Not Boring By Hifi Pig Hifi MUSIC CULTURE OPINION

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"The new Tellurium Q Black Mk II represents the best that I have heard from any mains cable that retails for under £1,000. once you have heard it I think you will know very quickly that you cannot go back to whatever was there before, and you will be really hearing what your system can achieve."

- Chris Kelly, The Ear

"The Statements stand alone....The Statements rewrite the book for cables and, at this very moment, as I write this review, completely stand alone in the market. In sonic terms, the Statement cables are breathtaking"

- Paul Rigby, The Audiophile Man















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INTRODUCTION TO THIS QUARTER'S NOT BORING BY HIFI PIG

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hen we launched HiFi PiG eleven years ago, we had no inkling that it would blossom into the extraordinary phenomenon it is today and we hope that we have been somewhat disruptive in the industry. In a landscape where imitation proliferates, it becomes increasingly crucial for us to stand apart and place the unmistakable stamp of our collective personality onto everything we do.

Bienvenue to Not Boring by HiFi PiG.

While HiFi and audio will always remain the core of what we do, we recognize that life encompasses more than just reviews and news about audio equipment. With this publication, we aim to introduce fresh content—topics we personally yearn to explore and that we hope will invigorate and captivate you. We also hope that it will pique the interest of some whose primary interests lie not in the world of HiFi and audiophilia.

In this quarter's edition, we explore and chat to Stratton Acoustics about their awe-inspiring new loudspeakers and the people behind this new UK brand of loudspeakers.

There's an introduction to the history of UK Hip Hop and also Drill which may be genres you are less familiar with and there's also an extensive exploration of Music Festivals in the 21st century that looks at what they have become in comparison to the spirit that gave birth to them back in the sixties.

We engage in an interesting and finally somewhat disturbing conversation with Chat GPT about music and art, a discussion that veers into the realm of bias on the part of Chat GPT and has us wondering whether the technology has a degree of predetermination with regards its answers.

"So you're Dead. Now what?" offers a thought-provoking exploration of life's existential questions, or rather it looks at the options your loved ones face when disposing of your lifeless corpse. It's more cheery than it sounds, honest!

And we have an exclusive interview with the legendary DJ mixer designer, Andy Rigby-Jones, tracing his remarkable journey and contributions to the industry.

Paris Street Art unveils the vibrant tapestry of urban creativity in the 13th arrondissement, while an interview with Charles White offers insights into the mind of this well-known graphic artist.

Alan McIntosh AKA Leader Tape, explores the wonders of open reel tape, and Terry Medalen asks if you will join him for a delightful rendezvous where cocktails and music intertwine.

John Scott gives a unique article on the North West Audio Show, or more accurately about his journey there and a bit about the stuff he saw at the show. Other show news will include Axpona and Munich High End.

We chat with Treble Clef Audio in an exclusive interview with the Danish brand.

And, last but not least, of course, expect a multitude of HiFi reviews that will satiate your audiophile cravings.

Oh, and there's even a horoscope! ENJOY!

LIFE'S TO SHORT FOR BORING - WELCOME TO NOT BORING BY HIFI PIG.

Stuart and Linette Smith





THIS ISSUE'S TEAM



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Hifi Pig is part of Big Pig Media LLP Partnership No OC397825









LINETTE SMITH is a self-confessed Old Skool raver who still shakes a glo stick to banging house and techno, though these days she goes to bed a lot earlier.

She has a penchant for bright colours and large loudspeakers, and if the loudspeakers are brightly coloured then so much the better.

She is a firm believer that life is way too short for boring HiFi.

Can often be found dancing in the kitchen while Stu is DJing, or chilling with the cats at HiFi PiG Towers. Lin loves travel, the beach in the winter and going to HiFi Shows around the world. She dislikes mansplainers and coconut. SARA VALLE-MARTINEZ is a London-based writer and journalist. She was born in Spain, where she started writing fiction when she was a kid. That somehow evolved into writing about real life and people. Sara's love for music started when she was a teen and she couldn't get enough of emo and pop punk.

You can probably find her at a live show, writing the next chapter of one of her novels while jamming to her favourite songs, or travelling (most of the time to catch a gig). She also loves dogs, supermarkets, the sea, tattoos, and how people's eyes light up when they talk about their passions.

JANINE ELLIOT is HiFi journalist but has also written on subjects as diverse as cars to tropical fish.

She has worked in the HiFi industry for a number of companies in research, design and writing of product manuals.

She spent 25 years at the BBC as a sound engineer and now teaches music in schools. As a musician she has played keyboards and guitar with a number of famous musicians and produced her own albums and music for film.

She is a keen collector of reel to reel machines and has an excellent knowledge of classic audio and HiFi.

THIS ISSUE'S TEAM







BAI IBRAHIM CHAM aka Rahim is a hip-hop head from The Gambia, smiling coast of west Africa.. Born and raised in the tropics, Rahim started his journey with music in the early 1990s. Inspired by the likes of Coolio, Snoop Dogg, Salt & Pepper and Method Man, Rahim formed his 1st rap group in 2001 called Cali Deep Roots before quitting rap and co-founding the Cypher in 2012, a hip hop platform that showcases young talents through its 5 elements.

Rahim served as the president of the cypher for 5 years while hosting the popular entertainment talk show TopNotch Convo on national television of The Gambia for six years. Rahim now lives in Edinburgh UK aiming to broaden his networks in the entertainment industry.

ALAN McINTOSH has been a fan of music for over 40 years and with a couple of decades behind the decks and more fiddling in a home studio, Alan is a self-confessed jazz addict, lover of electronica, prog rock and all in between as long as it's good!

Based in Glasgow , working in the global technology sector, Alan is passionate about travel, HiFi, vinyl, mountaineering and great single malt.

Over the last 5 years he's fallen hard in love with open reel tape and is increasingly immersed in splicing and rewinding tails out tape! When not writing about music he also blogs about mountaineering and the great outdoors.

JOHN SCOTT has had an interest in music and the things that play music for literally as long as he can remember.

Even at an early age he showed a precocious knack for HiFi tweakery, warming one of his mother's records (Walk Tall by Val Doonican, if you must know) in front of the fire before playing it. He remembers this well as it was on the same day that he learned that vinyl warps quite badly when subjected to heat.

John combines his love of music and HiFi with another life-long passion, photography and has thousands of blurry photos of people playing music in the dark to prove it. His less-blurry, better-lit photos often accompany his live music reviews for HiFi PiG and can also be seen on his Upstage Photography Facebook page.

THIS ISSUE'S TEAM







OSCAR STEWART was born to a former punk and music has been in Oscar's life since he left the womb.

A 2000's emo kid at heart with a love for post-hardcore and pop-punk, Oscar can be found at gigs when not working or writing reviews

Working in customer service within the audio industry, he has over 12 years experience reviewing headphones and portable audio.

At home his system consists of streaming, vinyl and CD through headphones and HiFi.

Based in Worthing and born in Brighton, he can also be found tinkering with vintage HiFii, mountain biking or behind the lens of a camera MICHAEL FAIRBAIRN developed a love for music and playing guitar in his early teens but started to take it seriously when he went to music college. Having slogged through a nightshift job the previous summer to invest in a 'proper' guitar and amp, he spent a whole student loan on his very first HiFi system.

Over the next two decades he pursued a career as a musician; even securing an 'Alien with Extraordinary and Exceptional Ability' visa to work in the United States.

These days, Michael tends not to go out as often as he would like, mostly due to being a dad of two wonderful children, but when he is allowed out to play, he loves to go to gigs and get more involved with HiFi-related shenanigans.

STUART SMITH is the founder of HiFi PiG and has a long and chequered history in music.

Once a radio DJ on the Sony Radio Station of the Year (1992) Wear FM hositng the world-infamous Midnight Train To Doomsville show, he's put on loads of parties, played loads of clubs, owned a record shop, and played in dub reggae band Roughneck Sounds.

He's fairly consumed by music and the things he plays it on.

When not reviewing kit for HiFi
PiG, he can be seen and heard
behind the decks of his home
DJ setup playing a wide range of
house and techno.





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Not Boring by HiFi Pig chats with new British loudspeaker manufacturer Stratton Acoustics

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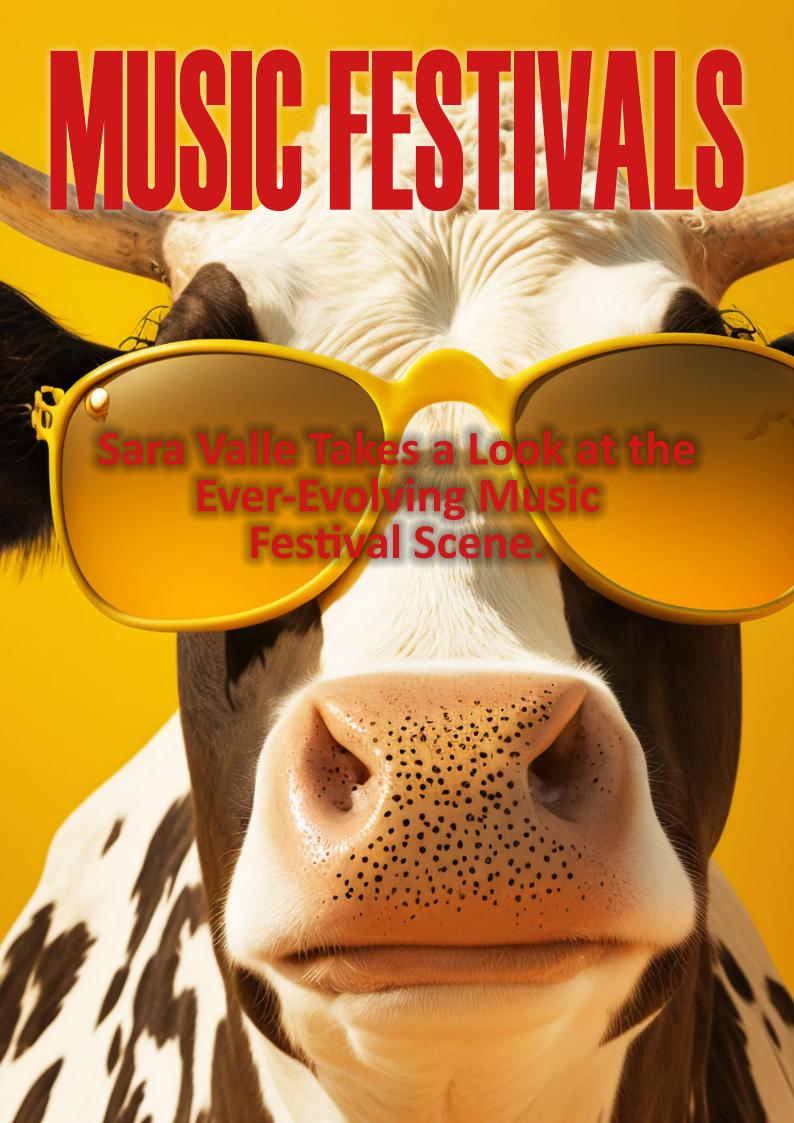












t's a strangely sunny day in the UK and you're queueing up under the blazing sun; ticket available with a couple thumbs on your phone. There's litter on the floor – from colourful and silver wrappers, to cans of cheap beer, and mini glass bottles of all sorts of spirits. When you're finally in, you stroll through the mud or perhaps the grass. You need to use your hand as a visor, but you don't care. The sun is out, the drunks are already on the loose, and if you're lucky you might end up seeing your favourite musicians live; if you're not, someone may spill a drink on you while you run towards the right stage. Anyway, it's still early and even though the food smells delicious you try to save yourself for a £15 sloppy kebab or a £20 greasy burger in the evening after waiting in another

But it's okay. We're here for the experience, right? Everything seems fine and dandy until you find yourself in front of an overflowing toilet bowl, holding your breath, and wishing that sticky liquid on the floor is not what you're thinking. It's taken you thirty full minutes to finally get in the portaloo, so you might as well make the most of it. Just be careful not to touch anything because the tap is dry and you won't be able to wash your hands until you get home... if you manage to get a taxi, or after a your fourteenth queue of the day to hop on the train or just drive out the very congested area in the middle of nowhere.

never-ending queue.

Music festivals are not for the faint-hearted. At least they didn't use to be. It was a lot of camping in the mud, hearing your tent neighbours doing gymnastics at 3am, waking up to the sound of a drunken gang at 8, or queuing up for a quick and cold shower - if you were extra lucky. They used to be about music and sharing. At some point we added splurging on a flat soft drink or a cold pint and dreading every and each toilet time to the least. At least you could afford it without having to sacrifice any other summer plans. In the last few years, they've changed to cater all kinds of audiences, including sit-down restaurants, wellness talks, and VIP experiences that can only be afforded by those who would rather glamp than camp. This inevitably begs the question: has music become secondary?

The first music festival in British soil was Isle of Wight. Inspired by the legendary Woodstock in the United States, a group of young entrepreneurs sought to replicate the communal spirit and musical revelry on this side of the globe. The inaugural Isle of Wight Festival drew an estimated 10,000 attendees — a modest number compared to the behemoth festivals of today. It was new and shiny and grimy and grungy all in one during a short-lived period of three years which saw iconic artists such as Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, Joni Mitchell and The Who amongst others joining the line-up. People wanted a place to be themselves and live a few days in a self-made utopia full of music (and sometimes

substances). Pictures of the scene show a great muddy field dotted with thousands of tents – a communal haven for newly-born music festival punters. But the idea of sharing peace and love vanished when those who wanted to join for free stormed in and made Mitchell cry on a Sunday as they smashed the fences. It was not until 2002, when music promoter John Giddings seized the opportunity to re-launch it, that it became what we know today: a hodgepodge of music and escapism across the water, with the possibility of paying £110 each for a pre-erected tent.

Marnie and Andy Burden have been in the music festival scene since the Stonehenge Festival in 1984, which Andy describes as "Life-changing anarchy in action". Besides attending many of the grassroots festivals like Horse Drawn or Surplus as well as larger festivals like Equinox, Bloodstock, or Download, they play across the UK and Europe with bands like The System.

"There is a radical difference between the smaller grassroots festivals and the larger more corporate events. The smaller events that we attend all operate on a more cooperative DIY basis," they say. "It's really an extension of the old school free festival scene that was prevalent in the late 70s - early 80s. "You see the same faces at these events. It's like a family gathering, bands, and punters all camping and mixing together. The old free festival motto of 'bring whatever you expect to find' still rings true." Their son was into the Nu-Metal scene, so Download became their family holiday for a few years in the early-mid 2000s. They would take him and his mates and camp on the live-in vehicle field. "It's always like a smaller festival within a festival if you know what I mean, making it easy to get away from the crowds if you wanted to."

Music festivals originate from sharing your taste and spending a few days living in community. But they've always had a notorious reputation for the prevalence of drugs and unruly behaviour too. Maybe it all kicked off with the virtual ambush that was the Battle of the Beanfield back in '85. But to understand this it's important to look back a little bit further, to the swinging '60s and '70s when free festivals such as Windsor Free Festival, Elephant Fayres, Stonehenge Free Festival, and the early Glastonbury Festival emerged. These gatherings saw a whole new movement sprouting up, centred around travelling about and trading.

After a few years, this movement got a name and became known as New Age travellers. Embracing an alternative way of life, they chose to live in vans, lorries, and even buses. But not everyone was keen on what they deemed to be "rebellious ways" and they became social outcasts – some even called them derogatory terms like "crusties" (which many now embrace). They moved in convoys and sometimes got involved in political matters like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which gave some of them



the name: The Peace Convoy.

Their political believes and lifestyle put them in the limelight. A night of violence in 80s Stonehenge that wrecked the whole weekend's experience put the cherry on top for those who were against this freefor-all congregation. On the festival's Saturday night, after a chilled start, a group of bikers went on a rampage, attacking every punk they could lay hands on. When punk band The Epileptics took the stage, they were automatically greeted with a hail of flourbombs, cans, and bottles. Then the bikers set fire to the band's banner and attacked the members of anarchist bands Crass and Poison Girls and stopped them from performing from performing. As Penny Rimbaud, a member of the band wrote, "the predominantly hippy gathering, lost in the soft blur of their stoned reality, remained oblivious" of the fate of the event and of what would originate after it.

So, now back to the Battle of the Beanfield. 1985, Wiltshire, England. The scene had already been set a few years before. The year prior, the Department of the Environment had passed management of Stonehenge and the surrounding land to English Heritage after complaints by landowners of the festival damaging archaeological sites, trespassing, drug use, and public nudity in rivers. As a result, a high court injunction was issued, preventing the 1985 Stonehenge Free Festival from taking place. On the day of the festival, 1,300 police officers swooped in and rained on the spirited travellers' parade. It was like a classic showdown, straight out of the wild west, except this time it was happening on British

"Everyone knew it wasn't going to be easy this year but everyone hoped it could happen somewhere close if not in the National Trust fields which had been used in previous years. No one expected that ambush to be as brutal as it turned out," recalls Andy, who had arranged meeting up with some friends for the festival. "I tried to be clever and approach Stonehenge from the West but got stopped and told to turn round or be arrested at the edge of the four-mile exclusion zone put in place, the copper who turned us round told us what was happening at

the Beanfield and said 'The convoy is over, go home,

there's going to be no festival this year'."

What started with a roadblock took a dramatic turn when the travellers decided to ram their vehicles into the police cars. A window-smashing spree ensued, with police making arrests left, right, and centre followed by a standoff. It was the most brutal police treatment of people, as ITN reported that some people had been clubbed by police.

"What happened at the Beanfield affected a lot of people, some of our friends gave up on the festival circuit after that, we still occasionally see people who were present in the Beanfield that day and you can tell it's had a long-lasting effect on them, probably PTSD," tells Andy, who had to wait until the next morning to read what had happened in a local newspaper.

So, the Peace Convoy was met with violence and



if we add this to what happened in Woodstock in 1999, it's arguably understandable that some people furrow their brow when there's chatter of a music festival. After all, music and drugs have always seemed to be part of the same deal for media, who's blamed tunes for making people aggressive and even murderous before. The blossoming of Acid House probably didn't help make the case. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why security has increased and that would be one of the reasons why costs have gone up too. The peace and love community feeling has been stumped and some festivals are now lacklustre for some just because our apparent need to fit everything in little organised boxes. The Burdens don't attend Glastonbury on purpose, as they've always seen it "as a corporate money-making event first and foremost" although they give the organisers props for sheltering the Peace Convoy after the '85 incident.

But even if getting tickets for Glastonbury nowadays seems as hard as winning the lottery, one can't talk about music festivals in the UK without talking about its longest-running festival. Established in 1970, its origins can also be traced back to the chimerical ideals of the late 1960s, when founder Michael Eavis hosted a free one-day event called the Pilton Pop, Blues & Folk Festival on his dairy farm in Somerset. Inspired by the ethos of counterculture and a desire to unite people through music, Eavis transformed his farm into the now-legendary Glastonbury Festival. Initially rooted in folk and acoustic music, Glastonbury – or "Glasto", like most people know it – gradually evolved into a multi-genre cel-

ebration, featuring diverse acts ranging from rock and pop to electronic and world music. The festival's immersive atmosphere, eco-conscious ethos, and iconic Pyramid Stage have become synonymous with the UK festival experience very much so that most end up whimpering after trying to buy a ticket. In the 70s, a £1 ticket got you free milk from Eavis's farm and, in 2022, £280 got you a Greta Thunberg speech in the Pyramid Stage on climate change and four days of music by Calvin Harris, Paul McCartney, Ziggy Marley, Kacey Musgraves, and Primal Scream all in the same space. That line-up could either be mixtage curated by a group of drunk friends or a music festival that's trying to make everyone happy: from the ones who take the tube to the ones that drive a Tesla.

