, however, lies in its ability to portray music with both smoothness and clarity. While the Royd Sapphire added a bit of thinness and hardness to Rickie Lee Jones' vocals, the SL260 conveyed them with a marvelous combination of warmth and presence. Not as detailed as some of the other top compact speakers in this price range, true, but more convincing in terms of body and tonal richness. Soundstaging on the Jones album was exceptionally good, with the musicians spread out across the end of my listening room, and depth of image was impressive. The net result was a performance that sounded both full-bodied and immediate, without a trace of coldness or sterility.

On the Miles Davis LP *Kind of Blue*, the SL260 was again notable for its smooth, full-bodied sound. Saxes and trumpet were reproduced beautifully, with excellent warmth and clarity. This feeling of body and substance made the music exceptionally involving and intimate, in that I could easily appreciate the tonal richness and complexity of each instrument. Note attack was not quite as crisp as I would have liked, particularly in the bass, making it somewhat difficult to follow the double bass on "So What". As such, pace and rhythmic progression were undermined slightly.

The Television LP *Marquee Moon* is a

remarkable piece of work, with a maturity that belies its status as Television's debut album. The spare, stark arrangements are accompanied by a sound quality that could charitably be described as "lean". Through some speakers, this LP can be a bit hard to take, sounding uncomfortably cold and strident. Tom Verlaine's piercing vocals don't help matters much. The Signet excelled here, allowing me to appreciate the taut drama of the performances without being driven away by stridency or harshness. Verlaine's vocals came across with both body (such as it is) and good presence. Electric guitars were clear and detailed, though note attack was a touch slurred. Richard Lloyd's terse, ferocious solo on "See No Evil" was compelling, if a bit rounded off in terms of crispness and speed.

For many music lovers, the Signet SL260 presents a welcome alternative to such excellent speakers as the Spica TC-50, ProAc Super Tablette, Royd Sapphire and others of this ilk. Such speakers can be rather demanding in terms of tonal balance, with little tolerance for brightness or thinness elsewhere in the system. Even when one's system is carefully matched to

these speakers, all of the above models can (to varying degrees) lean in the direction of tonal coolness. To be sure, these speakers offer tremendous quickness, detailing and imaging, giving music an exciting presence and immediacy. For many audiophiles, these models are very attractive indeed.

Other music lovers, however, may find the forward tonal balance of such speakers somewhat off-putting. The Signet is an ideal choice for them. The SL260 simply doesn't sound like a small speaker. In terms of tonal balance, bass power, and dynamics the SL260 utterly belies its compact dimensions. For those seeking a big, full-bodied sound in a small package, the SL260 is a pip. While not as quick and detailed as the aforementioned competitors, the Signet is certainly not laid-back or sluggish.

It is the Signet's sense of overall *balance* that makes it so attractive. Only the excellent Rogers LS4a (\$549) rivals it in this regard. Superior in sound quality to many speakers costing far more, the SL260 also dazzles with its superb build quality and gorgeous cabinet finish. As such, the SL260 easily qualifies for "Best Buy" status. The

SL260 is a product of great merit and value, one that reinforces my belief in the integrity of specialist audio. ■

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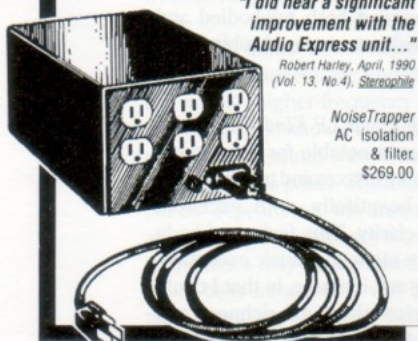
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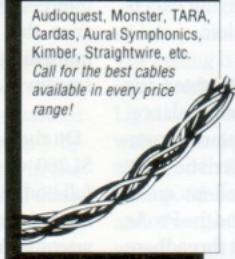
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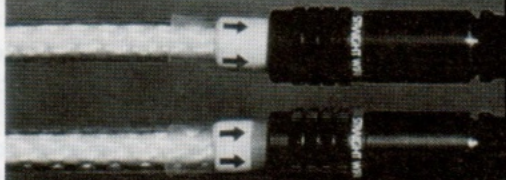


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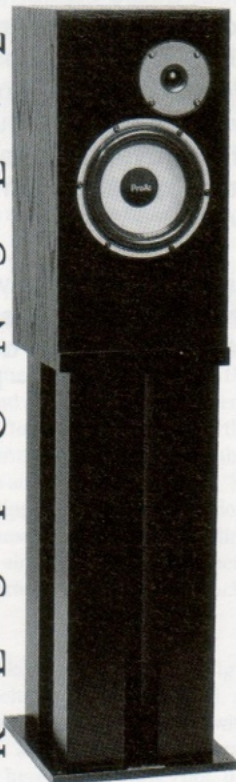
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# INTEGRATEDS AGAIN???

Americans seem to have an almost pathological dislike of integrated amplifiers. "High End" audiophiles prefer the status and macho appeal of separate preamps and power amps, while the general public is enticed by the elaborate front-panel displays of mass-market druck. The humble integrated gets lost in the shuffle.

Which is a shame, because the specialist audio integrated amplifier represents the first step towards true high-fidelity sound. Aside from the significance of this fact to anyone shopping for a musically satisfying audio system, it also has great portent for the future of specialist audio itself.

The general public simply *must* be made to understand that *truly* musical audio equipment is within its financial grasp. Too many people read of \$5000 preamps and \$40,000 loudspeakers, and quickly dismiss "High End" audio as a haven for lunatics. The specialist audio industry needs to reach out to the public *now*, to ensure that it will have customers in the future. Today's Arcam buyer may well be tomorrow's Audio Research or Krell owner.

Affordable specialist integrateds are vital in bringing the cause of *true* high fidelity to the masses, and in turn guaranteeing the future of specialist audio itself.

— Kent Bransford



## Integrated Amplifiers

Musical Fidelity offer a broad range of integrated amplifiers, which breaks down into three basic categories. The first (the "A" range) consists of three class A amps; the 20 watt A1 (reviewed in Issue #4), the 50 watt A100, and the 60 watt A200. The second category is occupied solely by the 60 watt B200-X (a class AB unit), which is a bit of a hybrid design in that its preamp circuitry is borrowed from the "A" range, while employing output topology from MF's A370.2 power amplifier. The last category consists of the B1 on test here.

An effort to offer "genuinely purist sound at a modest price", as MF put it, the B1 is a 35 watt per channel, class AB unit that can certainly be described as "minimalist" in terms of the control functions offered. The B1's front panel sports a power switch w/ integral LED indicator, a volume control, and program selectors for "listen" and "record". That's it. On the B1's rear panel there are RCA input jacks for a turntable, CD player, tuner, video source, and two tape decks. The B1 can accept both MM and MC cartridges, with a pushbutton next to the phono input selecting between modes. Somewhat surprisingly, the B1 offers a headphone socket on the rear panel. More surprisingly, use of the socket cuts signal to the single set of loudspeaker outputs. Purists tend to frown on such "switched" speaker outputs, believing they often degrade sound quality. Five-way binding posts handle speaker cable termination. These posts are slightly crowded together, making cable connection somewhat awkward.

Internal construction of the B1 is most impressive. Obvious care has been taken to keep the design as simple and direct as possible. All of the B1's circuitry is carried on a single glassfibre board, with the pre-amplifier stages kept close to the input jacks to keep signal paths as short as possible. This is made possible by mounting the B1's volume and selector controls towards the rear of the board as well, with splined shafts connecting the controls to their respective front-panel knobs. This vastly simplifies board layout, as low-level signals needn't be brought forward to the front of the amp. Very clever.

The B1's power amplifier circuitry is located towards the front of the amp, with each of its eight output transistors mounted on small, individual heat sinks. The B1's good-sized toroidal transformer occupies the left side of the chassis, well away from the noise-sensitive phono circuitry. As one



# Musical Fidelity B1

might expect given its class AB output biasing, the B1 normally runs only slightly warm, though when pushed hard it tends to get quite hot directly above the output transistors. Overall parts and build quality of the B1 are excellent for the price.

The B1's chassis is sheet steel, though with plastic side panels and a folded aluminum front panel. Unlike many British specialist manufacturers, Musical Fidelity place a great deal of emphasis on styling, and the B1 is certainly a striking piece of work. Its sleek, low-profile design makes most competitive amps look rather frumpy.

"Astounding" is not too strong a word to describe the sound of the Musical Fidelity B1. The dynamic range and sheer power of this amp are remarkable. Bass impact and drive shame many "audiophile" power amps costing several times as much as the B1. On a track like Peter Gabriel's "Lay

Your Hands On Me" (from the *Security* album), the punch and power of the drums rocked me back in my seat. On a truly excellent system, these drums are actually kind of scary. The B1 passed this test with flying colors — incredible for a \$499 integrated amplifier!

Vocals were just as impressive. Gabriel's heavily processed voice can sound rather gritty and strident through some amps, but the B1 managed to capture the *intentional* distortion without adding any residual harshness or hash. Tonally, the B1 offers exceptional warmth and body, yet at the same time it's wonderfully detailed and airy. On "Kiss Of Life", the attack and dynamics of the percussion were mesmerizing in their intensity. The performance here is furious and frenetic, but the B1 kept control of the various instrumental lines, never sounding congested or confused. The recording acoustic and ambience on this track were easy to hear, and this added to the music's immediacy and excitement.

On more subdued music, like "Daydream" and "I Can't Wait Much Longer" (from the LP *Robin Trower LIVE!*), the B1 impressed not with its power but its delicacy and subtlety. Bassist James Dewar's vocals on "Can't Wait..." were rich and resonant, with superb emotional impact (this is a remarkable vocal performance by Dewar). Again the B1 excelled in its ability to capture *both* the body and presence of vocals, never slighting one for the other. The full, heavy bass guitar line on this tune never sounded boomy or indistinct, thanks to the B1's exceptional bass definition and power. Trower's breathtaking guitar work on "Daydream" was in its full glory, the MF capturing both the instrument's resonance and body in the middle registers, as well as its soaring intensity when Trower goes up the neck. This is a dramatic, atmospheric song, and the B1 did a marvelous job of conveying its immediacy and intimacy without sounding forward or bright.

On the Shostakovich, the Musical Fidelity was an absolute triumph. Its big, dynamic sound communicated the sheer guts and power of the orchestra remarkably well for an inexpensive integrated amp. The B1's smooth, even tonal balance also helped give the performance body and substance. Massed brass displayed both crispness and impact, their "gutsiness" intact. Strings were vivid and clear, yet with fine warmth and resonance. The martial cadence section of the the fourth movement in *Symphony No. 11* moved along

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with great drive and tension — the B1 is right up there with the excellent Creeks in its rhythmic coherence and integrity.

The saxes and trumpet on the Miles Davis LP *Kind Of Blue* sounded gorgeous, their tonal richness and resonance well served by the B1. This gave the music additional color and emotional subtlety, which combined with the MF's great retrieval of recording acoustic and air to make the performance exceptionally intimate and inviting. The "human-ness" of the music was easy to appreciate — a bent note, the lip-ping of the reeds, all were readily apparent. The B1 excels not only in *gross* dynamic impact, but in a more subtle way as well. Slight changes in volume level can significantly contribute to the *feel* of music, and the MF did a marvelous job of capturing such dynamic nuances (particularly those of Davis and Coltrane).

John Prine's *Bruised Orange* is an acoustic guitar lover's delight, and the B1 did a super job of handling both the crispness and resonance of the instruments. Prine's raspy vocals were just about perfect, with no sense of thinness or harshness noted. The B1's fine separation of instrumental lines combined with its excellent soundstage width and depth to make the performance of each musician easy to follow and appreciate. There was no tendency for the musicians to clump together into an amorphous blob of sound.

What more can be said? The Musical Fidelity is an utter stunner for the money. Its powerful, dynamic delivery is certainly at odds with its modest size and price. Bass quality *and* quantity are superb, humiliating that of some larger and costlier competitors. The B1's smooth, full-bodied sound combines with its exceptional dynamics to give music greater substance and color — tonal shadings that might be diminished by thin, bright amps are easy to appreciate through the B1. Music through the B1 has a bold, vital feel that draws the listener into the performance. In this respect the Musical Fidelity beats a number of pre/power amp combos that are much more expensive.

There are a number of superb integrated amplifiers in this price range; the Arcam Alpha II, the Creek 4040/4140, and the QED A240SA II are all excellent values. That said, the B1 offers a combination of dynamic impact, tonal smoothness, and detailing that is very hard to resist. Given that, and the B1's retail of only \$499, I

consider the Musical Fidelity the best of the bunch. Indeed, the B1 made it onto the "Ten Best Buys In Audio" list detailed elsewhere in this issue. Musical Fidelity have had a rocky time in the U.S. thus far, but the B1 may just be the product to put them on the map here. Even if you're not in the market for an integrated amp, I urge you to try and hear the B1. I guarantee you'll be amazed. ■



## Arcam Delta 60

The Delta 60 is Arcam's first "no-frills" integrated amplifier. Eschewing such amenities as tone controls and separate "listen" and "record" program selectors, the Delta's circuitry is pared down to offer optimum sound quality. Indeed, Arcam have taken the unusual step of eliminating line stage amplification in the pre-amplifier circuitry. As such, the Delta 60 comprises a passive preamp w/active phono stage and a power amplifier. The four line-level inputs (CD, tuner, and two tape decks) are routed to the Delta's ganged volume controls (hence no balance control), and then directly onward to the power amplifier.

Front panel controls include pushbuttons to select among the five program inputs (phono plus the four already noted), selectors for "mono" operation and activation of a second set of speaker outputs, the aforementioned dual, ganged volume controls, a headphone jack, and a power switch. The phono stage accepts both MM and MC cartridges, with a pushbutton on the rear panel selecting between the two modes.

RCA jacks are used for all inputs on the rear panel, while two sets of 4mm sockets ("main" and "switched") are used for loud-speaker output. As you may have guessed, the "switched" outputs are controlled by the front panel's "SP2" speaker selector, and are not automatically switched out when the headphone jack is used, as is

usual British practice. The "main" outputs are directly wired to the power amp, and thus are "live" at all times.

Internal construction is, as usual for Arcam, excellent. All of the Delta's circuitry is carried on a single glassfibre board, including the front panel controls and the rear panel's RCA jacks and speaker outputs. A neat, low-profile Holden & Fisher toroidal power transformer dominates the right side of the chassis. High-quality metal film resistors and polypropylene capacitors sit cheek-to-jowl with integrated circuits, which should horrify the purists in the crowd. The Delta's output transistors are mounted on a small aluminum extrusion fastened to the chassis' aluminum rear panel, which in turn carries a small finned heat sink on its outer face. This arrangement combines with the Delta's aluminum chassis construction to offer excellent heat dissipation capability. In keeping with Arcam's emphasis on long-term reliability, the Delta employs output inductors, speaker fuses, and an electronic protection circuit to protect both the amplifier and the speakers connected to it. Some audio designers feel such protective measures cause unacceptable degradation of sound quality. Of course, some audio designers build amplifiers that have a nasty tendency to spontaneously combust.

The Delta's styling truly deserves special mention. Arcam products have a professionally-executed look and feel that sets them apart from run-of-the-mill specialist audio gear, and this is particularly true of the Delta 60. The sleek, low-profile (only

Price: \$649

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## Integrated Amplifiers

2.5" high) chassis is built entirely of aluminum extrusions and castings. The side panel extrusions are especially attractive, continuing the accent line that runs across the front panel. There are no fasteners visible on the front or sides of the amp — only two small screws on the rear panel hold the top in place. The net effect is that of an amplifier milled from a single block of aluminum. Very classy.

The Delta 60 is rated at 50 watts per channel into 8 ohms.


The Delta turned out to be a delightful surprise, boasting an exciting, detailed sound that makes music sound exceptionally alive and immediate. On the Doobie Brothers LP *Toulouse Street*, the sound was stunningly clear and present, the acoustic guitars almost seeming to be in the listening room. Cymbals, too, had remarkable crispness and definition, but didn't veer towards spittiness or sizzle. Tom Johnston's vocals aren't, by their very nature, particularly warm and resonant, and I feared the Delta's forward, lively tonal balance would make them sound a bit thin and hard, but this was not the case. To be sure, there seemed to be a little extra coolness in Johnston's voice, but it wasn't noxious or strident. Rhythmic coherence was excellent, with tracks like "Listen to the Music" and "Cotton Mouth" moving along with great pace and verve. Bass guitar and drum were exceptionally powerful and tight, the Delta challenging the superb Musical Fidelity B1 in this regard.

*Kind of Blue* came across with great clarity, with Davis and Coltrane sounding vivid and intimate. Tonally, the trumpet and saxes were a bit lacking in warmth and body, though not grossly so. It was somewhat harder to appreciate the harmonic richness of these instruments as when compared to their sound through the B1. Note attack and dynamics were excellent, making it easy to grasp the "shapes" of the individual instrumental lines here. Double bass was deep and crisp, with the tune "So What" displaying fine pace and direction. The Delta's superb retrieval of recording acoustic and air gave the performances here a wonderful "reach out and touch" presence.

The Shostakovich symphonies highlighted the Delta's open, clear sound, as both brass and strings came through with fine crispness and alacrity. The overall tonal balance here was slightly cool, undercutting the body and substance of

massed brass, for example, but it never crossed the line into outright harshness or stridency. Note attack and dynamics were again excellent, as strings in the martial cadence section of the fourth movement in *Symphony No. 11* were taut and compelling.

For those audiophiles with loudspeakers that lean in the direction of tonal brightness, the Arcam Delta 60 may not be an optimal choice. For those music lovers with speakers less explicit in their tonal balance, however, the Delta is a superb match. For example, mated with the lively, forward Royd Sapphire, the Delta got a bit wearing over time, though the combination of these two products yielded sound of stunning presence and detail. Partnered with the JPW Sonata or Signet SL260, the Delta worked marvelously, bringing welcome clarity and immediacy to the sound. The Delta is Arcam's best integrated thus far, but more importantly, it's a hell of a lot of fun to listen to music through this amp. At \$649, the Delta 60 certainly merits a "Best Buy" designation. ■



## Musical Fidelity B200-X

As noted in the B1 review, the B200-X is a 60 watt, class AB amp that marries the preamp circuitry of the "A" series integrateds with amplifier topology based on MF's well-regarded A370.2 power amp. Like the B1, the B200-X is a minimalist design, featuring a power switch w/integral LED, a volume control, program selector, and a tape monitor switch. The B200-X differs from the B1 in that it has inputs for only one tape deck, and no headphone socket is provided. Like the B1, the B200-X's rear panel carries RCA jacks and five-way binding posts.

The sexy styling of the B200-X mirrors that of the little A1 (see review in Issue Four). The amp's top also functions as a

heat sink, and this ribbed aluminum piece is certainly attractive. Internal layout appears to be similar to the A1, though this is largely conjecture on my part. Like the A1,

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the top/heat sink is bonded with heat-conductive compound to an aluminum piece inside that carries the output transistors. This bond makes it somewhat difficult to remove the top and inspect the circuitry. As such, I decided to only open the top a crack and peek inside.

If this review seems abbreviated, it's because the B200-X was frankly a disappointment. I had hoped the B200-X would offer similar sound to the B1, but with more power. This was certainly not the case. Bass quality was rather soggy and ill-defined, with it difficult to discern the pitch of bass guitars and double basses. On the Dire Straits track "Money For Nothing", the drums and bass guitar lacked snap and definition. Knopfler's entrance on the electric guitar sounded harsh and thin, and note attack was not as crisp and sharp as it should have been. The B200-X also had some problems in conveying the pace and tempo of music. "Walk Of Life" strolled at best.

The B200-X's somewhat forward, thin tonal balance flattered neither vocalists nor instruments. Rickie Lee Jones sounded rather shrill, while John Prine's rasp was obviously exaggerated. Strings and brass on the Shostakovich were a bit pinched and cold, lacking body and resonance. Tympani and bass drum came across somewhat blurred and indistinct.

Harsh words, to be sure, but I'm afraid the B200-X doesn't share the B1's magic. Compared to like-priced rivals such as the Naim NAIT 2, Arcam Delta 90.2, and Audiolab 8000A, the B200-X comes up well short. The MF has a rather ragged, sloppy rhythmic character that undermines the timing and progression of music. Tonally, the B200-X is a bit thin and bright, undercutting the music's body and fullness.

The good news is that Musical Fidelity is working on a new model, the B2. This will be based on the B1, and is intended to offer that model's superb sound quality, but will feature greater muscle for those with more difficult speaker loads. While the B2 appears to offer great promise, I'm afraid the B200-X is an unconvincing performer, and thus no recommendation is possible. ■



The A270 is QED's new top-of-the-line integrated amplifier, slotting in above the excellent A240SA II (see review in Issue Eleven). Like its less expensive sibling, the new A270 is a purist design intended to offer maximum sound quality for the dollar. As such, the A270 offers only a minimum of control functions; the front panel features dual, ganged volume controls (obviating the need for a balance control), program selectors for "listen" and "record", a headphone jack, and of course an off-on switch.

Moving to the rear of the amp, the A270 is somewhat unusual in offering two sets of loudspeaker outputs. One set is "direct", the other can be used in either "direct" or "switched" modes, the latter cutting out the speaker outputs when the headphone socket is used. Best sound quality is obtained when using the "direct" outputs. Note that these dual outputs are not intended to drive two pairs of speakers, but rather to facilitate biwiring. Neat.

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Another noteworthy feature of the A270 is its preamp output. This lets the A270 be used as a preamplifier only, but more importantly it allows the A270 to drive both its own internal power amp *and* a QED P300 power amplifier, in order to biampify one's speakers. (Actually, you could use *two* P300's, as it can be easily converted to mono operation.) The P300 is essentially an A270 without its preamp circuitry, and thus is a perfect match for the A270 when biamping. Rounding out the rear panel are inputs for a turntable (MM or MC, selectable by switches inside the amp on the Super Analog phono board — the same one used in the A240SA II), CD player, tuner, video source, and two tape decks.

Internal construction is similar to the A240, with most the A270's circuitry carried on a large, glassfibre main board, and the phono circuitry completely contained on the Super Analog board mentioned above. (Please see the A240SA II review in Issue Eleven for a detailed description of this board, as well as the circuit theories informing the design of QED electronics in general.) The most obvious difference between the A240 and the A270 is the latter's robust power amp section, with uprated output transistors, more power supply capacitance, and a beefier Holden & Fisher toroidal transformer evident.

The A270 is rated at 47 watts per channel into 8 ohms.

Not surprisingly, the A270 turned out to sound quite a lot like the A240SA II. (For

the sake of eschewing redundancy, I refer you to the A240SA II review for a complete listening critique.) The A270's greatest assets are an excellent sense of clarity and quickness, along with good bass power and definition. Tonally, the A270 sounds a bit more forward than the A240SA II, though this was a fairly minor difference. Bass power slightly exceeded that of the A240, though not dramatically so.

Frankly, I found the sonic differences between the two QED models to be fairly minor. The A270 offers greater power, and this would come in handy when driving difficult speaker loads, but under normal circumstances the A270 offered little advantage over the less expensive A240. As such, and given the substantial (\$280) difference in price, the A240SA II impresses as the more persuasive value. Of course, the A270's biampification option may tilt the balance in favor of the A270 for some listeners.

Make no mistake, the A270 is truly an excellent amplifier. It's just that the little A240SA II is almost equal in excellence, and comes at a bargain price to boot. That's a tough combination to beat. ■

**COMING IN ISSUE  
FIFTEEN:  
Reviews of more  
integrated amplifiers,  
including the new  
Rega Elicit and Elex,  
Linn Intek, Exposure  
XV, and the revised  
Audiolab 8000A.**



# SOLITARY MIEN

As I hope you've noticed, *Hi-Fi Heretic* makes a special effort to review audio products in groups. Anyone shopping for hi-fi equipment wants to know how all of the likely prospects in a given product and price category compare to one another. It doesn't do audiophiles much good to read about Preamps A and B now, only to discover in a review months later that Preamp C is by far the best. Hence, we try to round up the most promising candidates in a given product category, and audition them all at the same time.

Unfortunately, this often doesn't work out. Manufacturers are often less than reliable when it comes to sending review samples when promised. When four or five different manufacturers are involved, the review scheduling process can become a nightmare. This causes long delays in getting reviews out to you, and particularly penalizes those manufacturers who *do* send their review samples out on a timely basis.

Other times, there may be a lone product that looks interesting enough that I don't want to wait to gather several competing products to review along with it.

"Solitary Mien" is a new department that will contain reviews of *individual* products. While group reviews will still be our top priority, "Solitary..." will cover those products that, for the reasons noted above, "fall between the cracks" of the group-review process.

## RoomTune Acoustic Treatment

As we all know, the specialist audio industry is devoted to providing the best possible sound quality it can, albeit within certain constraints. These constraints invariably concern money — despite what some manufacturers may tell you, there is no such thing as a cost-no-object consumer audio product. (The easi-

est way to verify this is by simply asking any "High End" designer, "Do you mean to say there is *absolutely no way* you could make your product better?" You'll quickly hear a barrage of explanations, equivocations, and excuses.)

Personally, I see nothing wrong with manufacturers who have the gumption to face economic realities — those who don't may end up bagging groceries at Ralphs. Audio gear priced beyond the reach of its intended audience won't sell in sufficient quantities to keep the manufacturer in business, and then *everybody* (manufacturer, dealer, and audiophile) loses. Hardly a desirable situation. Intelligent audio designers recognize such financial limitations, and work around them the best they can.

Nevertheless, there are inevitably some hi-fi enthusiasts who decry such "cost-cutting" in their audio components, and set about to improve performance through the purchase of audiophile accessories. Today's music lover is confronted with a bewildering array of both upgrades (e.g., better cables and interconnects) and accessories, many of which claim to offer "dramatic" improvements to one's stereo system. The list is almost endless — speaker cables, interconnects, AC line cords, AC line filters and purifiers, CD damping rings, liquids, lotions, and polishes for Compact Discs, elaborate equipment stands, specially-treated clocks which improve the flow of electrons, specially-treated foils that correct "adverse charge effects in the listening room" (no, I don't know what that means either), etc. Some of these products do indeed offer substantial improvements in sound quality, some are rather subtle in effect, and some are utter wastes of money. Many are worthy of investigation by the cautious, well-informed consumer.

Where many audiophiles fall down, however, is in evaluating the *cost-effectiveness* of such upgrades and accessory items. Southern Californians have a curious habit of purchasing Hyundai Excels, and then loading them up with alloy wheels, sun-roofs, side skirts, suspension lowering kits, aftermarket exhaust systems, tinted windows, neon wiper blade covers, fake cellular phone antennas, and megawatt stereo systems. Oh, and of course the obligatory "Oakley" decal in the back window. The net result is that, rather than owning a crappy little \$6000 econobox, they now

own a crappy little \$12,000 econobox. It seems to me they would be better off spending their \$12,000 on a higher-quality car in the first place. In the immortal words of Robert Prosky, from the Stephen King film *Christine*: "You can't polish a turd."

Similarly, all too many audiophiles spend a small fortune on upgrades and accessories when in fact what they *really* need is a better hi-fi system. Not only will a better system offer improved sound quality in and of itself, its greater resolution will make the sonic changes offered by any subsequent upgrades or accessories easier to hear and evaluate.

Of course, there is one "component" in every audiophile's system that is very difficult, if not impossible, to sell off and replace — the listening room. Paradoxically, this is the very "component" that can have the greatest effect on the overall sound quality you experience. Room acoustics play an enormous role in determining everything from frequency response to imaging to dynamic range to...well, the list is almost endless. For the purposes of this review, I'll offer only a thumbnail sketch of the importance of room acoustics. RoomTune's Michael Green has agreed to write an essay on just this topic; his article will appear in Issue Fifteen.

Which brings us to RoomTune — both the company and the product. Founded by the aforementioned Mr. Green, RoomTune offers a full range of acoustic treatment devices, including the RoomTune pieces on test here, as well as CornerTune, EchoTune, and BassTune units. RoomTune the product (hereinafter referred to as "RT" for the sake of clarity) is a free-standing cylinder which measures 48" high and 12" in diameter. (Note: RoomTune now offer a flat-panel model, the Monolith, which is more attractive and is said to offer better performance than the standard RT. Measuring 48" H x 12" W x 3.5" D, the Monolith comes complete with an attractive oak baseplate. Retail price is \$229 per pair.) Built of plastic latticework, and covered with a lightweight stretch cloth, the RT's interior holds a thick (roughly 3") panel of fiberglass damping material that bisects the full length of the cylinder. One side of the panel is covered with aluminum foil, while the other is raw fiberglass. The idea here is to offer both reflective and absorbent surfaces; by rotating the cylinder, the user can vary the RT's absorbency/reflectivity characteristics

relative to both the loudspeaker and the room itself, and thus "tune" the RT for optimum results in a given setting.