Anna Chan, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion consultancy founder and director from Asian Leadership Collective in London, waited three years to finally get tickets for Glastonbury because of Covid, but she gets why "Glastonbury lives up to the hype". The festival has managed to accommodate the most basic needs like access to drinking water, toilets, and a co-op store.

"The whole festival, for the best part, has a very chilled vibe – everyone is there to have a good time. The crowd is friendly and gives each other space. I didn't experience or witness any aggression, beer/or 'other' being tossed into the crowd. Everyone is very willing to help each other. This shows through the community of 'leave no trace, love the farm'. Everyone is tidying up and taking their items with

Marnie Stonehenge Summer Solstice 2022

Photo credit: Andy and Marnie Burden



Not Boring



Walrus & The Carpenter Free Party Whitburn, Sunderland Photo courtesy of Andy and Marnie Burden



them," Chan says. "Yes, it is expensive, and I acknowledge the privilege involved with paying for the camping kit, paying for food and drink, and for the ticket alone. But the experience of feeling safe, with like-minded people, with all the basics covered... I would be willing to pay for Glastonbury again, and again."

Whilst it looks like the festival spirit is still instilled in some attendees who just want to enjoy a day out with friends, listening to good music and frolicking in the grass, some feel like it's the right space to get pissed. It has somehow turned into a night out variety meaning that people just take it as an expensive way of getting legless and partying with a live music set in the background – it doesn't even matter if Lewis Capaldi is joshing his heart out on stage if you have your seventh pint in hand and can't see straight. Maybe that's why prices have gone up too. A trip to party in Ushuaïa in Ibiza is expensive, so you don't mind paying £200 for a ticket when you just need to catch a train instead of a flight.

Food and drinks have always been a way to extort the money out of your pocket your other two options are dehydration and starvation. It's no surprise that private events rank up prices to make extra cash. In fact, I once saw £5 sausage rolls disappear within minutes at Slam Dunk in Leeds. But getting a pint at the O2 isn't any cheaper.

"I save for my festivals and, because I go to so many, I budget throughout the year. I have a cash binder for my tickets and my spending money, because

otherwise it would be so much out of my wages. It is something I have to plan for a lot more than I used to," says Maddy Alexander-Grout, a consumer media specialist from Southampton who's been to over 50 festivals. "Having gone for such a long period of time, I have seen the ticket prices and the beer prices going up so much. Back in 2000, tickets were £33 for a day and weekend tickets were £80, but now prices are £100 for a day and nearly £300 for the weekend, which is just insane."

Maddy used to be a punk radio DJ and went to a lot of festivals for free back in the day. She admits she still attends a few because of her love for music and events in general. Her thrifty spirit pushed her to launch an app, Mad About Money, and she also uses her TikTok channel to spread advice about how to save money in a festival.

"Being prepared is really the only way to save a bit, but most of the festival expenses are inevitable," she admits. Her words of advice include bringing spare sunglasses, sunscreen, and earplugs. "Think of all eventualities. If you want wacky festival gear, buy it in advance; take your own glitter... Just don't buy anything there! That will add hundreds."

"Price of food, drink, merch and accommodation (probably the biggest increase) have sky-rocketed. I can only assume this is because it's becoming harder for the organisers to create these events at a reasonable cost, so therefore [they] have to pass these increases onto the vendors, who in turn pass it onto the festival goers", says Kelly Vowles, who at-

tended her first music festivals as a professional DJ. "This year, I paid £5.50 for a bottle of Fanta at Slam Dunk. Some of the merchandise was as much as £40 or £60. The ticket price has also doubled – which I guess is to be expected." Besides owning her own hair salon, Kelly is a big Green Day fan that performed as the lead, Whatshername, in the American Idiot musical in Swindon. "They have become less 'alternative' and way more commercial," she adds. "Now you get anyone from Dolly Parton to Robbie Williams, with festivals happening everywhere all the time, which has its pros and cons."

"The most striking change I noticed was the diversity in music," says Jimmy Mavroudis, who is a Pathway Manager at a college, lecturing in media to students. He also created the Pop Scoop platform, which offers users practical experience in the music and entertainment industries. "Unlike in the past when festivals were genre-specific, today's line-ups feature artists from various genres like country, rock, hip-hop, and pop sharing the stage."

Whilst more and more genres originate with new technologies and innovative approaches, a study from the New York Times has shown that the musical diversity of the top 40 charts has decreased exponentially over the last few years, following a surprisingly consistent footprint. If we add a formulaic sound to how social media makes seemingly random things and songs trending, it's not uncommon to find The 1975, Doja Cat, Rosalía, and Muse in the same playlist. So, the hodgepodge makes sense, but if you're driving a bigger variety of listeners to the same spot, shouldn't that have a positive effect on ticket sales and a consequent reduction on prices?

"Like everything operating costs have increased," thinks Nicky Shallcross, owner of online homeware store interior superior in Edinburgh. She was late into the festival game, as she was afraid of crowds, but her job in the fashion industry made her brave her first Glastonbury in 2006. "Brexit has really hit the music industry hard, EU bands wanting to play the UK face increased customs costs to transport their equipment. The UK festivals need to pay EU acts more to cover these costs, otherwise it's not attractive. Musicians need to make money and should be paid for their talent; they don't make the same amount of money from physical album sales due to streaming."

"One significant change I've observed is the substantial increase in prices. While a small increase is to be expected, Brexit barriers have made it economically unfeasible for many artists to travel to gigs, leading them to raise their prices. Consequently, festival organisers have followed suit, hiking ticket prices," echoes Jimmy Mavroudis, "Unfortunately, some opportunistic vendors have taken advantage of the situation, driving prices to exorbitant levels at larger festivals."

Streaming has indeed made a dent in artists' profits, which would explain why merch is constantly being pushed with fresh designs with every release and tour. But most bands play festivals at a loss. Michael Eavis once revealed in an interview that Coldplay and Paul McCartney were both paid around £200,000 for past headline sets. Standing tickets for Coldplay, who sold out six nights at Wembley Stadium this summer, were £104.50. Deduce venue fees, roadies, and the rest of the team and still... you do the math.

So, what's actually so expensive about music festivals when most of them have sponsors that paid thousands and thousands of pounds? Whatever it is, it's undeniable that it's working. Since the very first music festival, the UK's festival scene has blossomed, with countless events every year. Music festivals like Reading and Leeds, Download, Latitude, and Bestival have gained significant prominence, drawing massive crowds and showcasing and array of genres to cater to diverse tastes. They've become cultural touchstones, not only for music but also for fashion, art, and youth movements, providing a platform for emerging talent and established artists alike. But this expansion of the festival culture has its pros and cons.

The fact that the line-ups cover a wider range of music genres makes it more accessible to people. Think about it: your posh, goth, biker, and punk friends can all join and spend a weekend getting their wellies muddy together; the cross-pollination and collaboration of different artists can lead to unique performances and innovative music that transcends traditional boundaries; and broadening music horizons also helps artists grow larger fanbases. But mixing multiple genres in one festival can present challenges for sound engineers and production teams, who have to adapt quickly for a 30-minute set where sound quality might not be a priority. And, let's face it, watching Jessie J perform just right after Bob Dylan is incredibly disorienting.

There's definitely something beneficial about having Bad Bunny, Becky G, Gorillaz and Blondie play in the same festival – especially for organisers. We see Coachella, where people spend thousands of dollars in tickets just to, right after, spend thousands of minutes thinking about which outfit is more striking. The photos need to be taken in the right spot and you better be a showstopper if you want to make it worthwhile. The skimpier, flashier, and more out there the outfit is, the better. Influencers get tickets gifted whilst others just dream about crossing the gates to the ferris wheel to an oasis full of video games, dance competitions, photo ops, and lounges sponsored by the biggest brands in America with a solid and trending soundtrack in the background.

We had our fair share of that here starting with Kate Moss making appearances at Glastonbury and making wellies popular worldwide. It's nothing new. But it comes to a point where you ask yourself: is this



really genuine or have they intentionally brought us all here together so they could put more money in their pockets? And who the hell is this chap playing now? I thought I came to see Jimmy Eat World.

I've been to my fair share of festivals, some in the UK and some abroad. My first festival experience was as an outsider – literally. There's this music festival in my hometown in Spain called Festival Internacional de Benicassim (FIB). Even though, for some, the line-up has arguably got less and less interesting in the last few years, FIB has been going strong since 1995. My first experience was the last year Bob Dylan played and I did what those who couldn't afford the tickets did: watching from a small hill right outside the fences. (Reminiscing of early Glasto, anyone?) I'm not doing anyone a disservice by unveiling this, because the organisers have known for years that people gather on top of the hill with cans of beers and jamón and tortilla sandwiches to watch their favourite bands for free. In fact, there were some clandestine vendors selling mojitos and ice-cold beer in the dusty and scorching evening that brought us all the rustic glamour of our own Coachella. And there I was too, smoking fag after fag, getting tipsy, watching the rest of the cheeky fans dancing (some swaying) along and – I must admit – kind of worrying that Dylan didn't sound like he used to probably because of the nicotine, too. The big screens didn't show close-ups of him for some reason, but that's for another day.

Long story short, that hill had the same spirit 1969's Woodstock probably had: total freedom and a community spirit instead of paying for fancy toilets, resting areas, or glamping. In fact, some people would end up sleeping on the beach. The weather favoured the early morning naps and the festival started late in the day, so the ones who stayed up banging their heads to techno, probably high as a kite, could be rested enough for another session when the sun starts to go down. But of course, let's not romanticise FIB and their VIP areas with dirty kiddie pools and, even less, the idea of Woodstock. What in 1999 kicked off with a rousing call to enjoy three days of "peace, love, and music" culminated with stages literally in flames, sound towers reduced to rubble, decimated tents, press and artists scarpering like the devil, and promoters holed up in their offices as well as hordes of wasted and knackered youths wallowing in a stream of faecal muck – a trainwreck, like Netflix called it in its documentary. Jamie Crawford's autopsy of the chaotic event would make anyone shut up about the complaints about music being "too fancy" now.

Simon Pope works in freelance marketing, PR and product development for Technics and Burmester. During his time working in music publishing, he attended festivals both as a paying customer and as a VIP guest with backstage passes. Although his VIP experiences were before "the age of selling and 'enhanced experience", he admits it gave him "a taste of privilege that was a world away from the

tent-in-a-boggy field and nasty latrine horrors" that he'd previously experienced.

"The current trend of offering different levels of packages has undoubtedly made festivals one, more expensive, and two, more financially divided and less inclusive. Paying extra for better toilets is something one should never have to do, and in my experience these VIP experiences rarely offer something significantly different, unless it's accommodation in a yurt or a portable eco-shed! At least in my day it was either you paid and stood with everyone else or got a free 'comp' ticket. They were the only 'levels'!" he says. "Modern UK festivals are now commonplace everywhere and quite a few of them cater for people who would have attended festivals when they were younger and now have families. There's nothing wrong with that per se, but quite often these festivals are overpriced and do not have great line-ups. The experience is diluted musically."

Whilst there's something inherently good about how festivals are organised, being more inclusive, when things become too corporate they just lose the spark. People become more demanding, and at some point we have someone complaining that the toilets are dirty (see beginning of the article) because the standards are simply not met. Something needs to be always happening. The waiting times with a pint in hand; kicking your trainers off and laying down under the sun seem to be less and less enjoyable. People talk about inclusion, diversity, and political statements from organisers and musicians alike. Now we want IPAs, lagers, Diet Cokes and Fantas, Sprites and shots, burgers, gyozas, kebabs, tacos, noodles, fish and chips and pasta food trucks and make all the demands without blinking twice. "Most things that start off in the 'underground' end up becoming mainstream when business oriented people see the potential to make a profit. The saturation of corporate music festivals these days doesn't seem to be slowing down, so there's obviously plenty of interest and money to be made," says Andy Burden.

Even if it makes us roll our eyes when we have to pay £5.50 for a soft drink, we would be the first ones to complain it's not cold enough even if we're in the middle of the dessert or laying on the grass next to a river. We now care about looking clean and good for the Instagram picture and we even buy special outfits for festivals to be in the loop.

"When I was younger, we would try and look good for the start," says Polly Arrowsmith, who has a lot of concert and festival experience under her belt including seeing the Sex Pistols and Fleetwood Mac in 1984. "But there was no doubt that you looked much worse at the end of the festival than at the start! Seeing people get on public transport or the same bus as you, in a messy state, was part of the fun. We listened to each other's horror stories and talked about it."



Arrowsmith adds: "These days, there is more pressure to look good. You can pay for a shower, you can blow dry your hair, and there are mirrors to do your make-up. People bring a lot more clothing. If you are lucky, you can return on a motorised cart to your site. It does seem to split the audience, as glamping has taken a 'we are all in it together' attitude. It's like flying; some turn left, and most go right."

"There was definitely something special about the free events of the past that made it a freeing experience. This was also partly due to the lack of phones, internet and social media. You could safely get up to anything without any repercussions, a very liberating feeling," argues Mavroudis. "There is however a backlash happening due to the middle-class glamping festival trend with lots of smaller events popping up all over the country that are essentially, going back to the roots of the traditional festival vibes."

If we forget about our demands and requests, looking good, and the "pics or it didn't happen" attitude, we can still find the true appeal of a music festival: fostering a sense of community and escapism and transcending musical boundaries. By immersing themselves in the captivating ambiance, attendees forge connections, make memories, and embrace the collective euphoria that permeates these events. Now we just need to accept the fact that a

flight to Spain in summer is probably cheaper than a festival ticket.

There are still opportunities for those who want to live a grassroots music festival experience. Just like the Burdens, lots of people attend free or cheaper festivals – without having to succumb to BBC's Radio 1's Big Weekend – like Fishguard Folk Festival, First Light Festival, Little Orchard Cider, amongst many others. Some have been running for years, run by volunteers and supported by local councils and sponsors. Whilst the money might not be enough to pay commercial artists, the folk scene has remained intact. It just seems like we need to choose between seeing our favourite bands if they play on the radio or putting our savings towards an overpriced ticket. Props to those who can afford glamping, to festivals not only being a thing for twenty-something liberals, and for getting to add new music you never thought you'd like to your playlist. All are very valid options this is definitely not a dusty old-fashioned point of view rejecting all change. Improvements have been made to line-ups in some cases were female artists have finally got more relevance and greener initiatives have taken the lead. Nothing against innovation, improvement, inclusion, and expansion – it makes the world better. But festival organisers out there, can we please make music affordable again?

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into the origins of this exciting new company and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Introduction and Company Formation

Our journey at Stratton Acoustics started from a love of music and of the HiFi industry that started at secondary school in London. At the age of fourteen I rescued a piece of furniture from my school that had been dumped outside the music department. After it was signed over to me I took it home, disassembled it and found electronics inside of a type I didn't recognise, I had never seen valves before.

It turned out I had rescued a Garrard 401, a Quad 22 and pair of Quad IIs, and I still use them all to this day. They are still basically unmodified other than the addition of IEC mains plugs and phono jacks and all still sound great.

Over the years I was lucky enough to listen to a few vintage, large diameter, paper coned speakers in a variety of situations and always found they made music and moved me in a way smaller speakers simply didn't. Between the team at our industrial design consultancy, Innovation Development Solutions Ltd, we decided we wanted to focus on our shared love of music contribute to the HiFi market by designing and making the kind of products that moved me so much and that just didn't seem to be available anymore; large diaphragm area, efficient, dynamic, revealing and emotionally expressive loudspeakers.

Because we are a morally focussed company we couldn't in good conscience design products based on my knowledge base at that time, so we needed to find someone who actually knew what they were doing when it came to electro-acoustic engineering to join the team. Quite quickly we were introduced to Phil, who spent most of our first meeting educating us as to why large diaphragm speakers sound the way they do. Over many Cappuccinos in a franchise chain in Southampton the die was cast and we began down the Stratton Acoustics road.

NB: Tell us a little about the team involved with the brand; their backgrounds, areas of speciality etc.

DF: There is myself, an Industrial Designer and engineer of twenty seven years who was fortunate enough to graduate from Central Saint Martins and The Royal College of Art under Ron Arad. I've

worked in a huge variety of sectors as disparate as designing and bringing to market the first portable solar charger to designing scuba equipment for the consumer and military markets. I've been deeply involved too in sustainable food packaging, high-end electronic jewellery, SaaS Healthcare Brands and Robotics.

We have Phil Ward who has now officially been dubbed a "legendary speaker designer" by Jason Kennedy but also enjoys his Stratton Acoustics job title as "Head of Noise". Phil is an extraordinary human in all respects and has worked with many of the greats at Naim, Mordaunt-Short, Canon Audio to name but a few. He is an accomplished bass player and journalist in his own right and our electro-acoustic heart and soul. Without Phil there would be no Stratton Acoustics.

Saying that, Stratton Acoustics would never have been able to start on this journey without the husband-and-wife team of Amy and Ben Richards, both graduates of Bournemouth University. They are incredibly talented industrial designers and engineers in their own right having worked in consultancies previously. Ben is a stunning graphic designer and web developer, an ex-county level cricketer and all round sportsman. Amy is one of the most talented engineers I've ever worked with and an amazing brand developer. She keeps us all in check with operations management and a wit that cuts us down to size at a stroke.

NB: What motivated you to create a new loudspeaker in an already saturated market?

DF: A great question, as I mentioned we wanted to produce the kinds of loudspeakers that didn't seem to be manufactured any more, large diameter paper cones with effortless dynamics across the entire audio spectrum and a direct line to your emotions.

More than that through we wanted to combine these characteristics with some decidedly modern features that yield real musical benefits, low colouration, low distortion, easy amplifier loads, high sensitivity and high-power handling ensuring they could be used with any style of amplification from single ended triodes to high headroom solid state.

This goal for this holy grail set of characteristics was to make sure everyone could enjoy the most emotional connection to their music, to make them easy



to accommodate in any system and to make the very most out of the wonderful partnering equipment that has been so carefully chosen. This is all on the assumption listeners could accommodate them in their homes, physics dictates that large cones require large cabinets I'm afraid.

We consider form factor as a major factor supporting the enjoyment of our products. Historically speakers were integrated into the home as pieces of furniture, we found this to be compelling as we believe that any product should delight the owner in as many ways as possible. In our case they should delight the ear with the music they make but should delight the eye and the hand when they are silent.

NB: What are the core values of Stratton Acoustics?

DF: Our approach is simple in principle but challenging in practise and drives everything we do at Stratton:

- We do everything with passion, positivity and respect.
- We treat what we do as a privilege not a job or a business.
- Always pursue objective, demonstrable, en-

during quality over trends and market bubbles.

- We value engineering, design, artistry, quality and integrity. We avoid snake-oil, unobtainium and mysticism.
- We always build to a quality not a price.
- Quality and consistency is essential.
- We work with our clients on an individual basis to ensure they are always delighted with their products.

NB: You mentioned previously that longevity is important and that you would like to see Stratton loudspeakers handed down through families, why do you see this as important and how do you go about building those kind of values into a product like loudspeakers?

DF: Great question, this is something that has concerned us from the outset.

Each Stratton Acoustics product represents a collaboration between ourselves and our customers. Their Stratton Acoustics product we hope will embody their desires and values, and so will represent them to their family members to their children and maybe their grandchildren.

We all have special objects handed down from



generation to generation, mine are strange things like battered Victorian leather stitching clamps (my great-grandfather was a cobbler) and a wonderful brass microscope (my grandfather was an amateur botanist) and my father's engineering tool chest.

These objects are metaphors for family values and represent family stories that are told and retold. Our goal is to aid in the creation of those stories with our customers and their families in creating products that are metaphors regardless of the level of finish they wish to explore.

NB: Where are your speakers fabricated?

DF: We build entirely within the UK. In fact all of our partners are based in the same region so we can work hand-in-glove with them on each and every pair 1512's.

Examples of this are that we don't work with mass-manufactured loudspeaker cabinet builders but instead work with some of the finest bespoke furniture makers in the UK. Equally, when it comes to our machined components, we work with leading vendors in the automotive and aerospace sectors to achieve the quality we require; their machining is

more like engineering art than it is metalwork.

Naturally we use bought-in components from a variety of global brands as the very highest performing and most consistent components are often made outside of UK shores. But as far as our cabinet construction, finishing, matching, fabrication, assembly, quality control, kitting and shipping is concerned, everything is made within the UK and always will be.

NB: How important to the brand's values is it that you use British manufacture and finishing in the construction of your speakers?

DF: It's a fundamental part of our value set. In the same way as Swiss watches are made in Switzerland, Stratton Acoustics products will always be made in the UK. There are two fundamental reasons for this, the first is quality control; we want to be able to physically see the smallest detail of every single product, not via some emailed photographs on a QC inspection sheet but with our own eyes and to feel the quality of finish with our own hands.

Secondly, is that due to recent changes to the UK's status within the EU....as in we begrudgingly aren't part of it anymore... we feel compelled to manufac-



ture in the UK. Without the great institutions of free access to education, information and healthcare that are so fundamental to the fabric of the UK I wouldn't have had the education I have been so fortunate to have. I want to contribute to the country I owe so much to and to assist in some small way in helping the economy, we want to play our part.

NB: How do you feel that Stratton Acoustics, over and above any other brand out there can create this heirloom status? I suppose the question here is how does a company go about building a reputation where their products are seen as something people will want to pass down to their children?

DF: The nature of heirloom is an interesting one. When we consider heirlooms throughout history they are usually defined as being items that transcend trends, are built to a quality not a price and prove to be functional in their given roles throughout their lives. They are usually produced in small numbers by passionate, driven people who love what they do. When I think of this I think of Martin, Stradivarius, Steinway as much as I think of Chippendale, Aston Martin, Patek and Breguet.

We are not so egotistical as to compare ourselves to such legendary brands and craftspeople, but we can at least aspire to the values that made these products legendary and of heirloom quality. In so doing we have a chance of engendering the same recognition and emotional attachment with our customers, their children and their grandchildren and in time may be recognised as true heirloom products.

NB: Tell us a little about the design of the speakers.

DF: It's difficult to know where to start, but at the beginning is the usual answer. When we decided to embark on this path it was partly in reaction against the inherent physical limitations of smaller diameter loudspeaker drivers.

Smaller drivers have to work harder to move enough air to play at adequate volume. As they don't have the diaphragm area, they have to compensate by increasing their excursion. And as diaphragm excursion increases so does compression, colouration and distortion as multiple motor system non-linearities arise, the voice-coil heat up, and the suspension and surround flex non-linearly. Dynamics suffer of course as small diaphragms have to accelerate and decelerate over a significant physical distances -

they just cry, "enough!". With small diaphragms it's simply difficult to keep the noise floor (any output that's not present in the input signal) of the speaker adequately low.

Given that smaller drivers have these issues, all of which fundamentally challenge our enjoyment of music, we chose to take a different path. If small drivers introduce these issues, then we simply won't use them, and the results are remarkable. Bass has unambiguous pitch, texture, harmonics, dynamics and richness. Midrange has a palpability and tangibility with amazing transparency, and, again, dynamics that make vocals feel immediate and present.

An illustration of this is a demo we do for people when listening at higher volume levels. We ask them to touch the bass and midrange drivers. Most small drivers will be working hard at these levels and moving at least ±5mm or more. With the 1512 however the drivers will hardly be moving at all; at most between ±1mm. Needless to say this isn't even close to approaching the maximum excursion for the drivers so, we minimise all of the diaphragm excursion issues at a stroke. The Elypsis1512 odd order harmonic distortion for example, at typical listening levels, is around 0.3% — closer to amplifier distortion levels than those usually measured in speakers.

Our tweeter is a large soft done and employs a waveguide to optimise both its dispersion and acoustic impedance matching. We have also mechanically isolated it with the goal of eliminating any spurious energy from affecting the tiny amplitude of the dome.

Everything else has been done to support the drivers in doing their best work. Our cabinets are massively braced furniture grade Latvian birch plywood with no internal voids. In fact they are akin to bracing with a skin rather than a cabinet with bracing. We have a separate internal midrange enclosure and another one for the tweeter. The midrange enclosure has non-parallel side panels and a tapering, resin filled back panel to minimise internal resonance and is independently braced as well of course. The tweeter enclosure pneumatically isolates the tweeter from the energy within the woofer cabinet.

The 1512 crossover is split into front panel mounted HF/MF module and a separate LF crossover at the rear of the cabinet floor. Both are housed in fabri-





cated non-ferrous enclosures. We provide +/-2dB HF and MF level adjustment on the crossover as listening environments have a huge impact to loudspeaker performance. Being able to adjust the speaker to the acoustic characteristics of a room helps towards obtaining the most enjoyable listening experience.

We could continue into every facet;

- The Voronoi pattern low mass stands ensure that any passive vibration doesn't move enough air to be audible, while providing the necessary isolation through our positive engagement isolation cones.
- The solid 3M acrylic front facia baffle that if scratched can simply be polished back to its original finish.
- The 16 way hand-applied and finished Olive Wood book-matched veneer on the back of the demonstration cabinets.
- We could write a hardback book detailing all aspects of the design and build of each pair of 1512's, in fact we do for each customer. As each pair is unique to them we photograph and document the build process of each pair and have it signed by the team members involved then present it as part of the installation process. We hope this will give each

owner a sense of additional pride when they see each and every stage of their speaker's build in such exhaustive detail.

NB: I'd love a pair, but I want them in bright pink and with solid gold accents. Can you cater to my very specific whims?

DF: Absolutely. We offer a bespoke design process called the "Absolute" service. As we believe our products need to delight all our customers senses we can offer an almost limitless range of design, material and finish options depending on our customers tastes.

If you wanted fine marble from a specific quarry, hand-carved solid wood of a particular species and finish, bespoke laminated solid carbon fibre of a particular weave, or upholstered leather to match the interior of a favourite vintage sports car, the only challenges are the imagination and the time required by our craftspeople to hand build each pair of Elypsis1512s.

Personally I would love to do collaborations with street artists, tattooist, sculptors, emerging brands, charities, designers, crafts-people, custom car and

bike builders and fine artists in making true one-ofa-kind free-reign pieces that blur the lines between HiFi and art, but that's mostly because that's where my tastes lie. It may not be for everyone, but the results would be incredible.

In your case would you like a particular Pantone reference of pink or maybe some pink graphics over a gloss white base, possibly a pink acrylic baffle with satin white sides? Would 18 carat gold plating suffice, or would you want specific pieces to be made in solid gold by our jewellers? The choice is entirely yours....let us know and we'll produce concept visualisations as part of the "Absolute" consultation process and show them installed at HiFi Pig Towers.

NB: People are naturally going to draw similarities between your loudspeakers and the big studio monitors from the likes of JBL. Is this comparison founded or are the similarities only visual?

DF: This question always surprises me as I'm not sure other loudspeaker brands get the same question. Do people ask Acoustic Energy if the AE1 was the same as the LS3/5a? Both are compact standmount 2-way speakers with a small directly radiating dome tweeter above a compact midwoofer. And both are nearfield monitors and both are exceptional. But they are completely different in philosophy, execution and performance.

The only similarities between the Elypsis1512 and the vintage JBLs, Tannoys and Ureis are in their diaphragm diameters and layout of the bass and midrange drivers, everything else is unique to the 1512. We spent five years in development and objectively exceed the performance of any of those iconic products in any applicable metric other than brand recognition.

Please don't take what I'm saying as arrogance. Those products were stunning in their day, but that day was over forty years ago. The Elypsis1512 is a truly modern loudspeaker in all respects and partly configured the way it is so that we could deliver a product that is as much a piece of fine furniture as it is a fine loudspeaker. You'd never describe the JBL4350 as a fine piece of furniture. We could have produced yet another towering angular or curvaceous monolith high-end speaker, but there are many wonderful brands already doing that very successfully.

We wanted to produce something that could complement an interior; subtly blending and or making a wild statement, but without dominating a listening space, and that isn't really possible with a two-meter-tall monument to conventional audiophile thinking and trends.

NB: In a way my previous questions have been leading to this question, but what is it about Stratton Acoustics that you think sets it apart from any other loudspeaker manufacturer in the world right now?

DF: In a word; obsession. We as a company are obsessed with the power of music to move us and communicate ideas and emotions. And we're obsessed with the engineering required to deliver the passion and engagement, with attention to detail ensuring every single aspect of our products will delight for every moment of ownership. We are obsessive about providing our customers with a level of service, dream fulfilment and a long-term relationship that ensures each one will enjoy their Stratton Acoustics speakers for the decades to come as members of a small club that values high quality engineering and fine, hand-crafted products.

NB: How do you go about communicating your values and unique proposition to potential customers?

DF: Currently we are working with HiFi and luxury press in loaning our 1512 demo pair for listening and review. We are doing as many shows as we can so that potential customers can experience the speakers for themselves and hopefully be moved by them. We host occasional two-day listening sessions at the wonderful Brighton Electric Studios; in the same live room that's been used by countless great artists over the years. And we can arrange home demonstrations for potential customers who want to experience the 1512 as part of their own systems.

We are enormously privileged in being invited to work with a well-known podcaster to talk about industrial design, start-up business and high-end HiFi. We are so proud to be involved in the podcast as it gives us a chance to represent the generosity and positivity of brands and individuals who have supported us and without whom we wouldn't have been able to get to this point. Massive thanks to Vertere, Innuos, AudioNote, Bryston via PMC, Benchmark, Quadraspire and Cyrus for supporting



us with loaned demo equipment.

We are working with a UK based high-end audio brand in producing a custom version of the 1512 that would be particularly aligned to the preferences and needs of their customers. We are actively seeking retail and distributions partners, initially in our hometown of London but also globally who share our values and would like to get involved in what we are doing here at Stratton Acoustics. Likewise, we are seeking partnering brands who wish to demonstrate their products through speakers that offer the unique blend of characteristics the 1512 embodies to attend shows and exhibitions. We are doing everything we can but of course we can always do more.

NB: And who do you see as being those customers?

DF: Our customers are a small group of people with taste and means, who place the enjoyment of music and the joy of ownership of fine, bespoke, heritage products high in their personal values. We make products that are designed and built to a quality and not a price by local artisanal craftspeople. We are by default a high-end brand as it is the only way we can create products that represent these values. Our hope is that our customers will recognise these values and chose to curate some wonderful, unique pieces. If their tastes are not so esoteric, they can chose from our "Pure" or "Bespoke" series and enjoy the passion, soul and emotion of their music for decades to come.

You can expect to see a full and in-depth review of these speakers on HiFi PiG in the coming weeks.





















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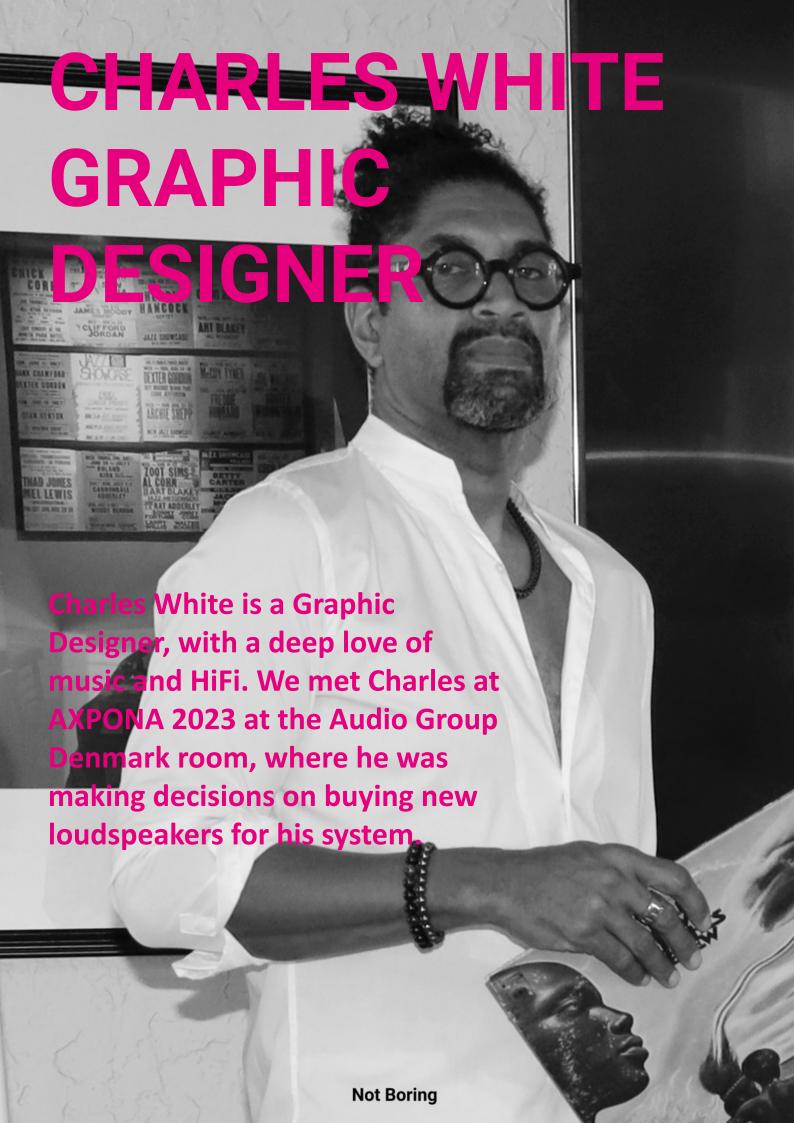


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CHARLES WHITE

harles' story is one of escaping the rat race, a dream that many people have, and his route to his new life and career came through his passion for old school hip hop.

He now lives and works in California, but Chicago will always be his home.

CHICAGO TO CALIFORNIA

NB: A bit of background, where were you born and raised, where do you call home now?

CW: I was actually born in Alabama. By the age of 3, my dad moved the family up to Milwaukee. From there, we moved around because of my dad's job and lived in Chicago, Detroit and Akron, Ohio. I really don't remember much about Milwaukee, but Chicago, Detroit and Ohio had a profound impact on me (in a good way). After graduating from college, I moved back to Chicago which is where I spent the first part of my adult life. To be honest, Chicago in the 90s was a great place to be. The people, food, culture, art, music and nightlife was incredible. Chicago will always be home in my heart.

For the last 13 years, I've been living in Claremont, a small college town about 30 miles east of LA. I have to say, I am pleasantly surprised by how much I love California. The weather (obviously), the vibe, and the freedom to be you (whatever your truth is) has made California a very special place for me.

NB: Was your educational background focused on art and design?

CW: My education background was not focused on art and design. I graduated from Ohio University with a Communication degree. I was always fascinated by art and design but didn't have the courage at that time to pursue that path. I was afraid to put myself out there. I guess I was being practical. However, that practical approach to life would soon change.

NB: Describe your career path and how you got to where you are now?

CW: When I first graduated college, I started working for a local Coca-Cola distributor as a marketing development manager (stable but not sexy). It was

a good job that taught me a lot about the corporate world, but if I'm being honest, it didn't move me at all. It was just a job.

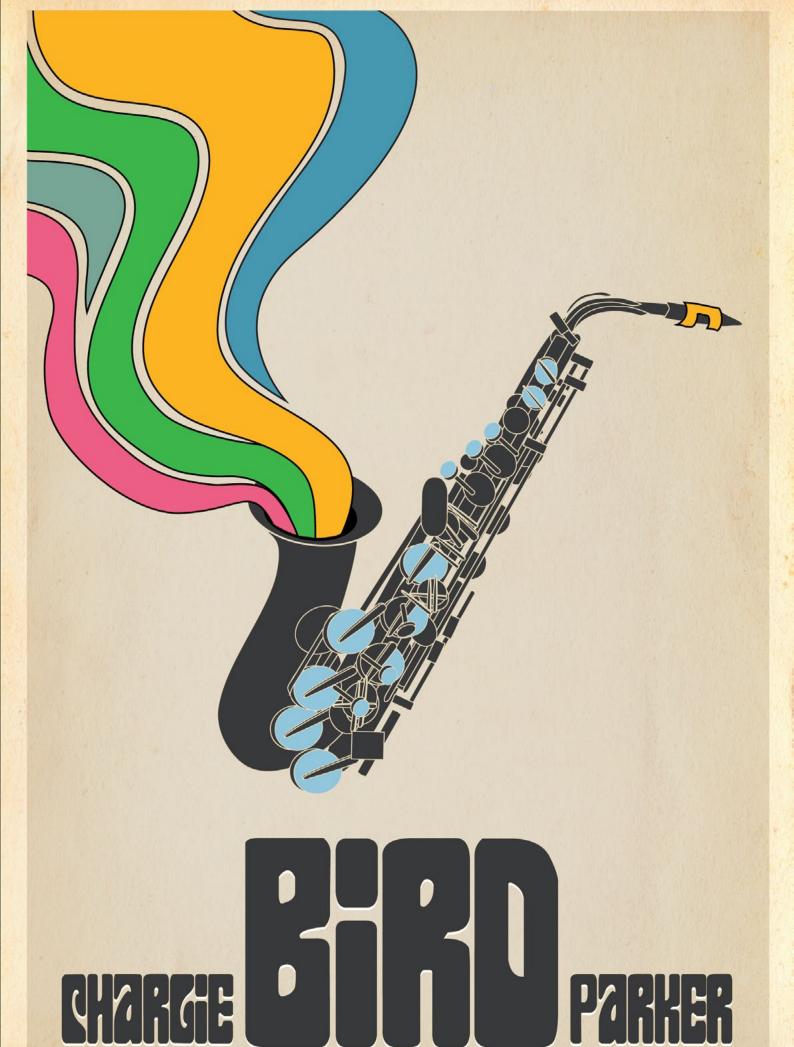
After a year, I found my way into radio, working in ad sales. I was fortunate to spend a few years working for two of the top music stations in Chicago. One was classic rock (WCKG) and the other was urban (V-103). I really enjoyed both experiences. I later realized I loved working around music and creative types more than I like the actual job itself. I later ended up working at Starz (the cable network) and Music Choice (another cable television content provider), both in marketing and distribution.

During my cable career, I started producing branded CDs for restaurants and hotels as a side hustle. The first project was a collaboration with a co-worker's husband. After the completion of that project, he moved on to other opportunities and I started targeting hotels. Once I secured the contracts, I would select the music, secure the license to use the music, get the CDs manufactured. This was my first endeavour in design. I had zero design experience, but I knew what I liked so I downloaded the demo software for Coral Draw and Adobe. At that time, I felt more comfortable with Coral Draw, so I purchased the software, read some books and started designing CD covers. Surprisingly, I was good at it.

THE 30 IN 30 CHALLENGE

In 2008, Music Choice began to downsize which led to me being laid off. My wife, who very supportive, thought it would be a good idea for me to finally pursue my passion. So instead of going back into the corporate race, I took a year off to study design. A year later, we moved to California.