For example, RoomTune recommend placing an RT in each corner of the listening room, with the pair behind the speakers positioned with the *reflective* side facing out, while the pair behind the listener should have their *absorbent* side aimed out into the room. This is one of the schemes suggested for use with typical dynamic speakers — dynamic dipoles and planar speakers dictate a slightly different room treatment. Siting of the RT's is dependent on both the dispersion characteristics of the speakers used, and the dimensions and construction of the listening room.

The basic goal of the RT is to break up resonances in the listening room. When a sound wave leaves a loudspeaker, it soon encounters one of the listening room's boundaries (ceiling, wall, floor), and the sound wave is reflected back towards the speaker. Depending on whether the reflected sound is in phase or out of phase with the direct output of the speaker, reinforcement or cancellation (i.e., resonance peaks and valleys) of the speaker's output occur. Similarly, reflected sound waves from different room boundaries meet and intermingle, further producing reinforcement/cancellation effects. These resonances are determined in large part by the dimensions of the listening room. Resonances can be attenuated somewhat by varying the distances of the speaker from the room boundaries (placing a dynamic speaker's woofer equidistant from the floor, side wall, and back wall is just *asking* for trouble), but this is hardly a complete cure.

The RT diffuses resonances (low-frequency resonances are known as "standing waves"; higher-frequency resonances are sometimes known as "echo slap") by dissipating a sound wave's energy in the RT's fiberglass panel. The degree of dissipation depends on the frequencies and amplitudes of the sound waves. Very high frequencies may be absorbed altogether, while bass frequencies will be only partially damped. The goal here is not to completely absorb a sound wave's energy, but to diffuse it in such a way that it will not significantly interact with either the speaker's direct output or the reflected output from other room boundaries. Such diffusion entails altering both the sound wave's *amplitudes* and its *frequencies*. When that is done, the reflected sound wave will no longer resemble the sound waves

emanating from the speaker or other room boundaries, and thus reinforcement/cancellation effects (resonances) will be reduced.

The above is a very brief, rather lame attempt to explain some basic aspects of room acoustics. If you find it confusing, ignore it, and wait for Michael Green's full-blown article in the next issue.

On to the important stuff — the sound. First, though, a quick description of my listening room. The main area is roughly 12'6" wide by 14' feet long, though this opens up to a total of 25' long when the adjacent dining area and kitchen are included. The room has a vaulted ceiling,

occupying a distinct, discrete point in space. The acoustic guitars came across with superb presence and alacrity, it being remarkably easy to follow individual instrumental lines. The effect was similar to snapping a camera lens into focus. The sound had been very good indeed *before* the RT's, but now it took on a new dimension of immediacy and vitality.

The *Rickie Lee Jones* LP offered similar gains, as I could "see" the musicians in the soundstage with remarkable ease. I could more readily follow individual instrumental lines, as well. Jones sounded exceptionally crisp and immediate, with great focus and specificity of image.

Bass definition and snap were also improved, particularly with the Signets and Vandersteens. The slightly heavy bottom end of the SL260 was substantially tightened up, giving "Danny's All-Star Joint" greater rhythmic pace and drive. Bass guitar lines were much easier to follow, both in terms of rhythm and melody. Anyone with loudspeakers that sound a bit porky in the bass frequencies should certainly try a set of RT's before throwing in the towel and changing speakers.

From large-scale orchestral music to small jazz and folk ensembles, from thundering rock to solo acoustic guitar, the RT always helped the sound in my listening room. Sometimes the improvements were more obvious than others, depending both on the program material and loudspeakers used. In general, music had a greater sense of focus and clarity, along with a reduction of harshness and glare in the upper frequencies (perhaps due to less slap echo).

The benefits of RoomTune will, of course, depend to some extent on the acoustics of your particular listening room. In *my* listening room, the sonic gains of RoomTune were undeniable. (Your dealer should certainly be willing to let you try RoomTune on a home-trial basis.) When I consider RoomTune's reasonable cost, and the heightened enjoyment of music it gave me, it's clear that RoomTune is simply one of the most *cost-effective* improvements you can make to your stereo system. ■



Price: \$179

Contact:

RoomTune Inc.  
P.O. Box 57  
Sugarcreek, OH 44681  
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which peaks at approximately 12' high. The ceiling is a wood beam affair, and thus is less reflective than the sheetrock walls. Light cotton wall hangings cover the side walls, reducing echo slap somewhat. Overall sound in this room has been excellent, with good bass extension and tightness, and few problems with standing waves noted.

I used four RT's in my listening room, in the configuration described earlier for a standard, front-firing dynamic loudspeaker. (In the course of auditioning I used the following speakers: the ProAc Studio 1, Vandersteen 2Ci, Signet SL260, Musical Fidelity MC-1, and Royd Sapphire.) As soon as I began auditioning, I was amazed at the improvement in sound. The Doobie Brothers' *Toulouse Street* displayed stunning clarity and imaging, with each musi-

## Ultra EAD-Rotel 855

I'll cut straight to the chase: the Ultra EAD-Rotel 855 is the best single-box CD player I've ever heard. The EAD is not a subtle "improvement" or "refinement" compared to typical CD players, it is a genuine breakthrough of enormous proportions. The sheer reduction of sonic crud and harshness the EAD achieves is simply astonishing. Noise and stridency I had feared were endemic to the CD medium are banished. The result is music with breathtaking clarity and detail.

After listening to the EAD for several hours recently, I noticed a remarkable thing — I felt *really* good. When using other CD players, I've often found that listening to two or three CD's all the way through is enough to give me a pounding headache. With the EAD, I can listen at high volumes for hours at a time without stress or fatigue.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself here. Enlightened Audio Designs are a small, Iowa-based company that specializes in modifying CD players. Specifically, EAD's mods are available for any 4x-oversampling, Philips-based player. In addition, EAD offer factory-new, modified units from Rotel (RCD-855), Philips (CD-80) and Mission (PCM II). EAD had initially sold through retail dealers, but found that, like most other mod companies, the vast majority of their business came from sales direct to the public. As such, EAD products and mods are now only available directly from EAD.

What exactly do the EAD mods entail? EAD claim that the majority of CD players on the market have significant problems when it comes to smoothing the analog current waveform produced by the player's DAC (digital-to-analog converter). When the analog waveform leaves the DAC, it is not smooth, but rather resembles a staircase, with the sharp edges found in square waves. As many of you know, such waveforms contain a great deal of high-frequency energy.

Op amps in the analog section of a CD player are used to convert this staircase current waveform into a voltage waveform, which is then low-pass filtered to remove the aforementioned high-frequency components. EAD note that these high-frequency components place great demands on the slew rates and rise times of the op amps used, and EAD feel the op amps used in most CD players are simply inadequate for the task. The result is severe transient



## Ultra EAD-Rotel 855

distortion, most obvious on loud musical passages. I quote EAD: "*This fundamental inability of the analog circuitry to cope with the staircase current waveform produced by the DAC is the principal source of the grunge, grit, hardness, and distortion commonly attributed to CD sound.*" A provocative statement, eh?

EAD's proprietary AccuLinear™ circuitry is claimed to offer vastly improved performance in the crucial current-to-voltage conversion, and thus dramatically reduce distortion levels compared to conventional op amps. EAD's Premiere mod (\$399) substitutes their AccuLinear™ modules for the op amp's currently in your CD player, along with some changes in the player's analog stages and power supplies. The Ultra mod (\$599) includes all of the steps in the Premiere mod, plus replacement of all components in the signal path with premium-quality components (1% metal film resistors, polypropylene caps, etc.), and

further upgrading of the digital and analog power supplies.

Space considerations (and my limited technical expertise) preclude a more detailed analysis of the EAD circuitry. For further information, I refer you to EAD's informative product brochure.

As noted at the start of this review, the model on test here is the full-boat Ultra EAD-Rotel 855. In future I hope to evaluate the sonic differences between the Premiere (\$699) and Ultra (\$899) models, but for now this review concerns the performance of the Ultra model only.

On to the music. The first CD I listened to after hooking up the Ultra was Elvis Costello's *King of America*. To say I was bowled over by the sound would be an understatement. The acoustic guitars on "Indoor Fireworks" were gloriously sweet and resonant, with none of the hash and thinness I've heard through other players. Costello's vocals sounded marvelous, with an almost ideal combination of resonance and immediacy. And *no* hardness or stridency. Another striking effect — there was much less audible *hiss* through the Ultra. *King Of America* is an analog recording, and in the past I thought I was simply hearing tape hiss. Apparently not. The Ultra's sound was significantly quieter than that of any other player I've heard.

On all-digital recordings like Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* and Peter Gabriel's *Security*, I again noted this lower noise floor. Far more important, though, was the *music*. And it was glorious. I've never cared much for the sound of *Brothers In Arms*, finding it harsh and strident compared to the analog *Love Over Gold*. The Ultra quickly changed that. Both Knopfler's guitar and voice had a smoothness and clarity that I've never heard before through any player. In the past I've winced at the brightness and stridency of some of these tunes, but now I could turn the wick way up and revel in the big, dynamic sound. "Money For Nothing" was quite an experience. I was fascinated to note Der Stingle's processed vocals at the very beginning of this track, and how utterly clear and free of grunge the were.

If *Brothers In Arms* was fun to listen to, Gabriel's *Security* was actually frightening. "You don't listen to a Peter Gabriel (LP) as much as live it," said one perceptive critic. Truer words were never spoken. *Security* is a sonic environment, and a pretty spooky

Price: \$899

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EAD Corp.  
508 North 2nd St.  
Fairfield, IA 52556  
(800) 323-2899

one at that. From the hypnotic chants to the thundering drums to the inventive synth work, the performances here were utterly enthralling. With no grit or harshness present, Gabriel's processed vocals still managed to sound human and affecting. "Lay Your Hands On Me" was shattering in its impact. It was both more detailed and smoother than I'd ever heard it before, and this drew me into the performance. Through other players, the thin and piercing sound of this disc pushed me away from the music.

On classical performances like Holst's *The Planets*, the Ultra again made a huge improvement. Where climactic passages had in the past entailed a hardening up of the sound, with strings and brass taking on a harsh, congested character, now the sound stayed clear and open. Massed brass sounded gutsy, but not hard or relentless. Strings had a sheen and resonance that I have simply never heard on a CD before. For classical music lovers justifiably enraged by the miserable sound of violins on CD, the Ultra will be a revelation.

But what really guaranteed the Ultra a place in my heart was its handling of Rod Stewart's solo recordings. *The Rod Stewart Album*, *Gasoline Alley*, and *Every Picture Tells A Story* are superb performances, and the Ultra conveyed them with a musicality that other CD players have never even approached. Acoustic guitars play a prominent role in all three recordings, and the smoothness and clarity of the EAD's sound made them sound vastly more realistic. Stewart's vocals were sublime, with only his natural gruffness present. The Ultra's lack of hash and grunge gave these performances far more realism and intimacy, helping to tear down the barrier between the musicians and the listener.

Frankly, nothing I have written really does justice to the Ultra. Long-time readers of *HFH* know that I've never been impressed by Compact Disc. It was atrocious when first introduced, and though great improvements have been made over the past few years, it still has largely left me cold. Not anymore. The Ultra brings a clarity and lack of harshness to CD unknown in my experience. By removing layers of distortion, the Ultra dramatically narrows the gap between CD and LP sound.

I've never bought a CD player in my life, but I can assure you EAD isn't getting this Ultra back. At \$899, the Ultra EAD-Rotel 855 is a tremendous value, and easily gar-

ners a "Best Buy" rating. Believe me, you simply have to hear this thing for yourself to truly appreciate how remarkable it is. ■



**The C300 preamplifier and the P300 power amplifier are the first separates QED have released.** The P300 is simply a QED A270 integrated amplifier without the preamp circuitry installed (the two units share the same circuit board). Sound quality of the P300 was essentially the same as the A270, impressing with its clear, smooth sound. That said, bass quality was a bit lightweight, lacking depth and impact. The P300 can be converted to mono operation, and this would up the output power, but at \$1200 the pair I see this as a dubious option. While a nice enough power amp, I don't really see the \$599 P300 being a convincing value with units like the Belles 150, and B & K ST-140 & ST-202 around.

The C300 preamplifier is another matter, however. Featuring "Premium Analog" phono circuitry, an improvement over the already-excellent "Super Analog" phono board found in the A240SA II and A270 integrations, the C300 is obviously designed with superb LP reproduction in mind. Indeed, a quick look inside the C300 will warm the heart of any vinyl lover, as the vast majority of the QED's circuitry is carried on the "Premium Analog" board at the left rear of the chassis. A large glassfibre board carries the line stage circuitry, which is all but non-existent, as well as the front-panel controls and the RCA jacks at the rear panel. A hefty Holden & Fisher toroid dominates the right side of the chassis.

The C300's front panel features program selectors for "listen" and "record", dual ganged volume controls, and a power switch. That's it. The rear panel carries inputs for a turntable, tuner, CD player, video source, and two tape decks. Both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges

can be used with the C300 — switches on the "Premium Analog" board select between the MM and MC stages. A single set of preamp outputs is provided.

On to the sound. The C300 features an impressive combination of smoothness and clarity. For those who find preamps like the PS Audio 4.6 and the Counterpoint SA1000 thin and bright, the C300 will be a welcome relief. On John Prine's *Bruised Orange*, the acoustic guitars were rendered with an alluring blend of warmth and detail, the resonance and body of the instruments easy to appreciate. Prine's vocals were crisp and clean, with harshness or added raspiness. Recording acoustic and ambience were very good, if not in the same class as the more expensive Audible Illusions Modulus 2D. Note attack and dynamics were excellent on this album, and this combined with the C300's fine rhythmic coherence and integrity to give uptempo tunes like "There She Goes" and "Aw Heck" great vitality and energy.