Once in California, I started freelancing for a number of companies including The American Heart Association in Los Angeles and AARP. I later started doing contract work for Esri, the world's leading GIS software company. I was creating 32 and 16 pixel icons for their software tools. Designing for spaces that small of was extremely challenging and mentally draining. I was starting to worry I was moving away from my passion and falling back into a corporate grind. That is why I implemented my 30 in 30 self-challenge which was to create on poster a day for 30 days. And, in order to keep my focus, I wanted to maintain a common theme. That theme was



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CHARLES WHITE



old school hip hop.

Upon finishing the project, I decided to post my work on Etsy to see if there would be any interest in my work. It was a little scary putting my work out there but after a couple of days, I started getting sales. I started creating more prints to sell on Etsy. This little experiment turned into a fulltime business which eventually led me into licensing agreements.

My first license agreement was with the Miles Davis estate. I felt both excited and privileged. Being able to create designs for Miles Davis has been an honor. It was at that time, I started to see myself as an actual artist.

NB: The 30 in 30 project sounds like a real challenge!

CW: The 30 in 30 project was a real challenge. It was something I greatly needed at the time. It was probably the smartest thing I ever did for myself. Because I was working on software icons at that time, I felt I was falling into a technical rut. I wanted to reconnect with why I loved designing in the first place. I also thought it would be great opportunity to combine three things I loved: graphic design,

poster art and music. It was a great mental exercise, it helped me learn how to design when I was not in the mood, how to get past creative blocks and how to stay on schedule.

NB: Is it something that you would repeat?

CW: I don't know. Fortunately, I'm in a place where I have enough diversity of projects, my juices are constantly flowing. In fact, sometimes I have to force myself not to think and shut it down.

NB; How do you view the commercialisation of art, is it a constraint or does it give you more freedom and why?

CW: I don't think there is one definitive answer to this question. If you are creating art to sell to a specific audience and that is the only objective, that will be constraining. In that scenario, you are designing with the mindset of, "this is what they want" versus "this is what I'm feeling". For me, it is hard to design from that perspective. Those type of projects are a struggle and typically take me much longer to complete.

On the other hand, commercial art can help you

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CHARLES WHITE



grow as an artist. When I design a licensed print, I am expressing my interpretation of the subject. But even though I have the license to be creative and expressive, there are still guidelines I have to follow. Learning how to navigate my creativity within those guidelines is an exercise that actually makes you a better artist.

All that being said, the idea of being a "starving artist" does not appeal to me. I feel the goal is to balance being true to who you are as an artist/designer and being able to earn a living. At the end of the day, we are fortunate to be able to make a living doing what we love. It doesn't matter if its commercial art or fine art, you're still creating.

NB: What advice would you give to someone wanting to make their living from art the way that you have?

CW: Three parts:

Figure out what moves you. What inspires you. Ask for forgiveness, not permission. Too many times, we ask for permission to do instead of just doing it. Yeah, you're going to make mistakes but who cares. That's how you learn and grow.

Understanding everything is not for everyone. Not everyone is going to appreciate your work and that's okay.

NB: Who do you admire in the art world?

CW: As a designer, I always admired Saul Bass. In my opinion, he is the greatest graphic designer ever. I've never seen anyone say so much with so little. I've always been attracted to minimalist designs. I could look at his movie posters all day.

MILES DAVIS AND PRINCE

NB: Who is your greatest musical idol?

CW: I have two, Miles Davis and Prince. They both were in their own unique universe.

Miles Davis has such a huge canvas of work. He never allowed himself to be boxed in. From "Birth of the Cool" to "Doo-Bop" he was always changing the game. He is probably the most inspiring artist to design prints for. He's a force of gravity like no other. And don't get me started on his persona. Miles is the definition of cool. To quote his nephew, Vince Wilburn (who is an incredible musician himself),

LIME AT ISULANDO SERVICIONES

CHARLES WHITE



Miles was and still is a superhero.

As for Prince, all I can say is he a major part of my life soundtrack. I remember the first time I heard the "Dirty Mind" album; I instantly became a fan. It was unlike anything I ever heard before. The bass line and funk on "Head" was mind blowing. Of course, at that age, I really didn't know what the song was about. I just knew it was funky. And like Miles, he was never restricted to one genre. A lot of people don't know he had two jazz funk albums, "Madhouse 8" and "Madhouse 16". I highly recommend checking them out if you can find them.

DANISH HiFi

NB; We met you at the Audio Group Denmark exhibit at AXPONA, so we guess there is a Danish influence on your HiFi, what is in your HiFi system? CW: I have two HiFi systems. My main system is the following:

Aavik I-280 Integrated Amp, Aavik S-280 Streamer, Esoteric U-Z1 Universal Disc Player (I guess it's a vintage piece at this point but it still sounds great), VPI Prime 21 Turntable, Moon LP5.3 Phono Amp

(looking to upgrade to Aavik in the future).

Borresen X6 Speakers. These 200 pound speakers are the truth! They really sing with the Aavik equipment. And they look amazing. They are a true statement piece, acoustically and visually.

Ansuz Mainz8 Power Distributor and Ansuz X2 Speaker Cables.

My smaller office system is a Primaluna Evo 300 Integrated Tube Amp, PS Audio DAC, Bluesound Node Streamer, Tannoy Mini Speakers and Nordost Speaker Cables.

NB: Have you reached audio nirvana or are you on an upgrade path?

CW: Do we ever truly reach audio nirvana? I think the journey to nirvana is what we enjoy which is why upgrades are always on the table. Right now, I am extremely happy with my system. The Aavik and Borresen set up is an incredible audio experience. Each listening session sounds even better than the previous.

As for upgrades, I have my eye on the Aavik R-180



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CHARLES WHITE



phono stage. I have about 3,000 albums in my collection so investing in a premium phono stage could be worthwhile experience. There is something to be said about a night of vinyl and a bottle of pinot noir.

NB: Give us three tunes that tell us about you, where you have been, where you are going and where you are right now.

CW: "Colors" by Ashley Henry. The line that connected with me is "we bring the color to the mural, we bring the chorus to the song". This is more of an aspiration.

"Everybody Loves the Sunshine" by Roy Ayers Ubiquity. It's about living your best life. Every day I wake up, my goal is to make it my best. Tomorrow is not promised. No matter how challenging the day is, a sunny day will always make it seem better.

"I Love Music" by The O'Jays. The title says it all. I simply love music, all types of music. My work and my pleasure are heavily influenced by music. For me, music is medicinal (I borrowed that from a friend at Mo-Fi).

NB: If you could spend a day with anyone from history, alive or dead, who would it be and what would you do?

CW: Muhammad Ali. He is the definition of strength and living your truth. And I'm not talking about physical strength. I'm talking about strength of character. I would simply want to sit with him and listen to his stories and life lessons. Stories and lessons that go far beyond boxing.

NB: Describe your perfect day off, who you spend it with and what you do away from work.

CW: A perfect day off is simply being at home, taking a musical journey through my albums with the family. It's pretty simple.

NB: Thank you Charles, it has been a pleasure talking to you, see you at AXPONA next year!

You can check out Charles' music inspired work at his website

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SO YOU'RE DEAD. NOW WHAT?

like to think of myself as a cheery kind of soul, but of late I've started to consider my own mortality a little more than I have done previously. Don't get me wrong, as Jerry Driscoll, the doorman at Abbey Road Studios says at the start of The Great Gig In The Sky from Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon record "I am not frightened of dying. Why should I be frightened of dying?", but I am aware that, to misquote Cat Stevens, we're only dancing on this earth for a short time. I'm of an age where I pretty regularly hear through social

media of friends and folk I knew in my youth having pegged it and within the last few years both my parents have carked it.

I'm an atheist and believe that when our numbers are up then we don't ascend to some higher place or descend to some hellish pit, though a few experiences have had me question the nature of consciousness, but that's a whole new topic and of discussion that I'll no doubt waffle on at length about at some point in the future. Long story short is when we pop off this mortal coil that's it, finito, the end and what happens to our bag of bones is of little consequence to the recently deceased.

Told you I was a cheery soul!

I was reading an article in an antipodean magazine about how cemeteries were becoming more suburbanised and that there was an opportunity for them to become areas in which relatives and loved ones could remember the dead in surroundings a little more fitting to their memory...that's another whole other article in itself. Not long after having read this primarily town planning themed article I got a timely e-mail reminder that I need to pick up the ashes of my mother and father and my mind (not at all morbidly) turned to thoughts about the options that are available to us, or rather those taking care of the arrangements after we peg it.

We don't have a family plot where I can be planted and, anyway, I've seen the film Poltergeist. Scary films about ancient tribal burial grounds notwithstanding, I don't really see burial as a viable option given the (roughly) 150 000 folk who die each day around the world. I mean, where are we supposed to bury four and a half million corpses a month? There has to be a more space-efficient way of dealing with the dead and the obvious one is cremation, where ones lifeless remains are returned to loved ones as a handful of ashes. Actually, I'm guessing that it's around a handful as I still haven't made the necessary arrangements to pick up my folks ashes.... not that I'm overly sure what I'm going to do with them once I do get round to it. Perhaps a nice quiet family occasion where folk say their last goodbyes... that opportunity has long gone. Perhaps a scattering at a favourite beauty spot. I could always make like (allegedly) Keith Richards and snort my folks up like a line of cocaine.

Fifty years down the line I don't want future great grandkids of mine being sent to the freezer for a bag of frozen peas only to discover great grandad's or 90 million miles...a day...or 32 850 000 000 head staring up at them who dies gets cremated. from beneath the **Findus Crispy Pancakes** and Raspberry Ripple ice-cream.

So, a bit more reading had me discover that cremation isn't actually all that great for the environment with Google telling me that an average cremation creates 535lbs of CO2 which is the equivalent of driving in a medium-sized car for over 600 miles. That's over 80 million pounds of CO2 a day... miles a year if everyone That's around 69 000 round trips to the moon each year...stick that in your pipe and smoke it Jeff Bezos.

Cremation and burial are clearly not all that sustainable from an environmental or a space

availability perspective and so I began to look at the options.

Before we get into the possibilities, let me tell you what I have, or had, in my mind's eye following my own demise. I saw two options:

A full Viking ceremony replete with burning longship being sailed with my body down the local river was my preference, but it seems that is neither practical, environmentally conscious, or something any of the folk likely to be left behind really want to get into organising.

A normal event at the crem' with family, friends, and a specially invited gaggle of beautiful but unknown women wailing at the back of the room to get collective tongues wagging (youngest son has been charged with this organisational detail already) followed by stale sandwiches and a fight at a local hostelry. Oh, and a Facebook message from my account to all attending to say "Thanks for coming." The second of the two choices outlined above is what is likely to happen, to a greater or lesser extent, but lets have a look at what other ways of

SO YOU'RE DEAD. NOW WHAT?



disposal are available....without getting all gangland creative and using car crushers and concrete wellingtons.

SO WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS?

Let's face it, you aren't going to give a humanist celebrant's platitude what happens to you when you die, but those that are left want the excuse for a lash up at your expense. Sorry, I'll rephrase that. Those that are sadly left behind will take comfort in a ceremony that is poignant, meaningful, and gives them the opportunity to mourn in a dignified and respectable fashion....and then get uproariously pissed and start a fight over the stale vegan pork pies.

Alkaline Hydrolysis looked an interesting option when I was researching this topic. The other names for this form of decomposing your bod are "water cremation", "aquamation", or "resomation" and essentially your lifeless corpse is decomposed fairly rapidly by a mixture of water, heat, and alkaline chemicals that leave nothing but a sterile liquid and some bone residue. No toxins or emissions are created during the process and so it's a bit of a green alternative, but it does cost significantly more at the moment than a straightforward burning, but less than a burial. If you happen to be a funeral

director looking to buy a machine to do this, I'm led to believe that you can't just carry this procedure out in an old bath, then you are going to be looking at anywhere from \$200,000 to €400, 000 a go, plus maintenance down the road.

Now, if you are a super-rich nut job that thinks that in the distant future medical science will be able to revive your frozen remains, then you can opt for cryonics. Essentially this process involves your bodily fluids being replaced with cryoprotectants (I'm guessing those involved have a deal where they get bulk discount on anti-freeze down at Halfords) so that ice doesn't form and bugger up your internal organs and cells. I headed over to "Tomorrow Bio" to see how much this would cost me and it turns out that you can go for whole-body or neuro cryopreservation with the latter just preserving your brain (still inside your head). Neuro cryopreservation is apparently going to set you back a minimum of \$80K but then there are other ongoing charges. An "all-inclusive cryopreservation plan with Tomorrow Bio is \$200K". So this one is out for me unless the loving bereaved want to opt for the DIY option and buy a chest freezer at around €500 and a load of anti-freeze (around a tenner for five litres). Personally, I'm really not so sure about this whole procedure (even the pro version) as I think it's all a bit far-fetched to think future generations are going to want to defrost me from my frozen state and give me new life. And just the head and brain thing? That just has too much of The Man With Two Brains

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about it for comfort. The DIY version is a recipe for disaster too. Fifty years down the line I don't want future great grandkids of mine being sent to the freezer for a bag of frozen peas only to discover great grandad's head staring up at them from beneath the Findus Crispy Pancakes and Raspberry Ripple ice-cream.

Burial at sea came up as an option and this sort of appealed to me in the same way that the aforementioned Viking ceremony appealed, but I can't help thinking that in years to come we're going to have millions of half decomposed and barnacle encrusted cadavers washing up on the Spanish Costas ruining everyone's summer vacation. I did look into the options around this particularly nautical arrangement and I was taken aback as to how reasonable

this method of disposal can be. Fully inclusive options that include ten passengers, the MMO burial at sea license, crew, fuel and all the rest of it cost from £2185. I assume that this is not for an actual burial but more of a scattering of the ashes off the coast of Cleethorpes or something. But I may be wrong as a bit more research had me find a "full-body burial at sea" by New England Burial At Sea (dot com) costing \$7500, including a four to six hour trip on a 65 foot yacht, though a natural burial shroud will set you back another \$750. This seems quite reasonable and I've been looking as to whether optional extras like water skiing for mourners (avoiding my inevitably floating remains which would add a frisson of slalom-like excitement to the event) and a DJ playing yacht rock are available. Mark this one as a "definitely a possibility if we can't sort the Viking thing!"

Promession is basically the freeze-drying of your remains and then breaking the resulting lump

down into a powder....we're getting into the whole Keith Richards legend thing again here. This process was developed in Sweden by a biologist called Susanne Wiigh-Masak in the 90s, though her company Promessa Organic carked it in 2015 before it had the chance to do any freeze-drying of any actual

people. The process is as follows: Body gets frozen to -196 degrees C, frozen body is vibrated for a bit to disintegrate frozen cells, the frozen gubbins is put in a vacuum chamber and water is removed. Any metal bits like pacemakers, gold teeth, and hip-replacements are sieved out or removed by magnets. Finally, whatever is left is popped inside a container made of potato starch and buried where is decomposes over six to eighteen months, though you can opt to be kept in an urn at home. Not currently widely available given the research I've done and so costs are unknown, but most seem to think it will be around the same price as a normal flame-grilled affair.

Space Burial sounds all a bit silly as all it involves is sending a just a little bit of your remains into

I like this idea.
Come on Mr
Bezos,
I'm looking at you here!

space inside a capsule and one of the other methods of properly dealing with the rest of your body will be required to deal with the rest of you. Now, if some enterprising type with space exploration tendencies was to say colonise a planet, build a fleet of spacecraft able to fly up 150 000 dead folk a day to space cemeteries, then I think we are onto a winner here. No problems with pollution (apart from the dozens of rockets a day outputting untold and disastrous amounts of noxious gubbins) and no problems with ground space for the deceased. I like this idea. Come on Mr Bezos, I'm looking at you here!

Now you can also donate your body to medical science and I'm reminded here of a Not the Nine O'Cclock News sketch here where a clearly ill man with massively high cholesterol visits his doctor to get some test results. The doctor asks "Would you leave me your body

when you die?" whereupon the patient wants to know if his body will aid medical science. The Doctor responds "No, I want to hang you in the garden for the Tits to peck at!" And this may not be as silly as it sounds with Sky Burial being a thing in Tibetan Buddhism, where the body is left out as nourishment

SO YOU'RE DEAD. NOW WHAT?



for other living creatures (not tits but vultures in this case). Zoroastrian's do a similar thing where bodies are left on Towers of Silence for the birds to peck at.

The whole sky burial thing got me thinking about other options around the world and it seems there are many ways in dealing with the dead. In parts of Indonesia, China, and the Philippines coffins are placed on cliffs or suspended from trees to keep their dead away from scavenging beasts or flood waters.

In Madagascar the Malagasy people practice Famadihana (turning of the bones) where dead relatives bodies are exhumed from their tombs and rewrapped in fresh shrouds from time to time. Mummification is another option but leads to all kinds of curses and things. I've seen the documentary film The Mummy and frankly it doesn't seem like a sensible option down the line and involves all manner of mishaps when a supernatural priest is disturbed from his deathly slumbers. Not recommended!

In Sulawesi in Indonesia the Toraja people carry out something called tree burials where a dead person is placed inside a hollowed-out trunk of a tree or a coffin is suspended from branches of a tree. Sort of like a not very festive Christmas time, I suppose. Taxidermy appeals a great deal to me. What better way to keep the memory of my joyful being alive than having me stuffed and posed so that I can sit with the family for eternity and essentially be a part

of all their day to day activities. A degree of articulation in my dead joints could be included so that my corpsey remains could be seated at the dinner table, in the front room to watch television, and even bundled in the car for days away at the beach. Yes, taxidermy seems like the ideal option for me with the only downside I see being that the dead will very quickly outnumber the living in the house and that would be a bit weird!

And so there you have it. Not Boring's guide to what to do with yourself once you are dead. Personally, I have found the whole experience of researching this topic a "right laugh" and I can hardly contain my excitement at pegging it and not seeing what my loving family does with my mortal remains. In a way I hope they go for the full on Viking burial thing but that seems unlikely. Burial at sea could be a giggle too if we can sort the water-skiing, DJ and (now out in international waters) party prescriptions out. However, what seems much more likely is that details will be left to the hospital where my corpse is taken and that will likely end up me being cremated and their being a bit of a party where everyone gets shitfaced afterwards to the point that everyone forgets their dignity and starts bickering over who will get my collection of assorted crap that has accumulated over the years and as to who the gaggle of beautiful women were at the back of the crematorium. Harry and Billy, you know your jobs here!

Thanks for coming!



Hello Ole and thank you so much for inviting us to the launch of the Treble Clef Audio TCA-M active speaker here in Copenhagen. It is said often that the most critical and defining part of music reproduction in the home is the interaction between the loudspeaker(s) and the room they are placed in. Treble Clef Audio have gone into directions and technologies that have hardly if at all been explored by other audio manufacturers to control and tailor the dispersion pattern of the speakers, especially in the bass registers.

NB. Can you explain how you have come to adopting the basic principles embodied in the TCA-M loudspeaker, and why you decided to pursue them to realise the product we have in front of us today?

OS: To properly answer this question, I think a bit of background history on my research and a look at some of the principles of hearing and room acoustics is needed.

In my experience, conventional box-type loudspeakers are associated with a more or less pronounced boomy and unresolved bass perception, unlike the instruments they are meant to reproduce, had they been played by musicians in the same room. This indicates to me, that although the room has a pronounced effect on sound, not least in the bass region, there are some fundamental differences between sound generated by instruments versus sound emitted by most current loudspeakers.