If the C300 is ultimately overshadowed by the superb B & K Pro-10MC Sonata (\$699), it nevertheless is a welcome addition to the dwindling number of quality preamps under \$1000. Its excellent phono stage will win it many friends indeed. While the Sonata offers greater low-level resolution and detail, the QED is still very good in this regard. The C300's greatest asset, though, is its smooth, musical balance. At only \$599, the QED is fine value, and is indeed the least expensive preamplifier *Hi-Fi Heretic* recommends. ■



**Price: \$599/\$599**

**Contact:**

**May Audio Marketing**  
**P.O. Box 1048**  
**Champlain, NY 12919**  
**(800) 422-7525**

Now that Saddam's Big Adventure is over, the economy should get back on track relatively quickly. Specialist audio dealers have taken a real beating over the last six months, all the more reason you should consider making any hi-fi purchases now. Dealers are desperate for business, and may be more willing than usual to negotiate on equipment prices. That doesn't mean you should grind your dealer unmercifully — it simply suggests that polite, sincere customers have a decent chance of getting a little knocked off the suggested retail price of any given product. Go in with an obnoxious attitude, and the dealer will (quite rightly) tell you to get stuffed.

The "Best Buy" check-rating system is quite simple. Two checks (✓✓) indicate the product was selected by *Hi-Fi Heretic* as one of "The Ten Best Buys In Audio" in Issue Ten. One check (✓) indicates the product provides an exceptionally good combination of performance and value, if not quite up to the level of those products on the "Ten Best" list. No attempt has been made to rank the products beyond these ratings. Compatibility with your own audio system and listening room will play a major part in determining which of these products is right for you.

New entries are denoted by a black arrow in the outside margin. These arrows may reflect new products added to the listings, or they may indicate a price change of a prod-

# MEATY BEATY BIG AND BOUNCY

uct already listed. **As the economy recovers, the dollar should gain strength against the pound. This should prevent the prices of British audio equipment from rising any further. Some British companies chose to hold their prices steady despite the increasingly unfavorable exchange rate, fearing that price jumps in the middle of a recession would make a bad situation worse. As such, don't assume prices will rapidly drop as the exchange rate improves.**

Please, use this feature only as a *guide* to deciding what components may bear further investigation and auditioning. Do not use it as a shopping list. You must decide which products provide the most satisfying musical performance.

Don't be intimidated by the auditioning process — as I've said before, if you're capable of appreciating music, you're capable of evaluating audio equipment.

Remember, all the hi-fi jargon in the world counts for not a whit when it comes down to the essential question of: Does this product sound like music? If you put all of the audio doubletalk out of your mind, and simply judge an audio component the same way you would judge a live musical performance, you'll have no trouble making an intelligent buying decision. You'll choose the products which best communicate the joy of music — which is, after all, the whole point of this madness.

— Kent Bransford

## TURNTABLES ● TONEARMS ● CARTRIDGES

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Dual CS-505-3	\$399		Least expensive turntable worth considering. Can sound a bit crude compared to Regas. Overpriced.	NA
Revolver Rebel	\$449		Standard Revolver with cheaper arm. Includes Goldring Elan cartridge. Iffy build quality. Regas better value.	NA
Systemdek IIX	\$559	✓	Table superb, arm OK. Armless model (\$359) great with Rega RB300. Lack of importer support rather worrisome.	#9
Rega Planar 2 Rega Planar 3	\$489 \$650	✓✓	The classic affordable table. Elegant design, marvelous sound. 3 is better buy. Tonearm on either is incredibly good.	#2
Linn Axis	\$995		Sophisticated motor drive circuit, clever suspension design. New, stronger MDF base. Akito arm now standard.	#8
Linn Sondek LP12	\$1495	✓	Superbly musical table. Extremely well-built and reliable. The standard against which all others are judged. Price a bit steep.	NA
Roksan Xerxes	\$2000		Clever bearing and motor drive system. Sound is quick, dynamic and detailed. Mates well with Rega arm. Expensive.	#8
Rega RB300	\$325	✓✓	Sophisticated one-piece cast aluminum armtube. Superb bearings. May be the single best value in audio.	NA
Roksan Tabriz	\$350	✓	Innovative budget model borrowing much of the engineering (and sound quality) of more expensive Artemiz. Fine value.	NA
Linn Akito	\$395		Significant improvement over earlier (and less expensive) Basik. Rigid design. Beats Basik as best budget partner for LP12.	NA
Eminent Technology Two	\$950	✓	Innovative air-bearing design. Excellent detail and imaging. Set-up a bit involved. Remarkably sophisticated for the money.	NA
SME 309	\$950		One of the best pivoting arms in the world with a removable headshell. Great bass quality. Superbly built.	NA
Arcam E77Mg Arcam P77Mg	\$120 \$150	✓	Magnesium body improves resolution, allows solid mounting. P77 more detailed, open. Both models excellent value.	#8
Rega Elys	\$215	✓	Superb combination of clarity, body and dynamic impact. Three-point mount best suits RB300. Best buy MM cartridge.	NA
Audio-Technica AT-F5	\$250	✓	Now officially imported by A-T. Open, detailed, excellent rhythmic drive. Can sound a bit bright. Best budget MC.	NA

## TURNABLES ● TONEARMS ● CARTRIDGES (cont.)

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Goldring Eroica Goldring Eroica L	\$275 \$325	✓	Smooth, relaxed sound. Lack usual MC brightness. Low-output L slightly more detailed. Good value for the price.	NA
Audio-Technica AT-OC9	\$395	✓	Now imported by A-T. Detailed, involving sound. Dynamic. Simply the best value low-output MC cartridge in America.	NA
Audioquest 404i-MH	\$595		Medium-output MC works well into preamps lacking MC stage. Clear, detailed sound without harshness.	NA

## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Arcam Alpha II	\$379	✓✓	Marvelous combination of detail and warmth. Optional MC input. Beautifully built for the price. Super integrated buy.	#11
Musical Fidelity B1	\$499	✓✓	Incredible sound. Superb dynamics, detail, and bass power. Smooth tonal balance. Best integrated value around.	#14
Creek 4040 Creek 4140	\$495 \$595	✓	Perennial favorites. 4140 more powerful, has MC input. Sound on both is sweet, clear, dynamic. Excellent value.	#10
QED A240SA II	\$569	✓	Amazing clarity and presence. Tonal balance excellent. Superb phono stage. Recent price drop makes it great value.	#11
Arcam Delta 60	\$649	✓	Lively, dynamic sound. Excellent clarity and airiness. Tonal balance slightly forward. Nice bass punch. Fine value.	#14
Onix OA-21	\$875		Big, dynamic sound. Optional power supply pricey, but effective. Choice of MM or MC phono board. Expensive.	#4
Naim NAIT 2	\$875		Usual Naim strengths of superb pace and tempo. Smooth balance. Down on power, restricted bass dynamics.	#10
Creek 5050	\$1050		Effortless musicality, with trad Creek smoothness and listenability. Numerous control functions. Overpriced.	#12
Assorted	\$????		Upcoming reviews: the new Rega integrations, Exposure XV, revised Audiolab 8000A, Linn Intek, and others.	NA

## PREAMPLIFIERS

QED C300	\$599		Smooth, detailed sound. Excellent phono stage. Fine build quality. Least expensive full-function preamp worth considering.	#14
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## PREAMPLIFIERS (cont.)

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
B & K Pro-10MC Sonata	\$699	✓✓	Tremendous sound quality for the dollar. Remarkable balance of smoothness, clarity, dynamic punch. Awesome value.	NA
Audible Illusions Modulus 2D	\$945	✓✓	Timbral accuracy, stunning dynamics, and remarkable imaging. Incredibly well-built for the price.	#12
B&K Sonata MC-101	\$949	✓	Traditional B&K smoothness with added detail and clarity. Extensive facilities offer tremendous flexibility.	#11
Quicksilver Preamplifier	\$1495	✓	Smooth, airy sound that betters preamps costing thousands more. Superb build quality. Great value.	NA

## POWER AMPLIFIERS

B & K ST-140	\$498	✓	The classic budget power amplifier. Smoothness a hallmark. Mates well with many preamps. Superb value.	#5
Belles 150	\$699	✓	Remarkable quickness and clarity. Very revealing. Superb build quality. Excellent value. Discontinued?	#11
Belles 450	\$1595	✓	Extremely powerful stereo amplifier. Outstanding sense of detail and finesse for a big amp. Excellent bass.	#12
Kinergetics KBA-75	\$1795	✓	Smooth, full-bodied sound from class A amp. Excellent bass punch. Great build quality. Newly revised chassis.	NA
B & K Sonata M-200	\$1796	✓✓	Mono solid-state amps with amazing current capability. Brilliant blend of smoothness and detailing. Bargain.	#12
Audible Illusions S-120	\$1995	✓	Tremendous bass definition and clarity. Smooth, sweet balance with great detail and air. Rare model.	NA
Naim 62/140	\$2090		Pre/power combo with superb musicality. Smooth, great timing. 72/HiCap/250 hot set-up. Pricey.	#9

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Dana Model 1	\$179	✓	Smooth, dynamic sound belies tiny price. Sold direct to public by Dana. Great build quality. Excellent buy.	#14
Celestion 3	\$280	✓	One of best budget minispeakers around. Quick, detailed, dynamic. Superb treble for the price. Bargain.	#11



## LOUDSPEAKERS (cont.)

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Rogers LS2a	\$399	✓	Smooth, full-bodied sound. Outstanding timbral balance, good detail. Bass lacks some definition.	#11
Rogers LS4a	\$549	✓	Lively, dynamic performer. Excellent bass punch and drive. May be best value in Rogers line. Beautifully built.	#11
Spica TC-50	\$550	✓✓	Amazing imaging and detail. Must use proper height stands for best results, or will sound thin. Superb value.	#4
Royd Sapphire	\$625		Incredibly fast, detailed speaker. Superb bass snap and clarity. Can sound bright in wrong system.	#14
Signet SL260	\$650	✓	Warm, smooth sound. Exceptionally dynamic. Slightly lacks detail, bass a touch loose. Amazing build quality.	#14
Vandersteen 2Ci	\$1195	✓✓	Big, smooth sound with outstanding bass power. Greatest asset is overall balance of performance. Superb value.	NA
Rega ELA	\$1250	✓	Small, floor-standing transmission line speaker. Amazingly fast, open. Tremendous imaging. Excellent buy.	#13
Thiel CS1.2	\$1250	✓	Punchy, dynamic sound with tremendous imaging. Stunning build quality. One of the best values in audio.	#10
Spica Angelus	\$1275		Improves on the TC-50's strengths. Bass tight but a bit lightweight. Controversial appearance.	#9
ProAc Studio 1 Mk. II	\$1300	✓	Latest Mk. II version w/ new tweeter smoother, warmer. Easier system match now. Punchy, exciting. Superb finish.	NA
Rogers Studio 1a	\$1500	✓	Warm, full-bodied sound. Surprising bass power for its size. Great long-term listenability. Gorgeous finish.	#9
Chapman T-7	\$1595	✓	True full-range speaker st a bargain price. Great imaging for a big system. Recently revised w/ new tweeter.	#13
Tannoy DC3000	\$1695		Obscenely sensitive model. Amazing dynamic impact. SPLs to make your ears bleed. Imaging, detail not strong points.	#13
Thiel CS3.5	\$2450		Exceptional combination of bass power, imaging, and clarity. Tonally thin? Beautifully built. Good value.	#10
ProAc Response 2	\$3000		Stunning clarity and quickness. One of the best dynamic speakers available. Utterly true to the music.	#12

DIGITAL AUDIO					
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Rotel RCD-855	\$399	✓✓	The best budget CD player in the world. Detailed, dynamic, excellent bass performance. Super value.	NA	
CAL Icon	\$750		Marvelous combination of warmth, detail, and dynamics. Impressive imaging. Outstanding build quality.	#12	
Philips CD-80	\$800		Smooth, sweet sound. Uses diecast CDM-1 transport. Remote volume control. Solidly built.	NA	
Ultra EAD-Rotel 855	\$899	✓	Incredibly musical. A true leap in CD performance. Astonishing blend of clarity and freedom from stridency.	#14	
CAL Tercet III	\$1295		Warm, analog-like midrange. No CD stridency or harshness. Extensive control functions. Well-built.	#13	
Kinergetics KCD-20B	\$1495		Smooth, detailed player with great bass. Excellent imaging. Can sound better driving power amp direct.	#13	
Theta DS Pro Basic	\$1995		Considered by many audiophiles to be one of the best outboard DACs available, irrespective of price.	NA	
MISCELLANEOUS					
Audioquest F-14	75¢/foot	✓	Solid-core speaker cable at incredible price. Smooth, detailed. Bass can get heavy on long runs.	NA	
Music Metre Interconnect	\$95/1m	✓	Twisted-pair solid core, with Teflon dielectric. Offers detail and tonal warmth. Balanced, shielded.	NA	
Linn K-20 Cable	\$7.50/meter		Spaced-conductor stranded design. Good compatibility with wide variety of systems. Solid value.	NA	
Sound Organisation Speaker Stands	\$99	✓	Least expensive high-quality stand around. Spikes top and bottom. Nicely built for the price.	NA	
RoomTune	\$179/pair	✓	Acoustic room treatment that works. Freestanding cylinders are easy to place. Cost-effective upgrade.	#14	
Target HJ Series Speaker Stands	\$200		All-welded steel stands. Spikes on top and bottom. Hollow pillars can be filled with lead shot or sand.	NA	
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# More Music On Modest Money

by David Cooper

## SOME GREATS OF JAZZ AND THE BLUES

### And Their Direct And Indirect Musical Mentors

*There are only two types of music: good music and bad music. Good music is written to express something. Bad music is only written to turn a buck.* — Duke Ellington.

Dear Friends,

With this article we are taking a break from our survey of "classical" music. I offer you a less-than-scholarly introduction to a musical area I favor and enjoy — Jazz and the Blues.

Don't look for a definitive analysis of either. You will find a bibliography at the end of the article for that. To quote Marshall Stearns: "In reply to the sweet old lady's question, 'What is Jazz, Mr. Waller?', the late and great Fats is supposed to have sighed, 'Madam, if you don't know by now, Don't Mess With It!' Fats Waller had a point there. Whether you hear it in New Orleans or Bombay...jazz is a lot easier to recognize than to describe."