We can define bass as being below the room's transition frequency, where more reflected than direct sound is heard. The room being the same, then what constitutes the difference between a loudspeaker source versus the original sound from instruments?

The essence of the answer is that no instruments, perhaps except for the Cajón, are shaped as a box seeking to contain half the generated sound energy inside it. With a conventional loudspeaker, one half of the sound pressure is contained inside the box. The other half of the energy, generated as the woofer diaphragm moves both in and out in opposite phase, is dispersed fully omni-directionally into the room reflecting off the walls, floor and ceiling often more than once exciting room modes with only a few Hertz between each. Conversely with acoustic instruments half the sound energy is not trapped inside an enclosure, instead, both

in and out of phase sound waves flows around, in and out of the instrument's body, forming complex dispersion patterns that do not universally excite room modes and causing standing waves in the pronounced manner loudspeakers tends to do.

Additionally, a conventional closed or vented loudspeaker enclosure must be large for deep bass and the woofer(s) must move a lot of air. Consequently, enclosure surface areas are large, much larger than the woofer diaphragm, and despite damping and stiffening efforts the enclosure will inevitably be playing along with sound that isn't part of the music signal sent to the loudspeaker. A lack of time coherence, especially from vented designs is an issue that further distorts what we hear.

Aesthetically, a larger space such as a concert hall has a subjective living property added to the rather dry sound of say a pizzicato cello or bass. The concert hall effect is highly involving and instead of perceiving the music as static and in front of the listener, only the immediate attack of the note is in front. The subsequent body of the note seems to be all around the listener, drawing him or her into the performance. In short – the sound is beautiful. With conventional loudspeakers, reproduced sound in a room lacks this living quality.

Often low frequencies are not perceived as external and with location, but inside the head. This is because vented and closed box designs, which are fully omni-directional at low frequencies, tends to interact with and pressurise the room to a steady state and thus lack any pressure gradient; the inter aural time delay is zero, and remains zero when the head is rotated. The subconscious brain not knowing how to localise these initial sounds, will perceive them as internal. Music reproduced from loudspeakers with this property is so common that we have come to accept it as inevitable, but it is far from authentic, and not as involving as say a live trio might be in the same room.

The quest for me then became; how to design a fundamentally different bass loudspeaker system with a low frequency sound dispersion, that preserves the required interaural time difference pressure gradients in the listening room, just like they do when acoustic instruments are played. These and other details were for me an exciting research project



covering room- and psychoacoustics. Then with this understanding, trying to figure out what the implications would be for the physics of loudspeaker design.

As it turns out, in early 2000 Axel Ridtahler invented a Folded Dipole (dubbed Ripol) bass ystem with the kind of sound dispersion pattern my research suggested. However, this original design had several drawbacks that needed to be addressed in terms of both enhancing the sound dispersion pattern, extending especially the upper usable frequency range and using as small as possible special woofers with a large linear excursion and suitable characteristics for the bass system I had in mind.

Completely eliminating sound from vibrating parts needed a force and internal sound energy cancelling construction, thereby completely avoiding any enclosure sound coloration.

Coloration of sound from a resonating enclosure is a pronounced issue with conventional box design that high-end loudspeaker designers are battling with. The original Ripol design that I built, despite its relatively compact square box like enclosure, is no exception in terms of vibration and a box sound of its own. The reduced sidewall reflections and somewhat asymmetric sound dispersion pattern limits the standing waves in the room and, despite the enclosure sound coloration, certainly sounded much nicer than my own large conventional box speakers, or any I had heard. The box sound vibrations were quite evident and confirmed by accelerometer measurements. The useful upper frequency range was also limited to about 100Hz by a very pronounced resonance peak at about 150Hz, an inherentproperty of a folded dipole.

With the Treble Clef Audio® patented folded dipole principle, the upper frequency range is significantly extended based on modelling efforts supported by experiments and measurements, such that we can comfortably crossover up to about 220Hz, amply avoiding the inherent folded dipole resonance now occurring at about 370Hz. This way a smooth directive transition to a small diameter high quality midrange system became possible.

The relationships between the inner, and outer folded dipole volume and port size also emphasise the air velocity transducer properties of this kind of bass system. Air velocity is the means of creating the low

frequencies pressure gradients in the room that enable us to locate bass sounds experienced from the transient attack and initially chaotic sound field of for example drums, piano, string instruments, an organ pipe and another low frequency complex sounds that we naturally and subconsciously recognise and need to hear for an authentic experience. Our white paper, available from trebleclefaudio. com, represents my notes and conclusions of this research effort as it applies to loudspeaker design considerations, a fundamentally different loudspeaker design that we achieved a granted patent for in just under 2 years. The patent of course shows that we have gone in a different and unique direction with the TCA-M and our future range of loudspeakers. This to include at-home extraordinary theatre surround sound experiences.

Aside from the challenges that conventional boxtype loudspeakers present in the bass region, further phenomenon in the midrange and treble frequencies are exacerbated by placing front firing drivers on the relatively large baffle of the typical high-end loudspeakers. It further emphasises the advantages our slender sculptural design that emerged from my research, where we avoid the typical baffle step and beaming directivity that also comes with diffraction challenges causing extra sound artefacts and so-called lobing that causes dispersion patterns of lacking sound. Instead, above the room transition frequency, the TCA-M design has a 180-degree dispersions pattern with the off-axis responses perfectly uniform with the direct sound up to about 4000Hz, then gradually and uniformly tapering off as the sound energy dissipates at higher frequencies.

The TCA-M speaker achieves a pleasurable phantom 3D psychoacoustic soundstage, the precision of which to a degree depends on the timing, related to room size, of reflections. Our loudspeakers are purposefully intended for ordinary rooms as an integral part of an interior design, sized from about 20m2 – 60m2, and importantly without consideration to any need for specific acoustic room treatment intended to reduce reflections. We purposefully want to keep reflections and let them be controlled by the sound dispersion pattern suggested by my research.

According to quite recent research, the dispersion pattern of the TCA-M loudspeaker is also designed to be equivalent to human speech and song. As a result, the sound is spectrally balanced and engaging

both in and even outside the listening room, where only reflected sound is heard, just like would be the case if someone were playing actual instruments in the room.

NB: Active loudspeakers are still struggling somewhat to find acceptation in the world of high end audio, as most people who form the traditional target market

for a loudspeaker system in the high five figure euro/dollar range, have already put significant investment into amplification and dealers are unsurprisingly reluctant to tell them to divest from expensive hifi gear they have sold to them before. In what ways is active, DSP-controlled drive integral to the sonic results of the TCA-M speaker, and to what extent is Treble Clef Audio aiming at a market outside the high end hifi microcosmos as we know it? And how did that shape the decision to launch the TCA-M as part of a design event rather than a HiFi show?

OS: For me regarding our intentional use of state-ofthe-art DSP technology, the short answer is that the acoustic properties from my research that I wanted to accomplish are impossible with passive speakers and permutations of external component choices.

Of course, exactly that audiophile enthusiastic exploration into combinations of amplifiers, cables and so on is an exciting hobby, as it certainly has been for me, experiencing many fleeting moments of potential greatness, but with little concrete explanation as to why and an ability to consistently repeating how.

I couldn't see it feasible to create a loudspeaker like the TCA-M with the properties we desire without taking full control of the signal path from inputs to the acoustical output from the several electro acoustic transducer systems that must integrate as if a single sound source.

We are now seeing a trend of high-end loudspeaker brands introducing an active or semi- active loudspeaker series to their range. Most of them of course still conventionally closed and vented box-type speakers with inherent properties that even active DSP control is unable to fundamentally overcome. Equalising a speaker for a more ideal response in rooms will at some level be limited by its fundamental acoustic design principles. For example, the monopole and omnidirectional nature of an

enclosed either vented or sealed woofer bass system or the off-axis response above the room transition frequency that may not be uniform with direct sound, again due to fundamental design principles, can't be universally addressed by DSP technology.

Another important factor for achieving authentic reproduction of music, is an overall phase-linear, or more encompassing fully time-coherent, acoustic integrated system response. For that purpose, a correctly designed DSP-controlled crossover is essential, not least in the bass region where time coherence down to the lowest frequencies have proven a necessary property for reproducing the true nature of bass. For the TCA-M loudspeaker, that means constant group delay from 30Hz to 24KHz and only gradually increasing to about just 13ms down to 20Hz. An accomplishment that with the TCA-M bass system design is possible only in conjunction with DSP technology. The bass clarity and resolution achieved by the TCA-Mloudspeaker, I believe few have heard or at present appreciate how much these properties matters for bass reproduction in ordinary rooms.

To design an all-encompassing optimal transfer function for the system, we must understand its inherent native behaviour; through input stage analog and digital electronics, via the DSP implementation, through each power amplifier and via optimally short cabling to each speaker drive as built into some form of enclosure. We make anechoic (without room reflections) measurements that fully characterise the behaviour of, in the case of the TCA-M loudspeaker, the three-speaker driver system signal chains; folded dipole bass, monopole wide dispersion midrange and tweeter systems, all of which must ultimately integrate as one coherent sound source.

Visiting Dr. Wolfgang Klippel and his wonderful team of experts, I learned a lot about the detailed behaviour of a prototype TCA-M loudspeaker by using the Klippel Near Field Scanner and deep expertise of the team in Dresden. I think this kind of approach is the future for truly high-end loudspeaker designs. It will get us to a stage where inventions within transducer units, their principles and motor system, diaphragm materials, coating etc. is optimised by simulation of the physics involved and material science being fully exploited to tailor the parts of an overall amazing loudspeaker systems. The TCA-M being a step in this



direction. Inevitably, new generation audiophile enthusiasts and music lovers alike will likely focus their attention more on the music, artists and recordings smitten by more up-to-date authentic experiences brought to ordinary living rooms.

The choice of input music playback source is completely open to the user as our loudspeakers come with very high dynamic range and extremely low noise analog input, digital AES/EBU, RCA SPDIF and even a Dante® lossless Ethernet LAN input. Our loudspeakers therefore suit both a fully analog frontend preamplifier with for example vinyl and R2R tape sources. Alternatively, one of the growing choices of high-end digital pre-amplifiers that features both analog and digital inputs as well as lossless streaming, excellent optimally implemented volume control etc. can all be connected. Finally, using the Dante® input the TCA-M and future Treble Clef Audio® loudspeakers connects directly to the recording, mixing mastering studio technology over a multi-channel lossless Ethernet LAN, which is also great for a home theatre installation with hidden wiring.

As we introduce our home theatre complementary and physically smaller loudspeaker series based on our patented acoustic platform, two such speakers will exhibit our Sound by design qualities, albeit with less power than a set of our main TCA-M speakers, with a very respectable actual bass extension of about 30Hz, and at a more affordable price point. The decision to launch Treble Clef Audio® and the TCA-M loudspeaker during 3daysofdesign in Copenhagen was quite deliberate. I have often been wondering why interior design magazines rarely, if ever, feature loudspeakers in a beautifully curated home interior. I can't imagine it's because people who care about their homes, spending effort, time and no doubt discretionary funds to achieve a beautiful interior are not also music lovers. My dream is to change that by hopefully one day having the TCA-M loudspeaker as part of a magazine featured interior. I don't know if that is too ambitious, but I can't think of a better event than the 10-year anniversary of the Copenhagen 3daysofdesign week to communicate that idea. Let's see, next year we may also be found at a HIFI show or two.

We build our loudspeakers by custom order only, with unique styling choices such as hardwood, colour and finish of certain parts. This also speaks into the creative minds of those that work in and enjoy

the interior design realm, and whom attend such events.

Furthermore, the TCA-M Loudspeaker is built with the notion of 'Form follows Function', but none-theless, is presented as a beautiful sculptural object, as much as a functioning loudspeaker. Our customers will be investing in a piece of art for their home, as well as a sound system, making the design world as much our target audience, as the high end hifi microcosmos.

It remains to be seen who might become our customers, but first and foremost I imagine it will be critical listeners who loves the combination of music and styling in their home without need for lots of additional technical gear, cables and acoustic room treatment other than rugs, furniture and people. As Miles Davis said, "For me, music and life are all about style".

NB: Can you tell us more about the collaborations with local craftspeople and engineers that resulted in the realization of this project? What will the production/value chain of Treble Clef Audio production look like, and how does it differ from the way high value consumer goods are normally produced and marketed?

OS: Launching Treble Clef Audio® and the TCA-M loudspeaker in Copenhagen and our exciting plans for extending our product range based on our patented acoustic platform, is the culmination of 6 years of development, industrial design considerations and the creation of a new and quite different Danish loudspeaker brand, all made possible only because of serendipitous meetings and close collaboration with a small group of independent, highly talented engineers, craftsmen and creative people. After hand building the first set of treble clef design loudspeakers and encouraged by the feedback and sound, I wanted to find out if perhaps I could obtain a design patent. Having thought more about the research and principles I had employed; I wrote an invention disclosure and sent it for review to a highly respected Intellectual Property law firm in Copenhagen. Their feedback was to opt for a full utility patent, which meant a need for precise drawings, CAD modelling and building a complete version of TCA-M including all my ideas, which wasn't quite part of the hand-built set of speakers made in my own simple workshop and had to be captured to define the full set of patent claims.



Finding someone in Denmark that could help with CAD modelling my speakers, translating my sketched ideas and explanations into an industrial design and to machined parts, was not easy. From internet searches I found a small company not too far from me and met with the owner Peter, who is one of the most talented people I know, and now also a dear friend, who shares the passion for this project and my product. With Peter's help, the industrial CAD design was completed, the patent was filed and then granted in less than 2 years and now production ready.

To launch the company, I also needed to create a brand identity true to my aspirations, find a Danish furniture quality skilled carpentry shop, someone to build a beautiful website, create CGI animations, a 3D online configurator for personal styling options, help with copy writing, styling on photoshoots, planning and executing events, engaging with international press etc.

The wonderful and talented creative people I have behind the project, I initially found through my daughter's new circle of Copenhagen friends and from there further serendipitous connections emerged. This team also staying with the idea and goal behind the brand though the couple of years with Covid-19 global impact, supply chain issues and delays.

From what I have read, the original concept of luxury, from brands like for example Louis Vuitton, was very much about solving a practical problem through ingenuity, the form follows function design principle, quality craftsmanship and collaboration between local artisans, each with special talents and skills, marketing being word of mouth based on customer recommendations. This same approach, updated with today's technology and online communication methods, appeals to me as way of creating more value with less overheads based on shared goals and a complement of talents.

I am very proud of knowing and collaborating with the amazing and dedicated team behind the launch of Treble Clef Audio[®]. With my background in engineering and product management, I can't imagine a high-end design and technically complex product like the TCA-M active loudspeaker could have been accomplished in any other way. As evident today, the team of collaborators have achieved this goal.

With the launch in Copenhagen, the Treble Clef Audio® production and value chain is now fully ready to deliver on built to order and personally styled hand assembled TCA-M loudspeakers. Each of the few companies involved doing what they do best every day for several other brand products and one-of projects using precision machining of parts and hand finishing.

We offer installation and configuration assistance and deliver globally backed by an extended limited warranty for 7 years. Enquiries and a personal dialog about styling options and wishes, audio, connectivity, delivery, installation and anything else related can be initiated via trebleclefaudio.com.

We prefer a close personal contact with potential customers and are also working on further collaborations to enable listening experiences and services in select key locations globally.

NB: Tell us about your personal journey in music and audio so far...

OS: Like most of us, I have always enjoyed music as an important aspect of being human in any culture. Over the years I have come to appreciate many music genres from across the world.

I keep an eclectic number of playlists that constantly gets added to whenever I hear something interesting. Unfortunately, I don't play an instrument myself despite my farther being an accomplished musician on the accordion and as young man playing in a Danish radio orchestra.

Fortunately, our two daughters grew up playing the violin and piano. We went to many concerts with young upcoming music school talents, offering me plenty exposure to how acoustic instruments really sound and in various buildings from barns to concert halls, and ordinary rooms. I have since heard many excellent loudspeakers, but none that to me, until now, sound truly authentic — especially in the bass region.

From an early age, and initially with help from my musical, electromechanical engineer and craftsman skilled father Helge Siig, I built several closed and vented box-type speakers, preamplifiers, power amplifiers etc. Each time a new

loudspeaker box with even better driversetc. was built, I had high hopes that my latest, but fundamentally equivalent creation, would sound amazing - only to be disappointed especially by the bass that never quite sounded like the instruments they were meant to reproduce.

Age 16, I had built a set of Coral Studio 200 loud-speakers, a Japanese brand of speaker units that came with enclosure schematics looking very similar to the large JBL L300 Studio Master, so-called West Coast Sound, monitors of that time. At first, I was very taken by how well these speakers sounded, but again never completely happy with the bass, despite the 15" very well specified woofer and washing machine sized enclosure. As I now understand, I was really listening to the resonances of the large enclosure and the inevitable pronounced room interaction, diffraction and lobing issues of such a design. The still excellent Coral drivers were specified for a 12dB/Oct crossover, but still not a phase-linear design.

As I embarked on my engineering degree, I had been puzzling over the phase behaviour of loud-speakers and especially the considerable non-linear and insurmountable contribution of phase distortion from a passive crossover. At the time, I did not fully appreciate the associated inherent challenges with loudspeaker room interaction, acoustic principles and the physics of sound trapped inside an enclosure, the system low-end roll-off behaviour, port resonance and lack of time coherence. Taken together all the properties of a loudspeaker are described by a system transfer function, which essentially means how an audio input signal is transformed to an acoustic output signal by the overall system.

A couple of engineering friends and I had an idea for a phase-linear active analog crossover. Above 12dB/Oct it would turn into an oscillator but simulated well at 12dB/Oct on the early 1980'ties Acorn Atom home computer programmed to run a Bode Plot Simulation of the crossover circuit. Each run between circuit modifications taking over 24 hours with the 6502- microprocessor spinning at an amazing 1MHz clock speed. The result was a perfectly flat frequency response and completely linear phase response. However, this solution only addressed the crossover electronic circuit's contribution to phase distortion leaving the transfer function as an overall electro acoustic system unresolved. The speaker

drivers, their enclosure, cables and the connected power amplifier still responsible for significant phase distortion. However, the phase-linear crossover was a significant step in the right direction.

My audio hobby got interrupted by life and a career co-founding a company creating systems for banks and brokerage firms, which lead to other career moves involving both a Silicon Valley start-up and heading up product management for public corporation.

In 2014, I had an opportunity to change lifestyle from my busy career always traveling and with too little time for family and hobbies. Back in Denmark rediscovering my now decades old, but still very decent HiFi system, the quest to really try to understand what is happening with loudspeakers in rooms and how our hearing perceives sound, became a bit of an obsession. I soon knew I had to divert from the conventional box-type loudspeakers and come up with something completely different.

NB: Now that the Treble Clef Audio project is out in the open, how do you feel about its reception, the encounters with 'music people' from all walks of life –inspiring and enriching to an extent to make the countless hours, the investment, sleepless nights etc. feel 'worth it' I hope?

OS: Throughout the research and experimentation my efforts were driven purely by my interest and obsession with the science of it all, and the satisfaction of finding out about things and proving in practice that an idea works. It wasn't about creating yet another audio company or creating an optimal compromise loudspeaker at some price point. Inspired by the shape, essentially dictated by the science, that I had come up with and a first experimental completely handmade set of loudspeakers, friends, family and others saw and heard my creation, commented on the surprising sound quality, sculptural form of the design and how well they would go with a nice interior, asking - why not market my speakers?

Given the time I had spent on the project and the extraordinary sound experience that has now become the TCA-M loudspeaker, it felt plausible these achievements might delight fellow music and design lovers. I now feel a great responsibility because I have come to understand how dedicated many musicians are and how they live for their art, study and



practice their talent often as much for themselves as for the rest of us as consumers of their performances. This is one reason that I have felt quite anxious about the idea of my loudspeaker designs being for sale.

Having heard the feedback from many people, including Kresten Osgood, who I had the pleasure of meeting only a few months before our launch, I now feel more content that the TCA-M loudspeaker lives up to my own aspirations. The feedback from Kresten has been more invaluable than he perhaps realises, but his intimate understanding of music, his own performances and as a producer recording with some of this world's most talented musicians, was the hints I needed to finalise the TCA-M built-in preference target curves getting the power response correct throughout the audible range as the basis for customers, or a skilled person, making adjustments to personal preferences and room behaviour with the Mac and PC application that comes with our speakers.

In another deliciously nerdy music conversation, Kresten explained the importance of pauses in music, and in a booklet Kresten has written titled "TRANSPARANS", he writes about metatempi as a key feature of Paul Motian's playing style on the drums redefining the timbre palette available. What prompted this conversation was that Kresten could hear, in his own record, these important pauses and metatempi reproduced with the TCA-M speakers in my lounge. All this made sense to me as these details do not drown in room interaction and the build-up of steady state bass sound pressure standing waves otherwise common with loudspeakers.

I am also very encouraged by the feedback at the launch events from several musicians, an opera singer, music composers, recording technicians and producers, highly respected designers as well music lovers from across the world, appreciating both the TCA-M design expression and sound even in the less-than-ideal acoustic, but beautiful Tableau space and in the Radisson Collection Royal Hotel, Copenhagen.

The countless hours and sleepless nights, many enriching and emotional experiences, with, it seems many more to come, have most certainly been worth the effort. In terms of a return on my financial investment in this adventure, well only time will tell. What I do know, is that now finally I have a so far very expensive set of satisfactory loudspeakers in my lounge.





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UK HIP-HOP



THE GENESIS

Hip-hop music is a global phenomenon, transcending geographical and cultural borders. The contagious style of hip-hop spread faster than any other form of popular culture. As the US celebrates hip-hop's 50-year anniversary, the UK is just ten years behind, celebrating its 40th year.

The UK like many other countries and cultures that took to hip-hop, adopted all the shapes and forms the genre that came with it including its fashion, culture and also the American accent. For most countries around the world, there was a strong belief that you must sound American to be hip-hop, weirdly enough even in the UK.

In the early days of hip-hop, the genre had to be religiously followed to the letter with all its five elements on display. So just like the US, British hip-hop emerged from the scene of graffiti, break dancing, DJing and live rapping at parties and club nights. Unlike in the US, the British hip-hop scene was cross-racial from the beginning, as diverse ethnic

groups in Britain tend not to live in such segregated areas, even in areas with a high percentage of non-white individuals. Such places allowed youth to share culture with one another, including musical genres such as hip-hop.

Thanks to migration, especially from the West Indies, cross-pollination helped develop a community interested in the ever-evolving new genre of hiphop. The integration of sound systems represents a distinct British Caribbean influence. Sound systems allowed for powerful syncopated bass runs and the ability to bring this sound to other venues, creating a club culture. The dissemination of hip-hop music to a large audience, that bypassed mainstream television and radio, meant that sound systems freed Caribbean music from commercialisation which characterised the British music industry. This also gave the culture a rebellious, anti-establishment persona as it proudly displayed its music in spite of not being accepted into the British mainstream, making it an important expression of politics, which also infused the roots of reggae.

This has heavily influenced the "slang" of British hip-



hop to date with many artists infusing a Jamaican/patois twist into their flow. Phrases like "man dem", "roadman", "man-like", "ya get me", "buss up", and "dem dead" are all street patois that were picked up from the dominance of sound systems, reggae and the Windrush generation and naturally integrated into British street culture.

THE PIONEERS

Going by the genre's terminologies, the "OG's" (original gangsters) of the scene released the original British hip-hop records, "Christmas Rapping" by Drizzy Heights being the original in 1982 and "London Bridge" by Newtrament Jive Records was another notable early release in1983. Drizzy Heights was the first MC to bag a major record deal with an established record label.

One of the early trailblazers of the UK rap scene was London-based group, London Posse, which was founded in the late 80s. They were influenced by American pioneers such as Public Enemy and Run-DMC but fused their sound with reggae, funk, and soul. Their raw and socially conscious rhymes, accompanied by funky breakbeats, made them a popular UK act in the late 80s.

In the early 90s, UK rap began to take shape with the emergence of new artists and groups. One of the most significant was DJ Pogo, who introduced scratching and sampling techniques to the UK's hip-hop scene. His influence would later shape the sound of the industry, with many UK musicians adopting the technique as their own and putting a unique spin on it. The success of acts such as Pogo ensured that hip-hop was no longer viewed as just a foreign import, but a sound and style that had been made uniquely British.

FORMATION

The mid-90s marked a turning point in the history of rap music in the UK, as the first wave of British rappers emerged. One of the most prominent of these was MC Solaar. Born in Senegal and raised in France, Solaar's music was a unique fusion of French and UK rap, earning him a large following across Europe. Simultaneously, an African community living in the UK began to make its mark on the UK hip-hop scene, with artists such as MC Mell'O', Rebel MC and Manchester's Hardnoise gaining recognition. There were a handful of prominent MCs such as Rodney P and Blak Twang who released his debut single "What's Goin' On" in 1995, but most of the scene would be comprised of local, and regional acts such as Overlord X, Dominant Force, Demon Boyz, and Krispy 3.

One of the reasons why these groups weren't able to break out of the underground was because hiphop, in this style, was considered too American, with the industry and media considering it inauthentic. However, what the industry hadn't taken into consideration was just how easy it was for MCs to localise their style of hip-hop.

Tricky is another MC whose influence can be heard in today's rap scene and that was because of his avant-garde charisma and individualism in a scene full of crews. He is from Bristol and as this wasn't part of the established hip-hop scene, it meant he is often overlooked when thinking about the lasting impact of '90s UK rappers. Tricky was one of the trip-hop trailblazers and Bristol was the birthplace of that scene in the UK. And the scene originating from the Western country isn't a coincidence either. The Southwest is culturally far from London and this meant that regional distinctions were beginning to develop across the country.

GRIME

The most significant development in the UK's rap scene came in the late 90s and early 2000s when Grime music emerged from the East End of London. Grime was a more aggressive and abrasive form of rap, which drew its inspiration from Jamaican dancehall music and garage. Sometimes debated as not being a subgenre of hip-hop, its real roots lie in UK Garage, Bashment, Drum and Bass, Jungle and Dancehall. Yes, there are very many similarities to hip-hop - both involving rapping for a start, however, grime has a specifically British flavour, both in style and attitude that separates it from its US-dominated cousin.

Grime originates from black culture and is a form of complete self-expression. Made in the streets, for the streets, it emanated out of a desire and need for the young and marginalised black community to speak about their experiences. A quintessential component of Grime music was the strong jab it throws at the British class system and its inherent injustice towards the less privileged of the UK.

With their catchy rhymes and heavy bass lines, Grime artists like Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, and Kano were able to create a unique sound that was distinctively UK. Sticking to its UK accent, culture and stories, the genre spread rapidly, and by the mid-noughties, grime had captured the imagination of young people across the country. Grime didn't only morph into a new subculture or subgenre of hip-hop, but it blew into a whole industry of its own, with its own style and fashion. It was a complete representation of what young urban black Britain looked and lived like. Similar to the infamous entanglement that came along with American "gangsta rap" attributed to the influence of drugs and violence, the UK grime scene suffered a similar hit with the rise of gang violence in the semi-urban communities of the UK, predominantly London. During this era, your street credibility has a major influence on your status as a rapper. You had to live that life to earn that respect. This fuelled the claims that grime



hit the mainstream for all the wrong reasons.

GRIME AND CRIME

The press and particularly the UK tabloids painted the picture of the genre as violent lyrics that were spawning a generation of senseless murders and glorifying criminal culture. With all honesty, they weren't very wrong. Having a deeper understanding of gang slang, MCs like D Double, Sharky Major and All in One's music was overshadowed by literal criminal acts, but it also seemed the press was looking for a scapegoat. Taking unemployment and poverty out of the picture, thanks to the press it was common belief that Grime was the main influence for the life of crime for many youths. In reality, Grime simply gave East London's disenfranchised youth a platform; it was the Fight Club of London's underground youth subculture.

As the American entertainment saying goes "All publicity is good publicity". Despite the controversy, record labels saw nothing but big payouts. In 2013 two of Grime's leading MCs, Dizzee Rascal and Wiley, signed to XL Recordings. Months after winning the Mercury prize for best newcomer, Dizzee and Wiley jetted out to Ayia Napa, where it was reported that Dizzee was stabbed six times, supposedly due to an altercation surrounding the So Solid Crew. Rumours have it that Dizzee allegedly groped Lisa Mafia, aggravating Megaman, who in turn allegedly cut him to ribbons. No one was charged. On his sophomore album "Showtime", Dizzee's record "Respect Me" seemingly confirms the incident. Despite the near-death experience, the controversy seemed to help Dizzee's debut album "Boy In The Corner" sell well, peaking at number 27 in the UK charts.

STYLE AND PATTERN

Sportswear becoming part of hip-hop culture is largely credited to Run DMC's era of the Adidas tracksuit. Grime took it to another level. From the 80s to the 90s tracksuits were the ultimate dress code in hip-hop. From drug dealers to rappers, an Adidas tracksuit with a gold rope chain dangling around your neck was every urban kid's dream attire. Once again, hip-hop created a cash cow for the big brands.

In the early 2000s, tracksuits flooded the inner cities once again, thanks to UK Grime music. Emerging from the tower block of London's East End, grime developed from early British electronic, garage and jungle style and then slowly started to integrate elements of Ragga and Dancehall. It was a complete takeover in Britain as Grime swept over the UK, amassing millions of followers worldwide. Similarly to hip-hop, Grime has a demographic as young as ten-year-olds to adults in their mid-thirties, a target market for sportswear brands.

Grime has its own very British looking Skepta and in the song "Man", the Grime pioneer declares he's "Dressed like he's just come from P.E" - a reference to the British schooling gym class where practically all the students wear tracksuits and t-shirts. Hailing from Tottenham, North London, Skepta is one of the most revered and critically acclaimed names in the genre, recognised for hit singles "That's Not Me" and "No Security" and winner of two MOBOs, one BET, one NME Award and many more. Skepta is of the main trailblazers in terms of merging Grime into mainstream culture, so when he dubbed his all-male crew the "tracksuit mafia", he asserted a grime identity and a whole wave of the genre's young artists started sporting their new unofficial uniform. But the tracksuit is more than just a symbol of Grime affiliation, it's the full regalia of the protection and force amongst UK youth. Not only does it resonate with being low-key and secretive- as JME spits "I don't wear no bait designer brands: I spit deep bars in my black top". The uniform allows its wearers to assimilate each other, and go unnoticed on the notoriously nefarious streets of London. Views and agendas have been thrown against tracksuits claiming that they're only worn by dangerous gang members, but Stormzy directly combats this in his song "Wicked Skengman 4" when he says "Everybody calm down it's a tracksuit, what the f*** man? I aint gonna stab you."

Mentions of altercations with the police and discrimination against Grime artists are prolific throughout many of the genre's songs and music videos. 'Gangland' by Young T & Bugsey featuring Belly Squad opens with the line "Runnin' from the boys in blue, all I hear is nee-nor, nee-nor", and this continues as the hook of the track: a blunt remark about the treatment of grime artists by British police and the stigma that they're connected to gang culture and misbehaviour. The video for Lethal Bizzle's smash hit 'POW 2011', (which features multiple other grime gods) shows the rappers running from police and being followed by police cars and vans. One thing that's synchronised in both these videos is that every single grime artist is dressed in a headto-toe black tracksuit. This further reiterates the common belief that these garments are a symbol of allegiance and alliance to the genre and its advo-

BACK TO BASICS

The cultural exchange between the UK and the US has been on the rise in recent years, especially in the world of music. The music industries of both countries have experienced significant growth, with many artists making waves globally. One of the most notable aspects of this exchange is the collaboration between UK and American rappers. These collaborations have become more prominent over the years, leading to some of the biggest hits in the music industry. In this article, we'll be taking a deeper look at the collab between UK rappers and American



rappers.

The UK and the US both have a rich history in black music but their styles and genres differ. While the US is known for its hip-hop culture, the UK has its own sound, which can be heard in genres like grime and Afrobeat. Despite these different sounds, the boundaries between the two countries' music cultures have been broken down. This cultural exchange led to the first collaboration between UK and US rappers.

In 2012, UK rapper Tinie Tempah teamed up with American rapper Wiz Khalifa on the hit track "Till I'm Gone." The song achieved widespread popularity in the UK and the US and represented the start of a new wave of collaborations. Since then, UK and American rappers have come together to create a string of chart-topping hits, with some of the biggest names in the music industry hailing from both countries.

Collaborating with an artist from a different country enables an artist to tap into a new market and style while adding an exciting dimension to their own music. Artistically, rap collaborations offer the chance for a cross-cultural exchange of ideas and sounds, forging new sounds and styles out of geographical differences.

One of the most successful British - American collaborations was between Drake and Skepta. Drake has gone on record to say that Skepta was one of his favourite rappers in the UK when they first met. The duo collaborated on a track called "Interlude" which was featured on Drake's album "More Life". Speaking on the collaboration, Skepta said "I just tried to make the verse count and represent who I am. I think the magic just happened with that song, everything came together right."

Another notable collaboration was between Stormzy and Ed Sheeran on the latter's track "Take Me Back To London". Despite being a Grime artist, Stormzy was able to merge his fierce rapping style with Ed Sheeran's acoustic sound to make the song a hit in the charts. Stormzy has also worked with other American artists such as Pharrell Williams, resulting in hit tracks such as "Frontin" and "Get Lucky".

These collaborations have been successful and they have also brought cultural diversity to the music industry. UK rappers have been able to showcase the diversity and richness of their sound, which had previously been confined to their local audiences. This cross-pollination is invaluable in promoting cultural exchange and breaking down the mindset of musical borders.

On the other hand, American rappers have been able to break into a market that was previously impenetrable. The UK has produced notable rap stars such as Skepta, Wretch 32, and Stormzy, who have made a significant impact in the music industry globally. Through collaborations with American rappers, UK rappers are becoming household names in the US, and their distinctive brand of music is gaining worldwide attention.

Another great example of this is the collaboration between Dave and Drake on the track "Wanna Know." Dave, then an emerging rapper from London, got an unexpected call from Drake after discovering his music online. Drake contacted Dave after the release of his EP "Six Paths". The track was an instant hit, and it helped Dave gain global recognition, leading to him winning the Ivor Novello Award for Best Contemporary Song with "Question Time".

However, as with everything in life, challenges arise, which can impact the success of collaborations. For instance, there are cultural and sound differences between UK and American rappers, which can lead to difficulty in finding the perfect balance. These challenges can require collaborative efforts in the US and the UK, with artists having to stay open and receptive to different styles and sounds. As seen with Ed Sheeran and Stormzy, when two worlds collide, the differences in music styles can come together harmoniously.

Collaborations also offer new business opportunities in the music industry. A good example is the success of UK rapper, Tinie Tempah and his label, Disturbing London, whose partnerships with companies like Nike led to the founding of a new fashion line.

In conclusion, UK - US rap collaborations are thriving, breaking down barriers and widening markets. Together, young artists from the two countries are creating magic by fusing different sounds, beats and perspectives. Achieving successful collaborations between UK and American rappers takes effort, an open mind, and a willingness to accept a different way of expressing oneself. However, the results are impressive: expanding the market for rap music and redefining the music culture in both countries.

The UK has definitely held its side of the bargain by manifesting rap culture through its real identity - exploring the depths of creativity through your own lived experiences. Today artist Tion Wayne, Central Cee, Stormzy and Dave are "keeping the fire blazing" by addressing and expressing social injustices through their music.

Hip-hop in the UK gave not only black culture a platform but all underprivileged communities with mixed identities and origins a voice and force to be reckoned with. The genre has been explored in all its different shapes and forms, giving birth to the various sub-genres like garage, grime and the many more to come.



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aris is a city synonymous with art, there are galleries everywhere, from the Louvre, the Pompidou Centre and the Musée D'Orsay, to small boutique galleries.

But some of the best and most vibrant art is not just found inside the gallery walls but out on the streets. Street art and graffiti is everywhere but, rather than seeing it as vandalism, Paris has embraced urban art.

In certain areas, street art has been actively encouraged, and there are places in Paris where you can walk in open air galleries, where huge murals enhance the architecture as the works of famous street artists watch daily life pass by below.

BOULEVARD PARIS 13 PROJECT

One such area can be found in the south of Paris; the 13th arrondissement is full of street art murals. The area was once the industrial centre of Paris, the Bièvre river, which then ran through the southern part of the capital, provided water for industries

such as shoemaking, laundry, weaving, dying and leather tanning. By 1912, the Bièvre had been covered up, but you can still follow its course with the little bronze medallions on the ground.

Since the 1960s, this industrial district has seen its facades covered by artists who wanted to make the area more beautiful.

STREET ART GALLERY

In 2009, the Galerie Itinerrance, which is located in the 13th, in partnership with the Mairie of the 13th arrondissement, started to create a tour of frescoes and murals, painted by French and international artists, which has become an ever-evolving openair museum and street art gallery. Their aim was to introduce urban art to as many people as possible. The Boulevard Paris 13 Project comprises works from some of the big names in street art from around the world including D*Face, Add Fuel, Shepard Fairey (Obey Giant), Hush and many more, there are many large-scale murals and new additions appear regularly. Even as I am writing this article, a new mural from D*Face has just been completed on the Boulevard Vincent Auriol.

PARIS TOWER 13

In 2013 a social housing tower block in the 13th that was due for destruction became home to a huge, and ephemeral collective art exhibition.

Mehdi Ben Cheikh, founder of the Galerie Itinerrance, invited more than one hundred artists from around the world to take over the building, filling it with art, which was open to the public to view before its final, and spectacular destruction. The documentary 'Paris Tower 13', by Thomas Lallier, tells the story of radical art creation, and destruction from the artists' side and was released in 2016.

A VILLAGE IN THE CITY

We visited Boulevard Paris 13 in early May this year, we had heard about the project and really wanted to see the huge murals. The area has a real village feel, even though you are in the heart of Paris, as soon as you step off the Metro at the Nationale station on line 6, you are greeted by murals, in fact you catch glimpses of them between the buildings as the Metro makes its way above ground in this area.

part of the fabric of daily life. Whichever way you turn you find more, and it is obviously a draw for visitors into the area, with guided walking tours and school trips checking out the murals. But there is a real sense that this is art for the people, and it is not just for the tourists. You can see that there is a lot of local pride in having these creations here. We spoke to a local lady who was pointing out where we could get the best views of the different works, she obviously loved the art and was keen to share her knowledge with visitors.

We passed a very pleasant morning, wandering, taking photos and admiring the murals. Honestly, the scale is just huge and so impressive, if you are visiting Paris, take a couple of hours to experience the Boulevard Paris 13 project for yourself, you really need to get amongst it and see it first hand to really appreciate the skill and work that goes into creating these masterpieces. As well as the large works by well known artists you will see many others, including under your feet.