I am far more interested in sharing with you some deeply loved recordings of Jazz greats, plus recordings of some of the "lesser-knowns" who influenced them. This article will focus heavily on a few of the greats of the many artists I personally revere. Those conversant in Jazz and the Blues will find many a glaring omission. Hopefully, this is the first of several occa-

sional jazz and blues offerings.

The music we call "Jazz" is part of a musical continuum. The greats learned their craft from mentors, and then created a music that was distinctly their own. Name any great and before each you will find a chain of masters, known and unknown, who were virtuosos in their own right. For instance, before Ella Fitzgerald was Connie Boswell, who influenced Ella's early popular style. Billie Holiday may have been an influence. Ella also drew, directly or indirectly, on such towering personalities as Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith, the imposing and multi-talented "Empress of the Blues". Bessie's mentor and musical progenitor was "Ma" Rainey. Before "Ma" Rainey was an unnamed host of rural and urban blues singers who lived in the appalling oppression of Jim Crow segregation, and in slavery before that.

Before Miles Davis or Dizzie Gillespie there stood the giant of the trumpet and cornet, Louis Armstrong. As we shall see, Louis had his own mentors and musical ancestors such as Joe "King" Oliver, Freddie Keppard, and the never-recorded, legendary Buddy Bolden. Before Duke Ellington went James P. Johnson, who also influenced Willie "The Lion" Smith, Fats Waller, and Art Tatum. Before Johnson stood the irritating and pervasively influential "Jelly Roll" Morton. Before Morton were Scott Joplin and the never-recorded Tony Jackson. White trumpeters such as Harry James and Bobby Hackett, and band leader/clarinet master Benny Goodman grew from exposure to the legendary "Bix"

Beiderbecke, who in turn was influenced by Armstrong, and by extension by his mentors.

All of this is grossly oversimplified — an injustice to each great named thus far. Not a few of these people performed and recorded together, within their own racial groups (it was Goodman who first crossed "the color line"). Despite racial lines, they listened and learned from each other. Armstrong considered Beiderbecke the greatest white cornet player he ever heard; Beiderbecke was in awe of Armstrong. Louis Armstrong learned much from the nine record sides cut accompanying Bessie Smith, in 1925. She, in turn, retained something of Louis's bite and note attack in nearly everything she recorded from then on. Before Bessie Smith and "Ma" Rainey was the extensive heritage of African-American church music, as well as the work song, the shout, and the cross-cultural influences of African, Caribbean, and European music. Yes, I'm writing in sweeping generalities, just to hint at what awaits those who want to dig further into a musical heritage yet to be adequately studied, let alone chronicled.

So, how do we approach such subjects, but with the music itself? If you insist on the highest level of reproduced musical fidelity, much of what follows will remain a "closed book". The sad fact is that the art of mechanical, and later electrical, recording was evolving while these giants walked the earth. The music they created remains often only vaguely preserved within the grooves of 78s.

The superior sound of Edison's "hill and valley" vertically-recorded cylinders and "Diamond Discs" was not available for Jazz or the Blues. The side-to-side reproduction within record grooves used by Victor, Columbia, Gennett, Okeh, Paramount, Black Swan, and others is still the medium we follow. A tour of the Edison Laboratories National Monument, West Orange, N.J., any week from Wednesday through Sunday will give you a chance to hear superior sound reproduction from circa 1880 to 1928. Sadly, Edison preferred vaudeville routines, ballads, and band music. He considered Jazz and the Blues to be inferior, if not downright sinful.

Acoustic recording was the rule on all records until 1925, when the simultaneous introduction of the microphone, tube amplifier, and electrical record cutter revolutionized musical reproduction fidelity.

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All of the 78 rpm recordings listed herein are on 33 1/3 LP reissues. And take heart, the better your turntable and cartridge, the more you will hear. Replacing an AR EB-101 with a Rega Planar 3, and an Arcam P77Mg with a Sumiko Blue Point, has revealed more music in my 78-sourced LPs than I thought was possible.

For the jazz novice and for the enthusiast, one invaluable resource is *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, P6 11891. This six-record set contains excellent takes from Scott Joplin (a piano roll take), "Jelly Roll" Morton, Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, Joe "King" Oliver, Sidney Bechet, James P. Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, "Bix" Beiderbecke & Frankie Trumbauer, Fletcher Henderson, Benny Moten, "Fats" Waller, Meade "Lux" Lewis, Benny Goodman, Coleman Hawkins, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Art Tatum, Jimmy Lunceford, Gene Krupa, Roy Eldridge & Benny Carter, Lionel Hampton, "Count" Basie, Teddy Wilson, Charlie Christian, Lester Young, "Duke" Ellington, Don Byas, Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Errol Garner, Bud Powell, Sarah Vaughan, Lee Konitz, Lennie Tristano, Miles Davis, Tad Dameron, "Fats" Navarro, Dexter Gordon, Thelonious Monk, Gil Evans, Sonny Rollins, The Modern Jazz Quartet, Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and many great "sidemen" and women.

But what if these names and Jazz are unknown? Why should anyone drop between \$18 and \$50 that could be spent on records of more recent and known music? This boxed set contains fine, clean pressings of uniformly important and fine performances by the very people who created, shaped, and continually developed one of North America's truly unique contributions to the world's music. Along with the records is a superb 46 page booklet that concisely traces the history of Jazz through 14 stages of development. This is followed by a guide, "Using the Recordings", with the suggestive headings: "1) Hearing the Melody, 2) New Pieces from Old, 3) Hearing the Blues, 4) Hearing the Whole, and 5) Other Qualities." The remainder of these excellent liner notes is devoted to a perceptible guide to the recordings and the musicians, complete with record label and number for each, with suggestions for further listening, complete with label and record number! My own fairly good collection is going to get better, and so can yours. Equally helpful is the lengthy bibliography of works on Jazz and the Blues at the end of

the booklet.

Allow me to offer a suggestion for those with little experience of "pre-stereo", "pre-CD", and "pre-LP" recordings. By starting with the more recent recordings and working back to the acoustic takes, we can attune our ears to the lack of fidelity and the two dimensional sound of early electrical 78s. Reaching further back, we shall then be able to hear some music from the pinpoint of tinny sound from the acoustic recordings. Is it worth trying to make "amusical" sound bearable? I think it is, if we really want to learn from whence Jazz and the Blues' greatest exponents arose. It is an essential discipline if we don't want to miss the only extant evidence of the musical thought and expression that guided successive generations of Jazz and Blues artists, who in turn guided and inspired the music of our times. Take away the earliest Blues and Jazz, Rhythm & Blues, Rock, Heavy Metal, perhaps even Reggae and Rap would not exist as we know them. All modern musical forms, including contemporary "Classical", have been shaped, at least in part, in response to these antecedents. Does this sound pedantic, academic, or dry?

Well, awaiting us in these ancient, often noisy record grooves is an exhilarating, inventive new music full of vitality and freedom of expression. Despite constant commercial considerations, these artists fueled a new, exciting music that made bearable and joyous some of the grimmest periods in modern history and human experience. These musicians were not indifferent to popular trends and commercial demand. Yes, they did want to "make the big time", but they also defined and gave expression to "the Roaring Twenties" and the "Jazz Age". They bespoke the longings and pathos of the Great Depression, while offering relief. They cheered the grim war years, giving hope of a better age. Many of these musical pioneers stretched and broke through centuries-old barriers of racial prejudice and class distinction. A large number of those who led the way died in obscure poverty and degradation. They gave their lives to a new musical form. Frequently these pioneers were the victims of the very lives they led as they blazed the way into a new, unexplored musical realm. Yes, I think we can gain something by overcoming our "need" for the "purest", "highest", "fidelity".

As in previous articles let's consider just a few artists who left an indelible imprint on

the fabric of Jazz and the Blues. For the sake of "getting into the music", we shall consider the more recent artists and then reflect on specific examples of their musical mentors and progenitors. This will help us get into the music, and become more attuned to limited fidelity as we work back to the earlier music. We shall consider four great artists and their antecedents: **I) Duke Ellington; II) Louis Armstrong; III) Ella Fitzgerald, and IV) Benny Goodman.** We shall conclude with a short bibliography of our own.

**I) Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington's** recording career began in 1926 and reached into the 1970s. He is sometimes criticized for relying too much on his standards from the Twenties through the Forties, such as: "Black and Tan Fantasy" and "Black Beauty" of 1927, "Admiration" and "Mood Indigo" of 1930, "Solitude" of 1933, and "Take the 'A' Train", "I Got It Bad (And That Ain't Good)", "Do Nothin' Till You Hear-From Me", "In A Mellotone", "Perdido", and "Cotton Tail", all dating from the Forties. Yes, Ellington returned to these standards throughout his career, but his recordings reveal a musician and composer writing for a tightly-knit group of virtuosos who drew from him an ever-evolving exploration of tonalities, rhythms, structures, and modes of expression that pushed the musical limits of a new art form. The same songs were never the same. My own mother and father, who heard Ellington live on a number of occasions attest to this fact, as indeed do his recordings. Ellington's music is filled with passion, depth, not a little humor, and an unrestrained joy in life and music rarely encountered. His greatness was always shared: with his colleagues and his public, whom he called, "My People". "Black and Tan Fantasy", or any other "ancient" standard was a different work each time it was played or recorded. As a composer, Ellington never rested on his laurels. He constantly grew, searching for a new musical language. It is revealing that his autobiography is entitled, *Music Is My Mistress*. Ellington touched thousands of musicians and millions of listeners over a period of more than fifty years. Here is an incomplete discography that should give hours, and years, of pleasure:

*Duke Ellington: The Beginning, 1926-1928* (The Kentucky Club period), on **Decca DL 79224** (unfortunately not well rechanneled for stereo).

*Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, 1928-1933* (The Cotton Club period), **Archive**

of Jazz 101 571.

*Take The "A" Train, 1940-1942, Camden Quintessence QJ 25331 Mono.*

*The Carnegie Hall Concerts, Jan. 1943, Prestige P-34004 (3 LPs); Dec. 1944, Prestige P-24073 (2 LPs); Jan. 4, 1946, Prestige P-24074 (2 LPs); Dec. 1947, Prestige P-24075 (2 LPs).*

*Ellington At Newport, July 7, 1956, Columbia CL 934.*

*Such Sweet Thunder, 1957 (Incidental Music for the Stratford, Ontario Shakespeare Festival), Columbia CL 1033.*

*Ellington Indigos, 1957, Columbia CS 8053.*

*Newport, July 3, 1958, Columbia CL 1245.*

*Billy Strayhorn (Ellington Co-composer & Co-arranger), 1958, I Grandi del Jazz GdJ-23/338582.*

*At The Bal Masque, Columbia Limited Edition Rerelease LE 1007.*

*Unknown Session, July 1960, Columbia 35342.*

*The Symphonic Ellington. 1963, Reprise R9-6097.*

*The Popular Ellington, 1966, RCA LSP-3576.*

*New Orleans Suite, 1970, Atlantic SD 1580.*

Please also see joint listing below under Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald Discographies.

In his high school years Ellington gained some local fame through four numbers that he had written, but he was limited. Later he wrote, "I was getting so big that I had to study some music to protect my reputation...I used to slow down James P. Johnson piano rolls and copy them note for note." (liner notes from first album.) In fact, Ellington was egged on by local Washington, D.C. fans to follow James P. Johnson in playing Johnson's "Carolina Shout". Locals held for the "home town boy", yet from then on young Ellington and Johnson were fast friends.

Everything that follows on James P. Johnson, "The Father of Stride Piano", whether in or out of quotes, is drawn from record liner notes and Gunther Schuller's excellent book, *Early Jazz, Its Roots and Musical Development*:

*"James P. Johnson's greatest contribution was to recast the rhythms of ragtime into a more swinging, steadier jazz beat. To implement this he had a steady, rocking left hand providing a reliable rhythmic substructure. But even at its stridingest, his left hand*

*added a flow and forward movement that none of the earlier players had. Johnson had assimilated the blues, an integrative element in the transition from ragtime to Jazz. Further, he added 'classical' pianistic precision, correct fingerings, well-balanced chords, digital virtuosity. By superimposing the vocal, linear feeling of the Blues on the piano, James P. made an important break with the past and changed the piano into an expressive instrument...Even in Johnson's earliest recording, 'Harlem Strut',...one can hear the new flow of the music...The composition itself was more 2/4 ragtime than 4/4 jazz...but the smoothness of the right hand runs, the more relaxed flow of the left — in other words, the whole 'horizontalization' of the music — represented at the time a new direction in jazz piano. His first cuts on Okeh, 'Keep Off the Grass' and 'Carolina Shout', were acid tests of virtuosity for the young Ellington, 'Fats' Waller, and Willie 'The Lion' Smith. More involved with rhythmic development than melodic content, Johnson truly prefigures Ellington, Count Basie, and, yes, even Thelonious Monk.*

*"Johnson's problem, was of course, that of all sensitive and honest musicians — the compromises he was prepared to make in the direction of commercial music were minimal and certainly insufficient to satisfy the demands of that market. As a result, without Johnson ever quite understanding it, both areas, the commercial and Jazz, began to pass him by...Like so many Jazz artists, Johnson had become the victim of advancing, changing tastes. Men like his disciple Fats Waller lasted longer by making large concessions to commercial demand and showmanship. Waller's most commercial offerings retain true musicianship and a deep sense of jazz." (Schuller, pages 213-225, excerpted & edited).*

Sadly, little of his music survives on record. My own collection is limited to two excellent LPs containing the same recordings in different order: *James P. Johnson: Father of Stride Piano, Columbia Monaural CL-1780* and *James P. Johnson, I Grandi del Jazz GdJ-85/328146*. Fourteen superb cuts also are to be found with James P. accompanying Bessie Smith in 1927, and 1929-1930: *Bessie Smith: Nobody's Blues But Mine, (2LPs) Columbia CG-31093 (2 cuts); Bessie Smith: The Empress, (2 LPs) Columbia CG-30818 (2 cuts); Bessie Smith: Any Woman's Blues, (2 LPs) Columbia CG-30126 (8 cuts); and Bessie Smith: The World's Greatest Blues Singer, (2 LPs) Columbia CG-23 (2 cuts).* The Schwann

2 Guide for Spring and Summer of 1979 also lists: *New York Jazz, Stinson 21; 1917-1921 Rare Piano Rolls, Biograph Vol. 1, 1003Q, and Vol. 2, 1009Q; Original James P. Johnson, Folkways 2850; and Yamekraw, Folkways 2842.* Elderly Instruments, 1100 North Washington, P.O. Box 14210, Lansing, Michigan 48901, (517) 372-7890 also lists: *James P. Johnson, 1928-31, SWAG 849; James P. Johnson, Father of the Stride Piano, Sounder 1204;* as well as the two Biograph piano roll records — and that is all that I've been able to find of this legendary pianist of the New York school. He was born in New Brunswick, N.J. in 1891 and he died in New York in 1955, all but forgotten.