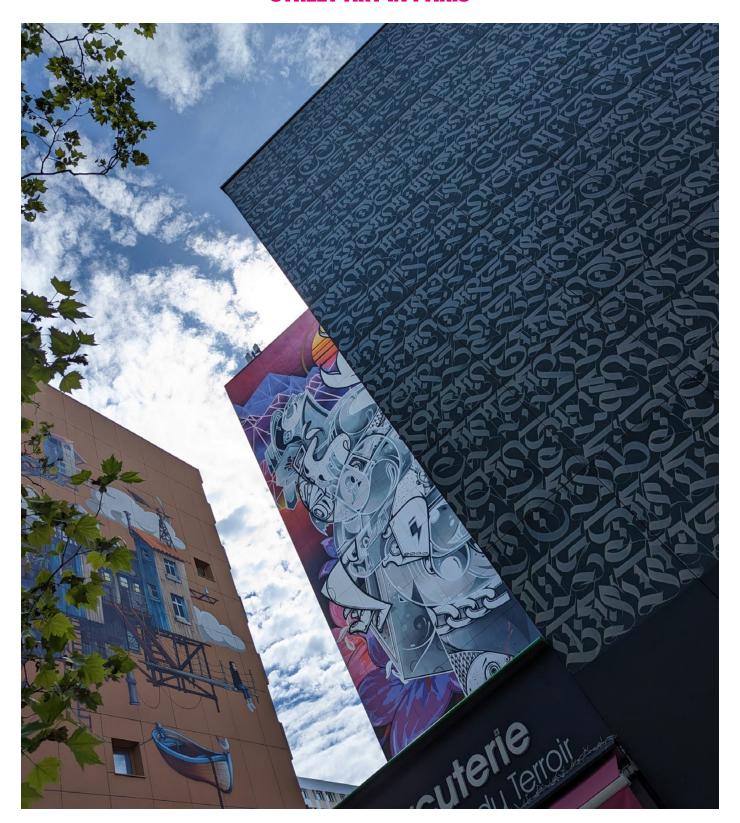
Whilst we didn't see every mural this time, we will go back again, like any good gallery there is always something new to see.

Here are some of our favourite murals.

ART IN DAILY LIFE

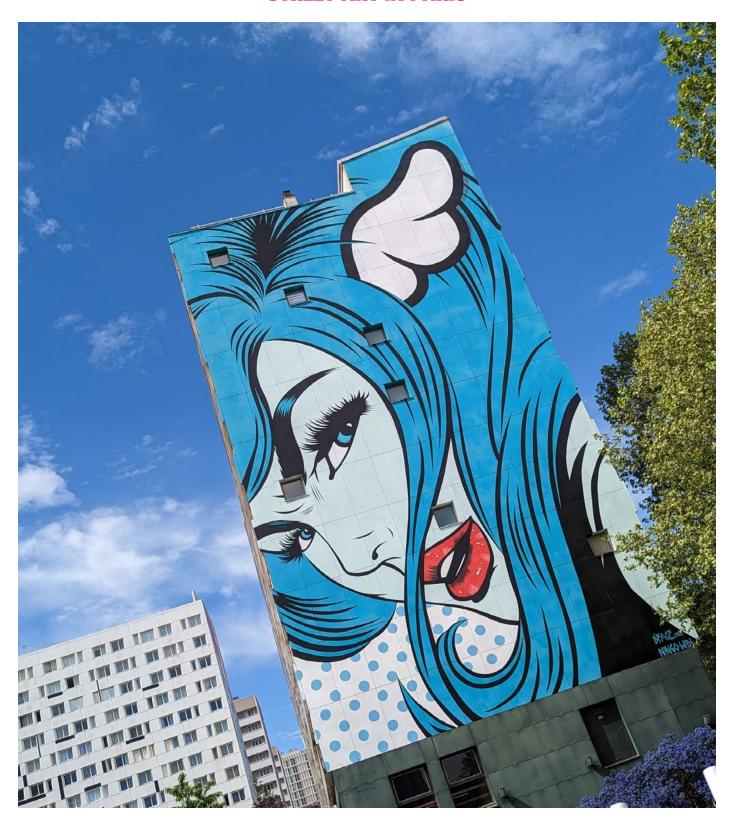
The works of art in this area seem to have become





Cryptik - Untitled

The artist Cryptik, who specialises in calligraffiti, covered the Maruani bookshop with this work. It is a poem by the writer William Saroyan, written with letters inspired by medieval scriptures. The bookshop also has a decrypted version that you can read.



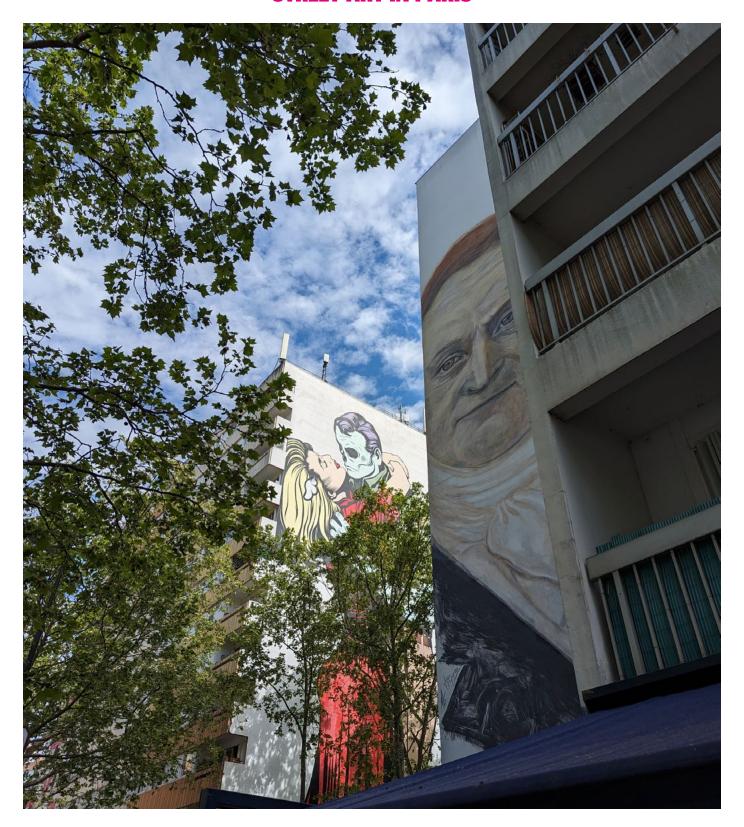
D*Face - Turncoat

Turncoat, a 25 m high work was painted by the English artist D*Face in 2018. The signature D*Face wings are escaping from her hair and the artist describes as "dominant, almost angry".



Shepard Fairey - Liberté, égalité, fraternité

Shepard Fairey is one of America's greatest and best known urban artists. In support of the victims of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, he created a monumental work that pays tribute to the motto of the French Republic. The words "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" frame a 'Marianne' against a background of the French flag. A copy on canvas of this work was commissioned by President Emmanuel Macron for his office at the Élysée.



D*Face - Love won't tear us apart

Covering the side of a tall building and partially obscured by trees, the 1950s style couple in Love won't tear us apart are reminiscent of the works of Roy Lichtenstein.

The artist D*Face has stated that it is important that the public should interpret the work in their own way, as, for him, the imagination of viewers often produces explanations much more interesting than his **own**.



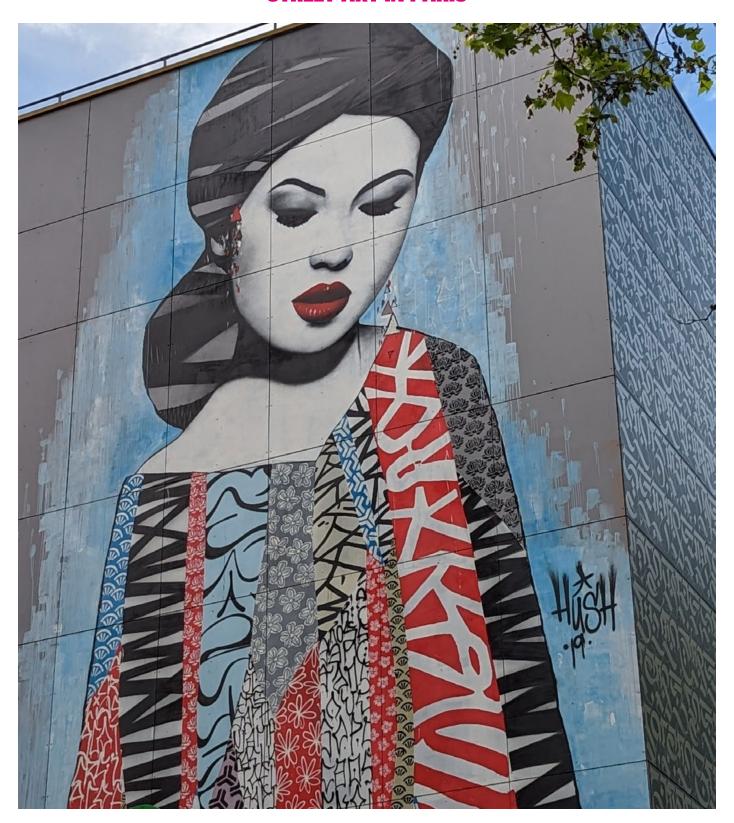
BToy - Evelyn Nesbit

BToy is a Barcelona stencil artist who pays tribute to female icons of the last century. Here, she created a portrait of the American reviewer and model Evelyn Nesbit (1884-1967).



Inti - La Madre Secular 2

Chilean artist Inti. Created the work Madre Secular 2 as a secular representation of the Blessed Virgin. Instead of Adam and Eve's apple, she holds Newton's apple in her hands. Stars and planets and jewels made of skulls represent the signs of all religions.



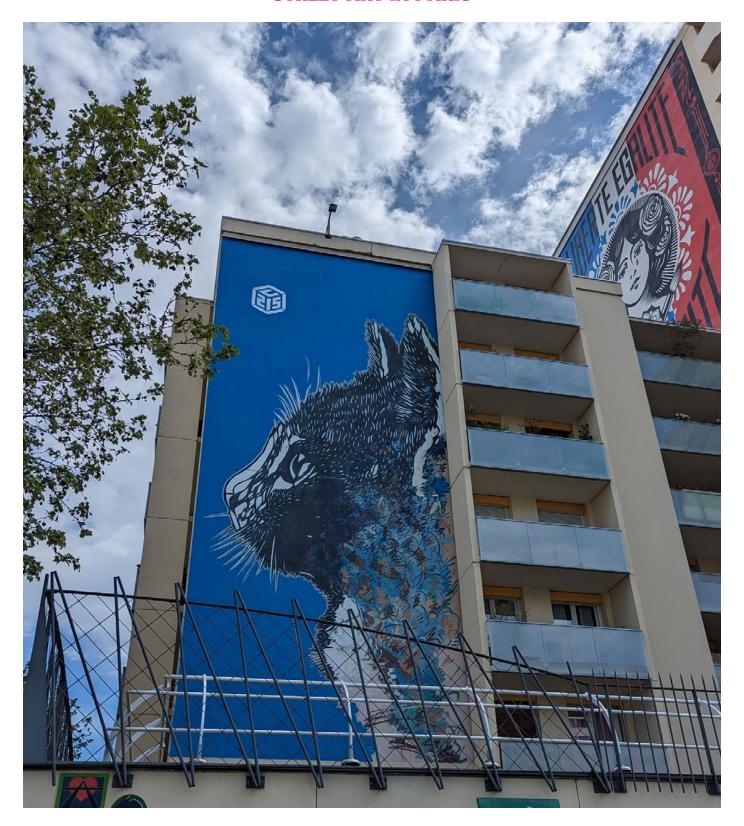
Hush - Untitled

Inspired by the representation of women in Asia, in this painting, the artist depicts his subject in almost in the style of Klimt, with an exploration of contrasting colour and detail.



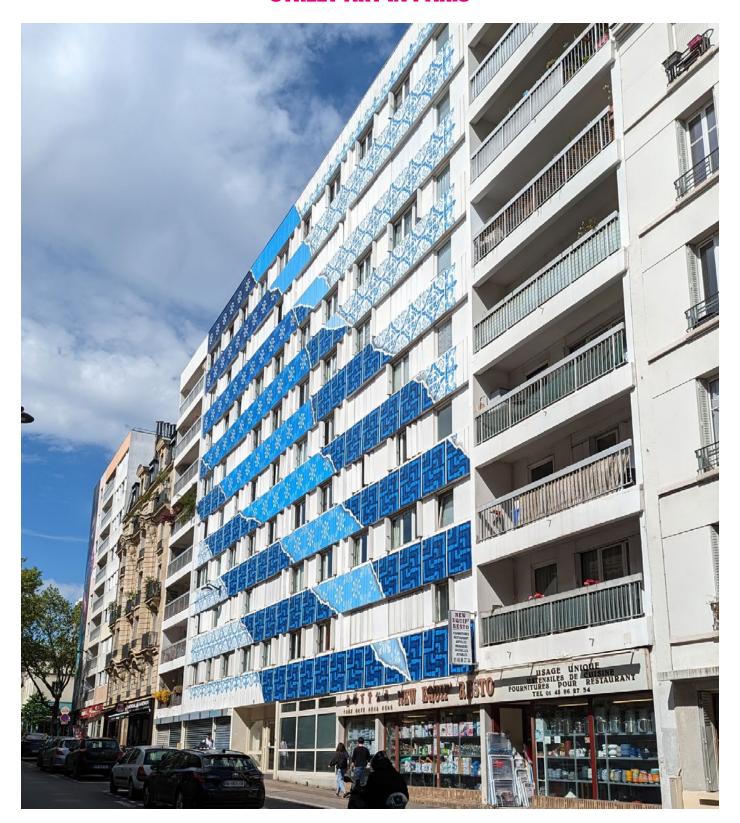
Shepard Fairey - Rise Above Rebel

This work by Shepard Fairey represents a woman who is a victim of oppression, but resists it. The artist calls it "a powerful symbol for people", depicted in a strong red and black palette.



C215 - Le Chat

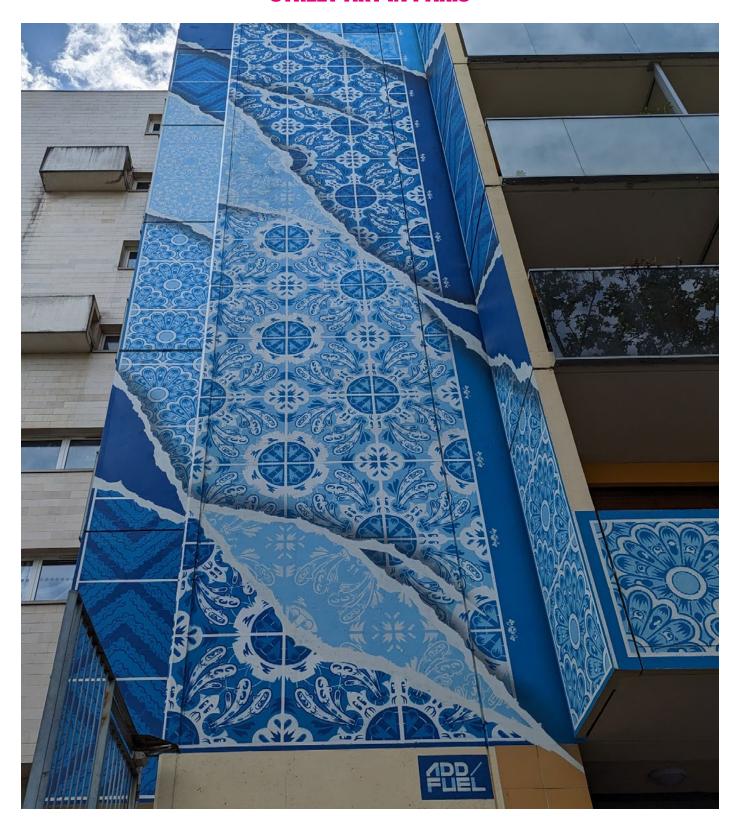
The cat is a recurrent motif in C215's work. It is painted here in shades of blue. It represents the beauty, and also the symbolism of an animal at the same time free and domesticated.



Add Fuel- Unfaded

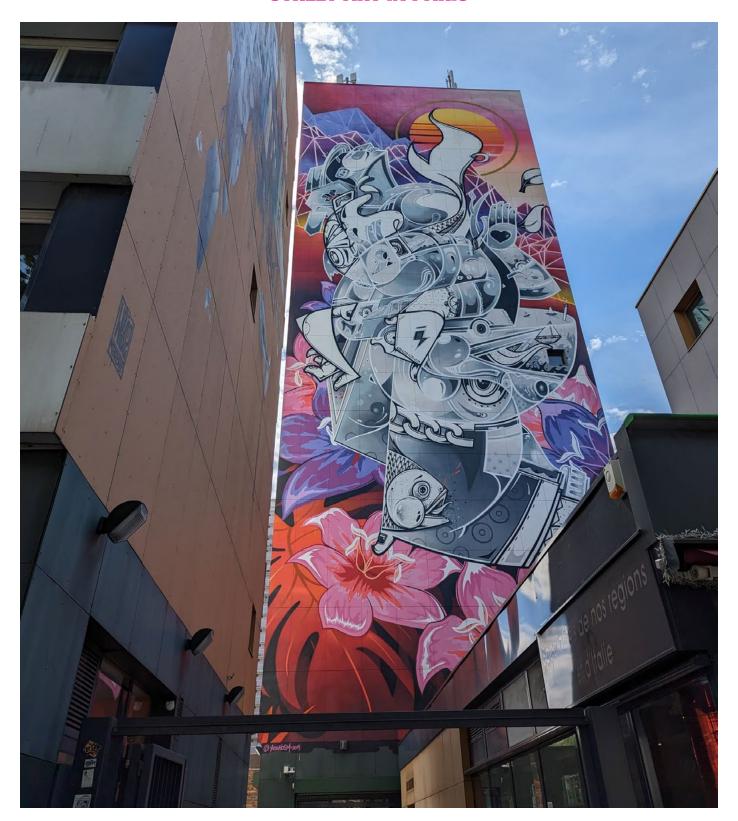
Unfaded by Add Fuel is, or was at the time of painting, the largest that the artist has ever executed. The artist was seeking to create a dynamic work, and plays on the repetition of the square shape, associating motifs mainly in shades of blue, accentuated by a white grid pattern.

A main feature of Add Fuel's work are azulejos, the ceramic tiles decorated with geometrical and symmetrical patterns, traditional in his native Portugal.



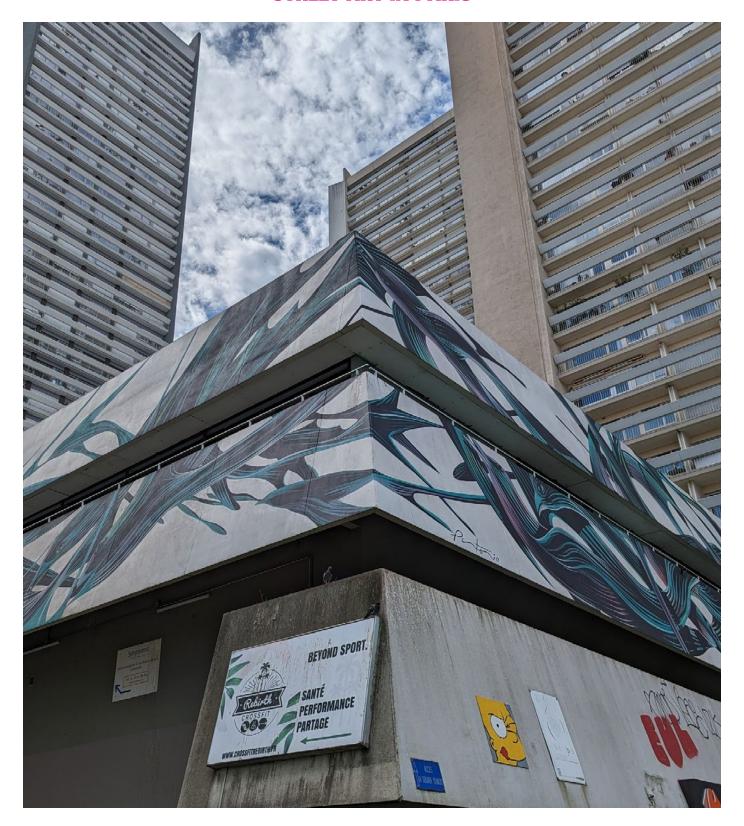
Add Fuel- Envolvente

Again working with the influence of Portuguese azulejos, Add Fuel created this work with an aim establish a relationship with the Portuguese community of Paris, which at nearly two million people is, one of the largest in the world.