As early as 1911 James P. Johnson heard Ferdinand La Menthe "Jelly Roll" Morton, the legendary and infamous pianist, gambler, pimp, and self-proclaimed inventor of Jazz. Morton may very well have been the first true composer of Jazz music. His influence was pervasive, even if it was to create negative reaction due to his braggadocio and tendency to pack a knife and an occasional pistol. He came from a genuinely rough school of music — the bordellos of New Orleans' fabled Storyville. The Morton takes on the *Smithsonian Collection* are excellent; but they only hint at his greatness as a pianist, band leader and composer.

Unlike Johnson, Morton was largely ignored, or, it is not a little unlikely that he was unacknowledged. Ellington had no use for him, though there does seem to be something of Morton's freedom as a composer and his sense of balance and swing that shows in the early Ellington. In 1938 Morton recorded extensively for the Library of Congress. These sessions can be found in eight volumes on the *Swag Label, Numbers: 1311, 1312, 1313, 1314, 1315, 1316, 1317, and 1318.* Elderly Instruments has carried them, and may still. Also, do not miss: *Jelly Rolly Morton. 1923-1926, Milestones of Jazz MIL 47018 (2 LPs).* *The Commodore New Orleans Memories on Atlantic SD-308 and Commodore New Orleans Memories, Plus Two on Commodore (CBS) XFL 14942* contain his last commercial recordings. On these LPs, the band cuts show the influence of the early Swing Years, while Jelly Roll's solo piano cuts are pure early New Orleans. *Jelly Roll Morton, II Grandi del Jazz GdJ-66/298042* contains ten cuts from 1926-1930 and five cuts from 1939.



## LICORICE PIZZAS AND CHROME DOUGHNUTS

"Jelly Roll" Morton was perceptive and deeply individualistic in his use of the New Orleans style. His sense of swing may well have been a personal development. His piano style followed his polyphonic approach to band arrangements, in which he could use eight instruments both as unaccompanied voices and as contrasting units. Morton's was a singular talent, which sadly led to no direct group of disciples. A fairly large number of opposing musicians who reacted to him and his attitudes *do* seem to show some of his influence. He died in near poverty in Los Angeles, having lived from 1885 to 1941. He left a mark and influence all his own that spanned the age of Ragtime to the age of Swing.

Who were his mentors, when he was unlikely to admit having any? Curiously, Morton did give credit to Tony Jackson, a musician of far deeper "color" than he. Morton was a Creole who held darker-skinned musicians in disdain. Yet, according to Morton, Tony Jackson could, and did, play anything. He said the legendary Jackson was "the greatest single-handed entertainer in the world" — a statement widely confirmed by many of his contemporaries. Morton wrote "New Orleans

Blues", 1902 or 1903; "King Porter Stomp", circa 1902 or 1905, "Alabama Bound" and "Indian Blues", 1905, "Wolverines", 1906, and "Praline", later stolen and retitled "Tiger Rag" by the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band. It would seem Tony Jackson could play anything Morton wrote, along with everything else. And "Jelly Roll" Morton made the following distinction between Ragtime and Jazz: "Ragtime is a certain type of syncopation and only certain tunes can be played in that idea. But Jazz is a style that can be applied to any type of tune." Morton added that he started using the word "Jazz" in 1902, specifically to "show people the difference between Jazz and Ragtime"; and *he* could "jazz" anything. (Gunther Schuller, page 139).

"Jelly Roll" Morton learned his craft first by playing guitar and later, through Tony Jackson's influence, piano in the aforementioned houses of ill repute. Creole cornet player Freddie Keppard won Morton's respect. Unfortunately all that exists of Keppard's playing is found on rather commercial cuts from 1924, 1926-1927 on *Fredie Keppard, Smithsonian/CBS Columbia P-15141 R020* (2LPs). Among other major influences were the Storyville brothel

"Professors" (pianists) Sammy Davis, Alfred Wilson, Albert Cahill, Frank Amacker, and, primarily, Tony Jackson. Morton also went to Saint Louis and lived for a while with the great Scott Joplin. Morton demonstrates the difference between Ragtime and Jazz in his playing of "The Maple Leaf Rag", on the *Smithsonian Collection*.

Joplin only recorded via the horrible limitations of the piano roll, which cannot record dynamics, nuances of touch or shading or rhythm. Each note is struck mechanically, with the same pressure as every other note (truly, the first form of digital recording). To hear Scott Joplin's work to good effect I recommend Joshua Rifkin's excellent three volume: *Scott Joplin Piano Rags, Nonesuch H-71238, H-71264, and H-71305*. For Band arrangements I love the New England Conservatory Ragtime Ensemble's *Scott Joplin: The Red Back Book, Angel/EMI S-36060, and Angel 45 R.P.M. SS-45029*.

II) **Louis Armstrong** is, in my estimation, the greatest single jazz personality of classic Jazz. From his beginnings in New Orleans and his recording debut with Joe



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"King" Oliver, to his more commercial and popular work, "Satchmo" remained true to his art. His unique virtuosity and individual creativity helped define Jazz. He set the standard for every cornet and trumpet player since. Wynton Marsalis has said that "Pops" (Armstrong) was able to get notes and dynamics from his "horn" that bordered on the impossible. Volumes could be written about this towering personality. Instead, I prefer to let him speak for himself through his "horn". Single and double asterisks denote albums that just should not be missed, and albums of landmark importance, respectively.

\* *King Oliver*, 1923 sessions, **I Grandi del Jazz GdJ 65/298034**, (Louis's earliest acoustic recordings: great music, but no fidelity).

\* *King Oliver: West End Blues*, 1923 sessions, **CBS 63 610**, (more of Louis's great early recordings).

\* *King Oliver and His Orchestra*, 1923 sessions, **Epic Jazz Series LA 16003**, (the last of Louis's recordings with "King" Oliver).

*Louis Armstrong 1. Young Louis "The Side Man" (1924-1927)*, **MCA-1301**, (Louis accompanying and soloing in popular bands on acoustic cuts).

\*\* *The Louis Armstrong Story, Vol. 1. Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five*, **Columbia CL 851**, (the first of Louis's

monumental independent group recordings).

\*\* *The Louis Armstrong Story Vol. 2, Louis Armstrong and His Hot Seven*, **Columbia CL 852**, (superb, beyond verbal description!).

\*\* *The Louis Armstrong Story, Vol. 3, Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines*, **Columbia CL 853**, (two giants team up to record imperishable joy, with remarkable fidelity for 1928).

\* *The Louis Armstrong Story, Vol. 4, Louis Armstrong Favorites*, **Columbia CL 854**, (commercial, but excellent).

\*\* *The Genius of Louis Armstrong, Vol. 1: 1923-1933 (The John Hammond Collection)*, **Columbia G 30416**, (a survey of the early years).

\* *"Satchmo:" Louis Armstrong (1900-1971)*, **Columbia C# 10404**, (a "greatest hits" entry with some great music).

\*\* *Bessie Smith: The Empress*, **Columbia CG 30818**, contains: "St. Louis Blues" (perhaps the slowest, meanest tempo ever recorded of W.C. Handy's masterpiece), "Reckless Blues", "Sobbin' Hearted Blues", "Cold in Hand Blues", "You've Been a Good Old Wagon", "Nashville Woman's Blues" (they really are "in the groove" on this one).

\*\* *Bessie Smith: Nobody's Blues But Mine*, **Columbia CG 31093** contains: "Careless Love Blues" (the bluest of the blues with both artists displaying consum-

mate mastery and unity), "J.C. Holmes Blues" (low down and together), and "I Ain't Goin' Play No Second Fiddle" (we'd better believe it!).

\* *Young Louis Armstrong, 1932-1933 Bluebird*, **RCA AXMZ-551**, (young, commercial, and great!).

\*\* *Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, Recording Together For the First Time;* and *The Great Reunion*, **Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, Original Master Recording MFSL 2-155 (2 LPs)** is an all-time great meeting of two of the preeminent masters of Jazz.

See also Louis's work with Ella Fitzgerald below.

Louis's mentor, Joe "King" Oliver, was born in 1885, spending his youth and early adulthood in New Orleans. He played in various parade and touring bands. He led bands in San Francisco and Oakland, California during World War I, taking part in originating the "San Francisco style". He returned East to Chicago in 1922 to form his own band of hand-picked New Orleans musicians, including Louis Armstrong, who arrived in 1923, in time for King Oliver's first recordings.

The three LPs listed above reveal as Gunther Schuller suggests: "*Oliver's highly disciplined, very personal and strict interpretation of what the New Orleans style meant to him. The extraordinary unity of the Creole Jazz Band was exacted at the price of renouncing all stylistic progress. It represents the New Orleans style's last ditch stand before the world and at the same time its finest full flowering... The glory of the Creole Jazz Band is that it sums up — in Oliver's somewhat personal terms, to be sure, — all that went into the New Orleans way of making music: its joy, its warmth of expression, its Old World pre-war charm, its polyphonic complexity, its easy relaxed swing, as heady as a hot summer night in New Orleans, its lovely instrumental textures, and its disciplined logic.*" (Schuller, page 77).

By 1937 Oliver was out of work and opened a fruit stand in Savannah, Georgia. Finally he was reduced to sweeping out a pool room. He died in obscurity and poverty in 1938, leaving behind compositions such as "Dippermouth Blues", "Canal

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Street Blues", and "Dr. Jazz".

Add to the above discography the following albums to round out your collection of Armstrong's great mentor, who personally heard, and possibly played with, the legendary and never-recorded Buddy Bolden.

*King Oliver: "Papa Joe", 1926-1928, Decca Records DL 79246 (fake stereo).*

*King Oliver in New York, 1929-1930, RCA LPV-529.*

*The King Oliver Collection, De Ja Vu DVLP 2085.*

III) If ever there was a vocalist whose singing borders on the perfect, we need look no further than **Ella Fitzgerald**. I like to put it this way: Ella Fitzgerald's voice should almost be registered as a controlled substance! Or, to quote Martin Williams from the *Smithsonian Collection* liner notes:

*"Ella Fitzgerald...is a singer's singer. Her control is sure, her notes are clear, her pitch is precise. Her range isn't wide but her voice has body, perhaps as much body as a popular singer is entitled to. Her rhythm is impeccable. And she swings...She can improvise and her final chorus or so may give impressions of a gleeful abandon...Hers is the stuff of joy, a joy that is profound and ever replenished — perhaps from the self-discovery that, for all her equipment as a singer's singer, she is absolutely incapable of holding anything back."*

This analysis is borne out in Ella's monumental American popular composers *Song Book* series from the late Fifties and early Sixties. One other invaluable observation about her singing is in the liner notes of the *Harold Arlen Songbook* album:

*"Despite her flawless technique and the huge span of her powers of interpretation, Ella in the Song Books uses herself as she might a musical instrument, so that while the voice itself is eloquent, the human behind it becomes quite self-effacing. This is the great paradox in the interpretation of a worthy popular song. By acknowledging that in this series it is the musical material which is the star of the show, Ella has produced album after album to delight the connoisseur of light verse with music."* (Benny

Green, *The Observer*, London).

I'm in complete agreement with Mr. Green until he starts pandering to snobbery by appealing to "connoisseurs of light verse with music". For me, and I hope for you, Ella Fitzgerald's complete artistry and humanity span and eliminate all musical and social categories. She is one singer who cannot be fenced in with distinctions or boxed with labels. Consider and search out the following recordings to experience the magic of this great artist.

*The Best Years of Ella Fitzgerald, 1936-1939, Historia H-620.*

*The Cole Porter Song Book, 1956, Verve VE 2-2511 or Verve 823 278-1Y2.*

*The Rodgers and Hart Song Book, Verve VE 2591 or Verve 821 693-1.*

*The Special Magic of Ella and Louis, 1956, Verve 2304 277.*

*Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, 1957, I Grand del Jazz*

*Jazz Special 02/328385.*

*Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong: George Gershwin — "Porgy and Bess", 1957, Verve V-6-4011-2 or Verve VE 2-2507.*

*The Duke Ellington Song Book, 1957, Verve V 4008-2 or Verve VE-2-2535.*

*The Duke Ellington Songbook, Volume 2, 1956-57, Verve VE 2519 or Verve 821 693-1.*

*The Johnny Mercer Song Book, Verve 823 247-1.*

*The Irving Berlin Song Book, 1958, Verve 829 533-1.*

*The George and Ira Gershwin Song Book, Verve VE 2-2525 or Verve 823279 4Y-1.*

*The Harold Arlen Song Book, Verve V-4046-2.*

*The Jerome Kern Song Book, Verve V6 4060.*

*Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington: The Stockholm Concert, 1966, Pablo Live 2308-242.*

*Ella At Duke's Place, Verve V6-4070.*

*Ella and Duke at the Cote D'Azur, 1966, Verve V6-4072-2.*

*Ella at Carnegie Hall (Newport in New York), 1973, Columbia 2-Col. PG-32557.*

*Ella in London, Pablo 2310751 or 2310711.*

*Mack the Knife: Ella in Berlin, 1960, Verve 64041.*

*Ella at Montreux '75, Pablo 2310751.*

*Ella at Montreux '77, Pablo 2308 206.*

*Ella and Count Basie - A Perfect Match, 1979, Pablo T. D2312 110.*

*Ella and Joe Pass: Take Love Easy, Pablo 2310702.*

*Ella and Joe Pass: Again, Pablo 2310772.*

*Ella and Oscar Peterson, Pablo 2310759.*



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*These Are The Blues*, 1963, **Pablo 2332 083**.

*Sunshine of Your Love*, 1968, **MPS 15250**.

As to Ella Fitzgerald's earliest recorded work with Chick Webb, her material was very commercial, and much in the style of Connie Boswell. Yet, there is something more, despite the material. Several jazz writers cite the influences of Ethel Waters, whose recordings I have yet to search out. A few suggest the influence, at least as to vocal awareness and sensitivity, of Billie Holiday. I encourage you to decide for yourself. A good introduction to Holiday's work is *The History of the Real Billie Holiday*, **Verve 2 V6S-8816**. A small group, including Gunther Schuller, suggest that Ella is indebted to Bessie Smith "for much of her style and vocal quality. During many a phrase on (the) 1925 Bessie Smith recordings we are impelled to think ahead to Ella." (Schuller, page 237, footnote).

Rather than trying to sort out questions of Ella Fitzgerald's direct or indirect mentors, let's take a cue from Schuller and consider her greatest predecessor, Bessie Smith. From Bessie we can reach back to the very roots of the Blues.

Bessie Smith was the first monumental urban Blues and Jazz vocalist. She drew from her musical heritage. "The Blues before her time...was a vast field encompassing a wide range of folk material — work songs, field hollers, spirituals, and shouts — mostly sung by (unknown every day people)...Second, the Blues was originally an area quite separate from Ragtime and early Jazz... (which) met mostly in the vaudeville-minstrel shows and carnivals around the turn of the century, and here a part of the classic blues tradition was worked out by professional singer-entertainers, of which the first important one was Gertrude Malissa Nix "Ma" Rainey." (Schuller, page 226).

The following excerpted quotes from George Avakian's liner notes for Columbia's short four volume, four LP set tell Bessie Smith's story succinctly:

*"Bessie Smith was born...in crushing poverty in Chattanooga, Tennessee — when, even she never knew;...historians have placed the year as 1895 or 1896 (some evidence suggests April 15, 1895)... (She)...got her first break when the great Gertrude Malissa Nix Rainey herself heard young Bessie (circa 1912). Ma Rainey...took the young girl on*

*the road with the (Rabbit Foot Minstrels) show and taught Bessie how to use that magnificent voice...She served a long apprenticeship with...small time traveling tent shows...Columbia's Frank Walker...heard Bessie...in an obscure honky-tonk in Selma, Alabama (circa 1918-20)... 'She was just 17 or 18 (he thought she was born in 1900). I had never heard anything like the torture and torment she put into the music of her people. It was the Blues, and she meant it.'*

*"A mistress of vocal inflection and an artist of impeccable taste, Bessie was also blessed with a huge, sweeping voice which combined strength and even harshness with an irresistible natural beauty. She could cut loose when she wanted to, but was capable of the tenderest nuances. Every note she sang had in its interpretation the history and heritage of her people...Her style and individuality always remained, no matter what the circumstances.*

*"Bessie's control of her voice was without parallel; a subtle accent in one syllable could convey the entire meaning of a line. Her sense of pitch was as dramatic as it was accurate. She could hit a note on the nose if she wanted to, but she could also dip, glide, and 'bend' a note to express her feelings. In short, she combined a prodigious technique with the finest elements of folk art.*

*"Bessie was a large, handsome woman; she was 5'9", and though she weighed 210 pounds in her prime, almost all of it was solid bone and muscle. Her appetites were as prodigious as the strength of her voice and body. She drank to excess in her youth, and increased in her capacity as she rose to fame.*

*"To understand Bessie Smith one must recognize that her personality was a strange mixture of contrasts. She was literally two people. One was gentle, tender, sentimental, and as full of pity and compassion as one would expect from the vastness and depth of the emotion with which she sang the songs of her people. The other was tough, aggressive, egocentric, with the violence that was suggested in her enormous and powerful frame."*

The music of this tender and sometimes terrifying woman of mastery is not to be missed!

**Bessie Smith, 1924-1928, I Grandi del Jazz, GdJ 70/298083.**

*The Bessie Smith Story. Vol. 1, 1923-1925 (including all of the Louis Armstrong cuts), Columbia CL 855.*

*The Bessie Smith Story, Vol. 2, 1924-1933, Columbia CL 856.*

*The Bessie Smith Story, Vol. 3, 1925-1927, Columbia CL 857.*

*The Bessie Smith Story, Vol. 4, 1927-1931, (includes 6 James P. Johnson cuts), Columbia CL 858.*

*Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway Film Sound Tracks, (cut 1, June 1929 Bessie Smith film clip), Biograph BLP-M-3.*

*Bessie Smith: The World's Greatest Blues Singer, Feb.-June 1922 & April 1930-Nov. 1933, Columbia CG 33.*

*Bessie Smith: Any Woman's Blues, Sept. 1923-Jan. 1924 & May 1929-March 1930, Columbia CG 30126.*

*Bessie Smith: Empty Bed Blues, April 1924-Sept. 1924 & Feb. 1928-Aug. 1928, Columbia CG 30450.*

*Bessie Smith: The Empress, Dec. 1924-May 1925 & March 1927-Feb. 1928, Columbia CG 30818.*

*Bessie Smith: Nobody's Blues But Mine, May 1925-March 1926 & March 1926-March 1927, Columbia CG 31093.*

Most of "Ma" Rainey's recordings border on being unlistenable, except to those of us who just *have* to hear the voice of the mentor who brought forth the miracle of Bessie Smith. "Ma" didn't begin recording until 1923 (Bessie began in 1922). Almost all of her recordings are of inferior acoustic "fidelity". Advertising claims of electrical recording caused wags to suggest, "Yes, they switch on one electric light bulb over the record cutter!" Still, "Ma's" voice prefigures Bessie's, and gives us a hint of the musical traditions that preceded her. Only the **Milestone** double album is really worth buying, unless you are a bit of a fanatic about "getting to the roots" — like me.

*Gertrude "Ma" Rainey: Queen of the Blues, (her 1st 16 record sides), Dec. 1923-March 1924, Biograph BLP-12032.*

*Oh My Baby Blues: Ma Rainey & Her Georgia Jazz Band, 1924-1928, Biograph BLP 12011 Volume II.*

*Blues the World Forgot: Ma Rainey & Her Georgia Jazz Band, 1924-1928, Biograph BLP 12001.*

*Ma Rainey, Oct 1924-Sept. 1928, (2 LPs) Milestone M-47021.*

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, 1924-1928, Yazoo 1071.*

To get a sense of the early blues that surrounded Bessie Smith and "Ma" Rainey in their youths, we should consider the tradition that reaches far back into African-American culture. That tradition is often called, "Primitive Blues". "Primitive Blues" is the blues music that was created by often

anonymous folk or, on rare occasions, individuals who sang from personal experience, which was often harsh and oppressive. Generally the best instrument available to their limited means was the guitar, often homemade or at best, second-hand. To get a sense of this type of music that pervaded the life and times of both "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, there are three or four modern examples. Columbia's two LPs of Robert Johnson's offer complete recordings of his own Primitive Blues from three sessions. He made these recordings in his late teens. Again excerpted liner notes best tell the story:

*"Robert Johnson appeared and disappeared in much the same fashion as a sheet of newspaper twisting and twirling down a dark, windy, midnight street. First, in 1936, he was brought to a makeshift recording studio in a San Antonio hotel room. A year later, he was recording in the back of a Dallas office building. Then he was gone, dead before he reached his twenty-first birthday, poisoned by a jealous girl friend.*

*"Robert Johnson sang Primitive Blues about women. His references were earthy and thinly disguised. He lived the life he sang about and which ultimately killed him. He was not unique in that respect. We can point to Sonny Boy Williamson, who was stabbed to death with an ice pick, or Charlie Christian,...Jimmy Blanton, Billie Holiday, Bunny Berigan, Fats Waller and many other jazz immortals whose lives were snuffed out prematurely. They all died because they did not eat or sleep, because their systems couldn't weather physical adversities, and, often because they were Negroes and unable to get proper medical care."*

Robert Johnson's life, about which he sang, began and was spent on a plantation near Robinsville, Mississippi:

*"American Record Corporation's salesman Ernie Oertle, who had heard about Johnson, brought him to A.R.C.'s recording engineer Don Law, fresh from the plantation. Don Law remembers him as slender, handsome, of medium height, with beautiful hands and a remarkable ability to project while he was singing or playing guitar.*

*"Law also recalls that Johnson was an extremely shy young man. Law asked him to play guitar for a group of Mexican musicians gathered in a hotel room where the recording equipment had been set up. Embarrassed and suffering from a bad case of stage fright, Johnson turned his face to the wall...Eventually, he calmed down sufficiently to play, but he never faced his audience." (Edited liner notes.) He likely travelled from Mississippi to his second recording session by "riding the blinds" (hopping freight trains, riding in vacant cars or slung from the truss rods beneath them).*

Johnson's is a music of the tormented life of a young, eerie genius who sings in a tradition both ancient and unmistakably current. He was a product of rural blues tradition that surrounded most of the early greats of the Blues and Jazz. To hear him seek out:

**Robert Johnson — King of the Delta Blues Singers, (1936 cuts), Columbia CL 1654.**  
**Robert Johnson — King of the Delta Blues Singers, Vol. II, (1937 cuts), Columbia 30034.**

Three other classic examples of the Primitive Blues tradition are: the 1926-1929 acoustic recordings of Blind Lemon Jefferson, about whom nothing is known other

than he did record; Mississippi John Hurt, who was "rediscovered" in the 1960s; and the justly-famous Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. Representative recordings include:

**Blind Lemon Jefferson — Early Blues, 1924-1929, Olympic 7134.**  
**Mississippi John Hurt: Satisfied, Quicksilver QS 5007.**  
**Mississippi John Hurt: Candy Man, Quicksilver QS 5042.**  
**Brownie & Sonny, Everest Archive of Folk & Jazz Music FS-242.**

There is a wealth of Primitive Blues, from a variety of sub-traditions, available on record. Elderly Instruments, listed above with their address and phone number, is an excellent source. Attention should also be given to the heritage of the African-American church's musical tradition that inspired Gospel as well as much of the Blues.

IV) This last section may cause some consternation — among those who have been hanging on, in hopes of reading about their own favorite artists, and also because I shall suggest some influences not generally considered.

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on Columbia rerelease OSL-160, we are going to reach back quickly to a very few early white Jazz greats. Goodman is due far more space than I can give for his contributions to popular music and Jazz. He took more than a little heat for racially integrating his bands. He brought the popular music of his time into the hallowed precincts of Carnegie Hall, and he set the tone of the late Thirties and early Forties. The *Carnegie Hall Concert* recording was made with a single microphone suspended over center stage. On hand that night was one of the most remarkable collections of musicians ever to be gathered in one place. The results are electrifying and should not be missed by anyone with the slightest preference for Jazz. Many of Goodman's recordings deserve mention and analysis, but I am going to leave it at that (I told you some of you would be upset!).

Born in 1909, Goodman had the extreme good fortune to come from a Chicago family that did not discourage his passion for music. Music studies began at age ten in his local synagogue. He took up the clarinet at Hull House under Johnny Sylvester at age twelve, and joined the musicians union at age thirteen. During the early Twenties he played in bands with local talents such as Jimmy McPartland, Dave Tough, and Art Hodges. In 1923, while playing on excursion steamers cruising the Great Lakes, he had his first meeting with the legendary "Bix" Beiderbecke. The clean, lyric style and easy swing of Goodman's clarinet bespeaks many influences, including the musical heritage of his own Jewish background. His style also bespeaks a major impact from Beiderbecke's own remarkable artistry — and it is to "the young man with the horn", Bix Beiderbecke, that I am devoting the remainder of this article.

Leon Bix Beiderbecke, (baptized Bix and not Bismarck, despite conflicting reports), was born March 10, 1903 and died August 6, 1931 in Queens, N.Y. of pneumonia aggravated by heat prostration, poor nutrition, and the ravages of alcoholism. At age three he began practicing piano, and at fourteen he came to the cornet, which for the first eight years he played left-handed. Also, being self-taught he used all three valves equally, rather than emphasizing the first two, as is normal practice. In his youth he heard Jazz on the dance band riverboats that put into Davenport, Iowa. He may have heard Louis Armstrong at this time, though the point is much debated. Bix was made a legend by his ex-

traordinary artistry, short and somewhat reclusive life (he was apparently painfully shy, only coming into his own behind his cornet), and because of the rough and tumble life of jazz musicians in the "Roaring Twenties". He dropped out of Lake Forest Academy to pursue a musical life, centering in Chicago as well as Ohio and Indiana, where Hoagy Carmichael first heard him. Carmichael recounts:

"I could feel my hands trying to shake and getting cold when I saw Bix get out his horn. Boy he took it!...Just four notes...but didn't he blow them — he hit 'em like a mallet hits a chime — and his tone, the richness...I got up from the piano and staggered over and fell on the davenport." Carmichael also recounts being with Bix and banjo player Bob Gillette in 1923 when they heard Joe "King" Oliver's band in Chicago: "The King featured two trumpets (*sic*, actually cornets), a piano, a bass fiddle and a clarinet...a big black fellow (then)...slashed into 'Bugle Call Rag.'...I dropped my cigarette and gulped my drink. Bix was on his feet, his eyes popping. For taking the first chorus was that second trumpet, Louis Armstrong. Louis was taking it fast. Bob Gillette slid off his chair and under the table...Every note Louis hit was perfection." Over twenty years later Carmichael compared them: "Bix's breaks were not as wild as Armstrong's, but they were hot, and he selected each note with musical care." (Carmichael quotes from Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*, pages 175-6.)

Despite the fact that Hoagy Carmichael and his friends seem to have had more trouble with their furniture than their music, he made some valid points. Bix Beiderbecke deeply admired Louis Armstrong's playing, though he refrained from copying it. Bix had little experience of the Blues. He was a white musician who came to Jazz through the records of white cornet player Nick Larocca's Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and through exposure to New Orleans bands that played on the river boats. Gunther Schuller writes very well on this comparison, beginning with Bix:

"His beautiful golden tone...stands out as a unique attribute, not equaled even by Armstrong. Bix's tone had a lovely unhurried quality, perfectly centered, with natural breath support and a relaxed vibrato. Here, in fact, Bix showed his independence from Armstrong. Comparing the two, we note the extra daring in Louis's solos, the almost uncontrollable drive, the rhythmic tension — in short, playing in which all technical

matters are subservient to the expansion of an instrumental conception, to the exploration of new musical ideas. By comparison, Bix was a conservative. His ideas and techniques combined into a perfect equation, in that the demands of the former never exceeded the potential of the latter. His sense of time...was...essentially uncomplicated, but within its limitations he was almost flawless. He showed a sure attack and a natural feeling for swing. Thus each tone, apart from its rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic relationships, was a thing of beauty: an attack perfectly timed and initiated, followed by a pure, mellow cornet timbre.

"Bix had a quality extremely rare in early jazz: lyricism..., it was a consistent element in his playing. Indeed, it was linked to his one limitation, an inability to break out of the conservative expressive framework of his style. Bix set his expressive sights much lower than Armstrong. He was content not to explore further; perhaps he was emotionally unable to push beyond his most immediate inclinations. I think we see here an analogy to certain aspects of his personal life, of which his biographers and fans have made a mystique. I refer to Bix's somewhat shy and restrained relationship to women, his need for security manifested in joining the Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman orchestras, and his vague desires to come to terms with "classical" music. In one way or another these are parallel symptoms of a man who could not let himself go emotionally, a man in whom a conservative discipline acted as a restraining lid or, as George Avakian has put it, 'it's like capping a geyser'. His tone received both its beauty and its cool reserve from the personality traits. An outburst such as the exuberant rip on 'Singin' the Blues,' very common in Armstrong's playing, is rare with Beiderbecke." (Schuller, pages 188-189.)

In his liner notes for Bix's 1924 *Wolverines* recordings, Max Harrison adds an important dimension for our understanding:

"The innovations which gave Beiderbecke's music its extraordinary impact were chiefly melodic and harmonic...every note is placed with hairs-breadth precision, no matter how unusual the melodic interval. He made every note beautiful not only in relation to its place in the linear contour, but also in itself, and this because of what must be one of the loveliest sounds anyone ever drew from a brass instrument. Ralph Berton, who heard Bix in 1924, said his pure rounded tone was 'like shooting bullets at a bell'...., yet he had no


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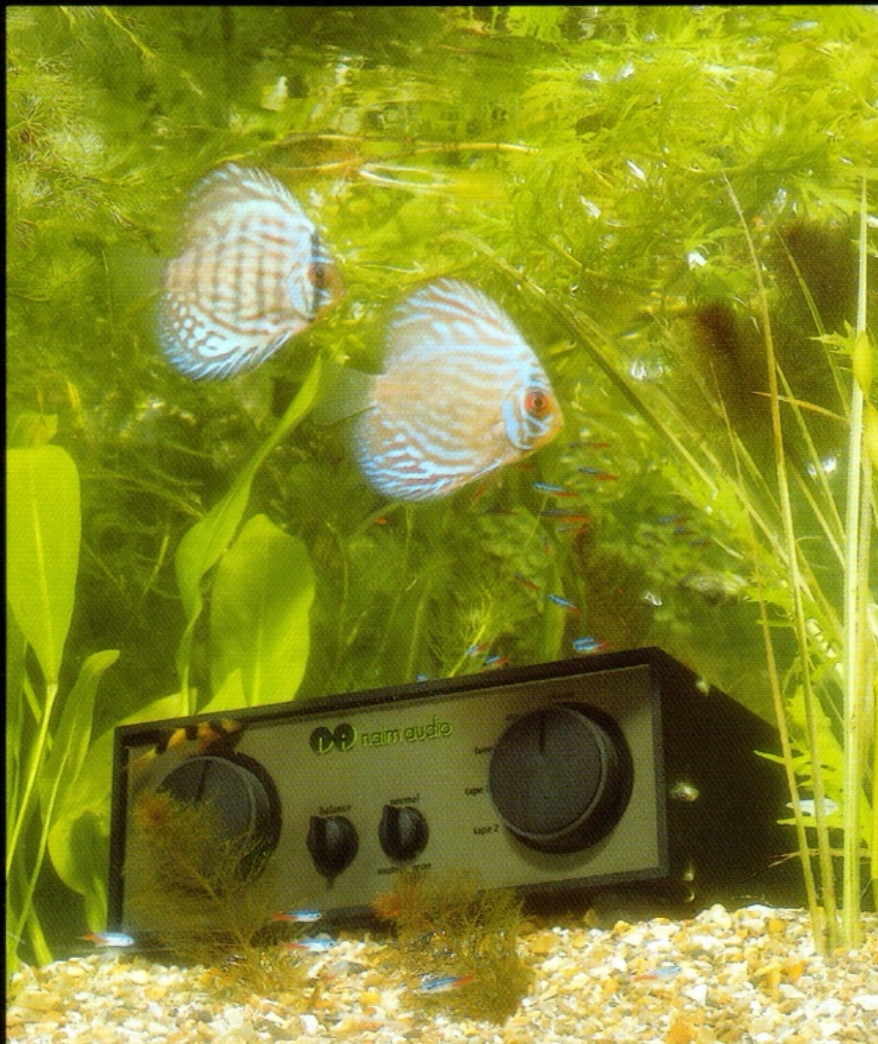
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need of the sharp attack of the trumpet to which most jazz cornetists switched during the 1920s (*Armstrong did just this*), because his musical ideals usually take us by stealth, through the power of his imagination.

"Sensuous qualities of tone are unique and personal, but with his harmonic innovations...Beiderbecke added grist to the mill of all later soloists (*the italics are mine*), for they were an aid to invention as distinct from embellishment. Indeed, greater harmonic awareness became essential to jazz as collective improvisation waned and the solo increased in importance, needing a larger chordal vocabulary upon which to draw. Like Ellington after him, Bix explored 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, and other chords not because they were modern..., but because he instinctively felt this was the sort of harmony jazz could use — nondeveloping, and able to enrich the music's immediate sensory impact. Again like Ellington, he rarely allowed such devices to weaken the momentum of line and rhythm, as lesser mortals did." (Max Harrison, liner notes to *Bix Beiderbecke and the Chicago Cornets*, Milestone M-47019.)

As Harrison goes on to point out, Beiderbecke intrigued fellow musicians and spurred on experimentation and the forward progress of Jazz. But, as the saying goes, "Now for the bad news." Bix Beiderbecke recorded some 240 record sides, but of them, approximately 180 of those sides were recorded with completely commercial organizations like Goldkette's and Whiteman's (the boy *did* have to make a living!). He made his first record in 1924, just before he turned twenty-one, and his last in 1930 at age twenty-seven — a year later, he was dead. He made good money swinging "all seven acres of Whiteman's concert band (sometimes including a young vocalist named Bing Crosby)!" (Marshall Stearns, page 201) Yet, that leaves around 60 sides of immortal Jazz! Avoid single albums not listed below, since they are invariably the commercial stuff. The following list is not easy to locate, but is entirely worth the effort.

*Bix Beiderbecke and the Chicago Cornets*, 1924 Gennett recordings of *The Wolverine Orchestra & Bix and His Rhythm Juglers*, (2 LPs) Milestone M-47019.

*Bix Beiderbecke*, 1924 Gennett *Wolverines* recordings, I Grandi del Jazz GdJ 71/298091.

*The Bix Beiderbecke Story, Vol. 1: Bix and His Gang*, 1927-1928 great Jazz cuts, Columbia CL 844.

*The Bix Beiderbecke Story, Vol. 2: Bix and Tram*, 1927-1928 immortal Bix Beiderbecke & Frankie Trumbauer sessions, Columbia CL845.

*The Bix Beiderbecke Story, Vol. 3: Whiteman Days*, 1928-1929 Paul Whiteman sessions, the best including Bing Crosby, Columbia CL 846.

*BIXOLOGY: Bix Beiderbecke 1924-1930*, 240 record sides of 78s — transcribed to 14 LPs, International Joker Production C 71/14, released 1981 in Italy.

This last album may never have been released in the U.S. — I learned of its existence on a visit in Canada. It was thoughtfully secured for me by the superb Toronto record store **Sam The Record Man**, 347 Yonge St., Toronto, Ontario M5B 1S3, (519) 977-4650. This 14 LP set cost a modest \$65.00 Canadian in 1983, and was special ordered from Italy and shipped UPS to me in the United States. It might be worth giving them a call, or paying a visit. Take lots of money; Sam's is a *complete* record store, staffed by people who know the music of the section in which they work! Also, word has it that a new Jazz-focused record store has opened in downtown Philadelphia on Second St. between Market and Chestnut. The **Princeton Record Exchange** remains my primary source for used records, and is always worth a visit.

One other note of importance for the collector of used records of Jazz and the Blues. These records generally have seen a lot of playing time! A bit over a year ago, I acquired a Nitty Gritty Pro 2 record cleaning machine. I know that its price tag is steep; there is no denying it. There is also no denying that used records *just have to be thoroughly cleaned*. This machine has been serving me very, very well. Replacement of cleaning pads and the capstan rubber roller is not too hard, though a steady hand and eye help. Patience is required to get the backing off of the cleaning pads without leaving paper on the adhesive, but the results are definitely worth it. This machine is built on the order of a railway locomotive. I also understand that VPI's machines are excellent. The difference in sound after cleaning is truly noticeable. The sound is more extended and detailed, as well as less noisy. This is particularly true on 78-sourced LPs.

Before closing, I *do* extend profound apologies to all of you whose particular Jazz and Blues favorites have been slighted and/or overlooked. I regret not having

time or space to have considered Earl "Fatha" Hines, Count Basie, and all the others in the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* who were missed.

Should you wish to read further, I refer you to the bibliography you will find at the back of the *Smithsonian* liner notes. The references for this article, beyond liner notes and personal knowledge, are as follows:

Chilton, John, *Who's Who of Jazz: Storyville to Swing Street* (an encyclopedia of artists), Time-Life Records Special Edition, 1978. Chilton Book Company, Philadelphia, 1972. Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. 72-188159.

Schuller, Gunther, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*, Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1968. ISBN 0-19-504043-0 (paperback).

Stearns, Marshall, *The Story of Jazz*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1956, Fifth Printing, 1967. Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. 56-8012.

Until next time, good searching and joyous listening! ■

COMING IN  
ISSUE FIFTEEN:

PART TWO  
OF ROB  
DOORACK'S  
HISTORY OF  
PUNK ROCK

# ARGYBARGY

## SPICA

I am sorry that you were so disappointed with the sound of our SC-30 speaker, in spite of its very good construction quality.

We do not experience the excessive brightness that you described; if anything, more of a hollowness. However, at \$399 per pair, the SC-30 does not get as intensive treatment in component tolerance matching as our other products do, so there is bound to be more unit-to-unit variations.

As you can imagine, designing a product in this price range is like trying to squeeze a quart out of a pint pot, and excruciating choices have to be made at every step of the way. In attempting to create a somewhat transparent-sounding system in a rectangular box, what normally is artful compromise becomes unconditional surrender...sigh.

So, I suppose your recommendation of our TC-50 over the SC-30 is a sensible one.

**John Bau**  
President, SPICA

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Thank you for reviewing the Model 1 and giving it your "Best Buy" rating. We are extremely proud of the Model 1, and the fact that you and other hi-fi magazines have recommended it.

While no two ears are alike, I agree with your very favorable comments on the soundstage, imaging, bass and overall smoothness. As a musician and recording engineer, I designed the Model 1 for tonal accuracy without any peaks that can make a speaker sound sexy.

Many buyers of the Model 1 use expensive High End amplification, and they have favorably compared the Model 1 with \$500 speakers. Of course, the final decision should always be made by the consumers in their own listening rooms. Dana Audio's 15 day trial period program gives buyers an opportunity to compare for themselves.

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Issue Four is in short supply.

Please address all back issue orders to:

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# The Black Box (In black and white)

A&R's Black Box is one of those products for which the review writes itself. A faultless product about which you can only say good things.

If you have an old (or not so old) CD player that is showing its backside in the presence of ever newer and better machinery; and it is equipped with a wired digital output (a phono socket makes things easy but is not essential) then take your player along to your nearest A&R stockist for a demonstration. Take your cheque book too - you are going to need it!

## WHICH COMPACT DISC?

In most applications involving middle price CD players, and in some cases even with expensive ones, the *Black Box* provides excellent (improved) bass and significantly tightens up stereo resolution and clarity, without any tendency to brightness or stridency. This elegant add-on appears to be conspicuously good value for money.

## HI-FI CHOICE

Anyone with a budget CD player having a digital output can now join the audiophile league for just \$649. No comparable extra expenditure on a complete CD player could effect anything like the changes the Black Box will bring.

## HI-FI ANSWERS

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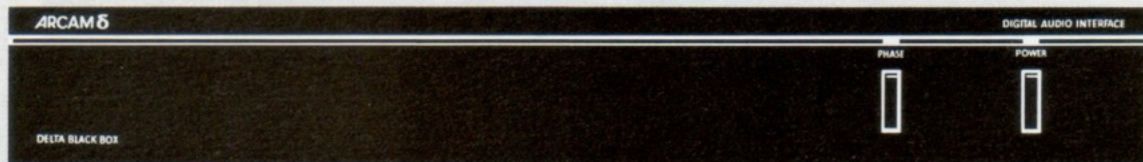
*As ever, our ultimate accolade goes to a product able to bring superior sound quality to a wider audience at an affordable price.*

Simple it may be but the Black Box points the way forward to the day when digital sources will be totally DAC-less. For the moment, it offers stunning upgrade potential at an affordable price.

## WHAT HI-FI? GRAND PRIX AWARD 1989

Arcam are to be heartily congratulated on the technical and subjective success of their proprietary Black Box, it represents real value for money engineering without any serious audible compromise. With its \$649 price tag, the Black Box cannot really fail; only if it were significantly more expensive would a complete CD player upgrade be worth considering as a viable alternative. As it stands, the Black Box will lift any digitally-equipped budget CD player into another league. If there is any justice left in the world, Arcam should sell this particular black magic box by the truckload.

## HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW



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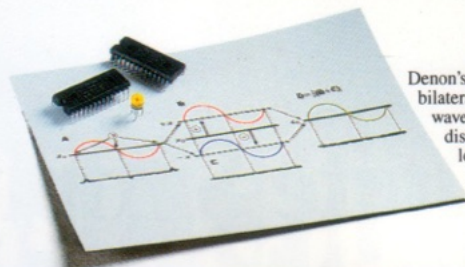
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Denon's LAMBDA processor bilaterally offsets the digital waveform to eliminate the distortion that occurs when low-level waveforms cross the zero line.

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Denons often sound better than current competitors' models. And why a leading hi-fi journal found that a moderately-priced Denon equalled or outperformed all others tested, including machines costing over \$1800.

What makes Denon CD players better? Perhaps it's that Denon performs every step in the music chain from recording artists through pressing CDs. And that Denon has concentrated on one thing and only one thing for 80 years.

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