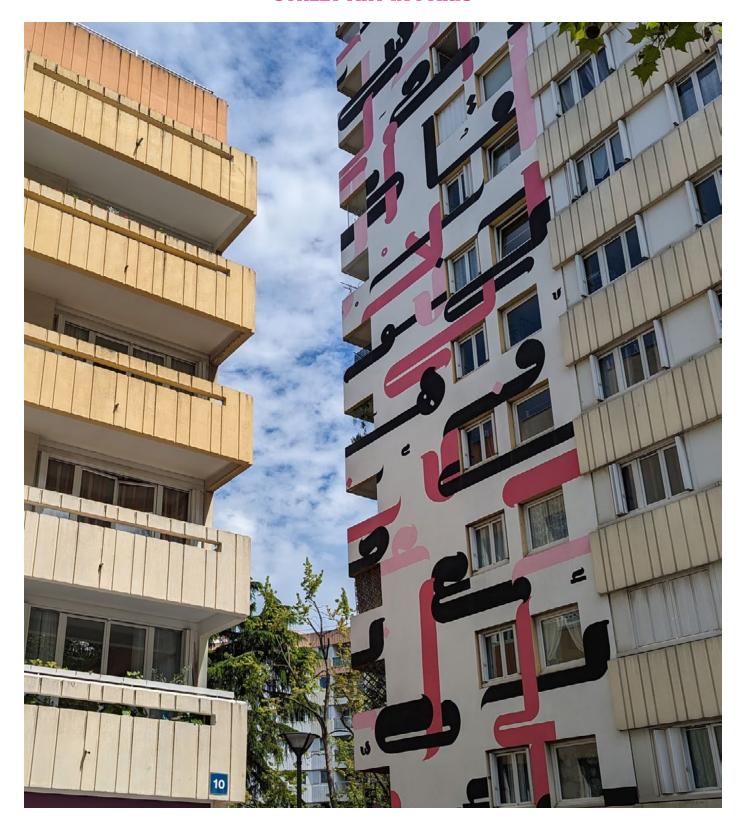
Hownosm - Sun Daze

The artist Hownosm says of this piece "We actually prepared two drawings for the wall, and this is the second one. The first had a deeper meaning —the significance of this one is more superficial, less significant. It's called Sun Daze, making a pun on 'Sundays'. But what this really communicates is the idea that sometimes you just need to lie down, relax, slow down a bit and realize that there's more to life than just work, work, work. That sometimes you need to sit down, be aware of the present moment and make the most of it."



Pantónio - Fragile Agile

Pantónio says "Although I had to interact with the adjacent works by Inti and Conor Harrington, I also took inspiration from the day-care centre and the children moving around behind my walls. I had no predefined message to communicate, but when I saw their drawings, I realized that the theme here was simply the love of drawing. Nothing more."



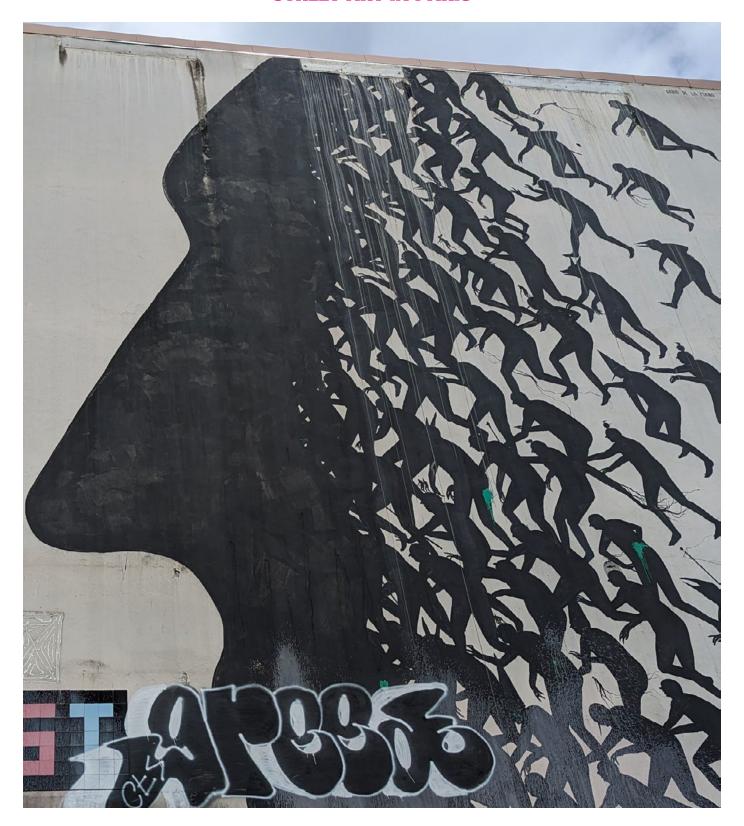
ST4 - Untitled

This mural by ST4 is a graphic composition that displays the style very specific to these two young street artists. The Arabic letters written in black and shades of pink intertwine and lose their functional aspect, becoming abstract.



Conor Harrington - Etreinte et lutte

Artist Conor Harrington often depicts representations of political debates or arguments. He says of this piece "I think this mural is rather appropriate in the present run-up to the presidential elections. The way I have painted the competitors (sweaty, collapsing, fading away) signifies changes in French society (and European too)."



David de la Mano - Untitled

This David de la Mano's work shows a face in profile made up of silhouettes which was selected by the residents. Created in black paint on a white ground, it is accompanied on the left by a work by artists Cost and Invader.





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CHI-RAQ

Chicago - the windy city, Chitown, home of the Chicago Bulls has dominated mainstream media for being the murder capital of the United States. Gang violence has rocked the city to its core with the highest numbers in the country. The term "Chi-Raq" is a portmanteau of Chicago and Iraq used by some Chicago non-residents to liken the area to a war zone, due to its high crime rates. The impact of this goes beyond gang members, though Chicago is arguably the city with the highest murder rate of rappers too. Look-

ing at this statistically, in 2012 Chicago had twice the number of murders compared to Los Angeles, four times higher than New York City and more people died from gang violence in Chicago than US soldiers died in Afghanistan.

Over the years this has prompted artists and residents to flee, seeking a safer and better life. Many black families fled now the music capital of hip-hop since the "Dirty South take over" in the early 2000s.

Amidst all this mayhem, Chicago has produced a list of the most talented creatives in mainstream music. From R Kelly, Virgil Abloh, Kanye West, Lil Durk, Chance the Rapper, Twista, Lupe Fiasco, Earth, Wind & Fire. And it's impact goes bevond music too, let us not forget the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama. Amongst these names who lived and survived the wrath of the city is Chief Keef: the one who put drill music up in the charts.

DRILL

Drill music is widely labelled rap's most dangerous sub-genre and

many say it has a disproportionate influence on gang violence. Chief Keef was soon signed to a major label, Interscope, and joined fellow drill music veteran King Louie on Kanye West's 2013 album Yeezus. Other drill rappers like Lil Durk, Lil Reese, G Herbo, and the late Fredo Santana also grew in popularity in this period.. The Chicago Drill scene's prominence proved short-lived—Keef was dropped by Interscope in 2014—but remained active, while drill music took root in other parts of the country and world.

Chicago Drill producers like Young Chop, who oversaw many of Chief

the UK govern ment has attempted to impose censorship on to Atlanta and made it their new home, which is the subgenre as if they are the arbiters of taste and censorship.

> Keef's hits, followed a template similar to Trap music: heavy use of the 808 drum machine beats (typically 60 to 70 beats per minute), stripped-down production, and an emphasis on ear-catching melodies underscored with a brooding menace. In comparison, UK Drill artists, like Headie One, employ faster beats and a greater focus on melody, while Brooklyn Drill is distinguished by a booming delivery and warmer production.

THE UK **CHAPTER**

UK Drill music has taken the world by storm in recent years, becoming a prominent style of rap music on the UK scene. With its dark and intense lyrical themes, combined with the heavy bass and percussion, UK Drill has become a sub-genre of Grime and Hip-Hop, taking inspiration from UK Grime music and the everyday experiences of its artists.

The UK Drill scene is partly shaped by the environment it springs from – the streets of cities

> such as London, Manchester, and Birmingham. The lyrics of the songs have a certain gritty authenticity as they tell stories of lived experiences in these struggling neighbourhoods. From tales of drug dealing, violence, and police conflict, UK Drill provides a fresh and authentic perspective on the youth culture and streetlife of these areas. It's almost as if the sub-genre acts as a cathartic outlet for these young people that feel so often overlooked and ignored.

Artists in this subgenre take on strong personas, often heavily associated with their area of origin, which further cements them within their communities to the point of almost becoming local

celebrities and icons. In addition to this, Drill artists often feature weapons, gangs, and gang rivalries in their music. UK Drill songs take pride in their locality and highlight the intricate gang connections of different neighbourhoods. The names of different post-codes are used extensively in references to gang conflicts. It is as if the music is a way to present each other with thinly veiled attacks under the guise of music. As we will see later, this has presented a significant obstacle for the

DRILL

scene in terms of its reception in the wider community.

TORIES, MEDIA & REALITY

UK Drill has received criticism for its sometimes violent and controversial messages. Right-wing newspapers and media outlets have demonised the genre, arguing that the music promotes and normalises violence amongst young people. There is a degree of truth to this, of course; UK Drill music is not always fun and games and can contain some pretty serious themes. However, as with anything that covers topics such as violence and gang culture, it should be accessible to those over eighteen years old, similar to the majority of media that contains classifiable content. It should also be noted that some UK Drill rappers are a product of the environment they come from, and the music acts as a way to process and express the hardships

Moreover, the UK government has attempted to impose censorship on the subgenre as if they are the arbiters of taste and censorship. In 2019, the government introduced a bill that threatened those who did not conform to "British values." In this case, UK Drill music was deemed a risk. While not as extreme as some countries where some forms of music are outright banned, the UK government has still been accused of censorship and bearing down on cultural freedom. It seems that mainstream society has yet to catch up with many of the musical styles that ebb and flow through new generations.

they encounter in their

daily lives.

EDGEY & SKETCHY

British music has always had an edge to it, from the Sex Pistols of the 70s to the Grime movements of the previous decades. It seems that UK Drill music is no different in this regard, and as a genre that reflects many of the genuine experiences that young people face within inner-city areas of the UK, it deserves to be more widely recognised.

A key feature of UK Drill is the Trap' sound, heavily inspired by southern US rap culture. As men-

It is a glimpse into the experience of young people from some of the UK's toughest areas, and as such, has the potential to be enlightening

tioned, this often involves 808 drum machines, aggressive bass lines and gunshots. The subgenre is also closely associated with the UK Grime scene, with many artists forging connections between the two genres. However, one thing you will not find in UK Drill is the kind of frenetic aggression of Grime. Instead, UK Drill leans more into a less frantic, more braggadocious tone, paying homage to the US gangster rap scene.

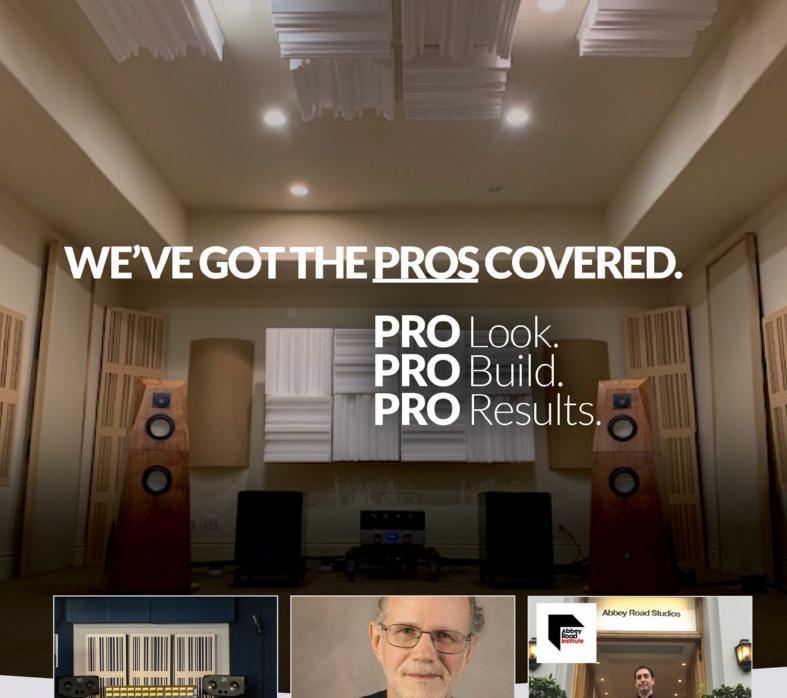
UK Drill music pioneers 67 and Harlem Spartans have been instrumental in the development of the genre. 67's signature sound primarily features sample-based beats and gritty lyrics that echo the realities of life in their South London neighbourhood of Brixton. Harlem Spartans, coming from the Kennington and Brixton areas of London, were formed through mutual friends and quickly became a highly-regarded group, releasing their debut album, Call Me A Spartan, in 2017. Other notable UK Drill artists include OFB (Original Farm Boys), who have a deep connection to

> the Wood Green area of London, and the North-West London group 1011, whose music has caused controversy due to the use of graphic language and violence, which caused YouTube to remove their debut video 'Play For The Pagans' citing promotion of violence, gang culture, and drug use. Despite this, 1011 later became pioneers of Drill music and helped the genre reach wider audiences in the UK.

Overall, UK Drill music is a reflection of its milieu. The themes of struggle, rivalry, and hardship tackled in the songs are a product of the streets and neighbourhoods that the sub-genre has come to represent. It is a glimpse into the experience of young people from some of the UK's toughest areas, and

as such, has the potential to be enlightening. As with any artistic movement, music will always be a source of debate, censorship, and criticism.

Still, UK Drill music represents a raw and fiercely competitive scene, awash with energy and tenacity, a window into a street culture that may be alien to many, but vital to many more.





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If you know DJ mixers then you will know the name Andy Rigby-Jones. He's the designer behind some of Allen and Heath's best mixers as well as the rotary mixers of Mastersounds. From his new factory in Cornwall he's now launched the fantastic **looking Union Audio Orbit.6. Not Boring catches** up with the name behind some of the best DJ Mixers that shaped music history for a bit of a natter.



NB: You started of working on the assembly line for small format mixers for bands and venues, when was this and who was it for?

ARJ: That would have been back in March 1992 when I first joined Allen & Heath as the flow solder machine operator.

NB: What were these mixers like from a design perspective?

ARJ: They were all analogue and all modular. A&H were at the start of a renaissance and were introducing a line of well specified, affordable mixers. The design emphasis was on offering a good performance/specification vs cost, and it was the start of a golden age for the company.

NB: How did you get into producing DJ mixers? Who was it for? And what was your first DJ-centric mixer?

ARJ: I had been DJ'ing since the late 70s, first with a homemade roadshow, and then in clubs. I was doing two to three gigs a week while working at

A&H so DJ mixers were a part of my life. Then around 1994 I joined the R&D department, first as a technician and later as a designer. The trigger for wanting to design my own mixer came from playing with a voltage control filter circuit (VCF), and I knew I had to build a mixer with that feature. I put it to the management, and they gave me the go ahead to build a prototype.

NB: Tell us about this first mixer. What controls did it have and how have mixers improved with regards to features?

ARJ: The first A&H DJ mixer was based on the companies MixWizard and was part live-sound mixer with a DJ mixer centre section. As well as an asymmetric EQ (I think that might have been a first) it also had a basic VCF. Today these features are fairly ubiquitous on most club style DJ mixers, so the biggest change has been the inclusion of USB Audio systems and digital FX.

NB: Do you think there is often an over reliance on features and gimmicks on mixers rather than concentrating quality of sound?



ARJ: When you are trying to design a product to stand out in the marketplace, it's very easy to get carried away adding extra features but in reality most DJs don't use more than the basic audio toolkit, so they probably could be labelled as gimmicks. As for sound quality, most medium and high-end mixers sound pretty good these days, so you have to spend a lot of time, effort and money to improve on them.

NB: You led the Xone range of mixers team for many years, which of these mixers was your favourite and why?

ARJ: The Xone:DB4 was the most fun to develop but I would say the one I'm most proud of is the Xone:92, it was designed twenty years ago and is still an industry standard. My all-time favourite would have to be the Xone:V6. V6 was a labour of love, and I was quite sad when production ceased due to component availability.

NB: In 2014 you launched Union Audio, that's a big step but one that has clearly born fruits. What has been your favourite product to come out of Union Audio and why?

ARJ: That's a tricky question to answer because I still have so many designs in my head but so little time

to get them into production. I'm really proud of Model1, which I codesigned with Richie Hawtin, as it has so many innovative features, but linking up with Ryan Shaw of MasterSounds back in 2016 was the turning point for Union Audio, and together we have created an amazing product line.

But from a purely personal perspective orbit.6 has a very special place in my heart. It's not only taken over from where I left off with the Xone:V6, but it's also the first product to bear the Union Audio name

NB: You have worked with some big names in DJing, who have you worked with and what were their different needs and requirements from mixers?

ARJ: Over the years I have had the privilege of meeting and working with some incredibly talented artists, Louis Vega, Chris Leibing, Pete Tong, Carl Cox, Sasha, Digweed, Paul van Dyk, the list goes on, but my closest working relationship has been with Richie Hawtin. Rich is not only an amazing artist but has a deep insight and fascination with the technology he uses. He's always wanting to push the boundaries of what's possible, and the way he DJs to new levels. Richie Hawtin's mixer will need lots of IO and lots of channels for the way he constructs his sets. He doesn't really DJ in the usual sense of



the word, it's more live production. At the other end of the spectrum I've witnessed amazing sets from Louis Vega using nothing more than two turntables and a Xone:V6.

NB: You have recently launched the Orbit.6 six channel mixer, tell us more.

ARJ: As mentioned, Xone:V6 holds a special place in my heart, but rather than try to recreate it with the orbit.6, I wanted to design a product that was its complement – a sort of yin and yang. Orbit.6 has styling cues from the V6 and follows a similar design philosophy but they are very different products. The V6 being all FET based has a light open and airy sound, orbit.6 is BJT based with a warmer, deeper sound. People ask me which one sounds better, and my answer is always that it depends in what music you listen to – if it's Jazz or Vocal then the V6 is better at conveying the close intimacy of voice or instrument, if it's House, Techno, Disco or Soul, then the orbit is better at conveying rhythm and bass, especially on the low end.

NB: It's pretty stripped back in terms of features, why is this and what do you think this stripped back approach brings to the DJ's craft?

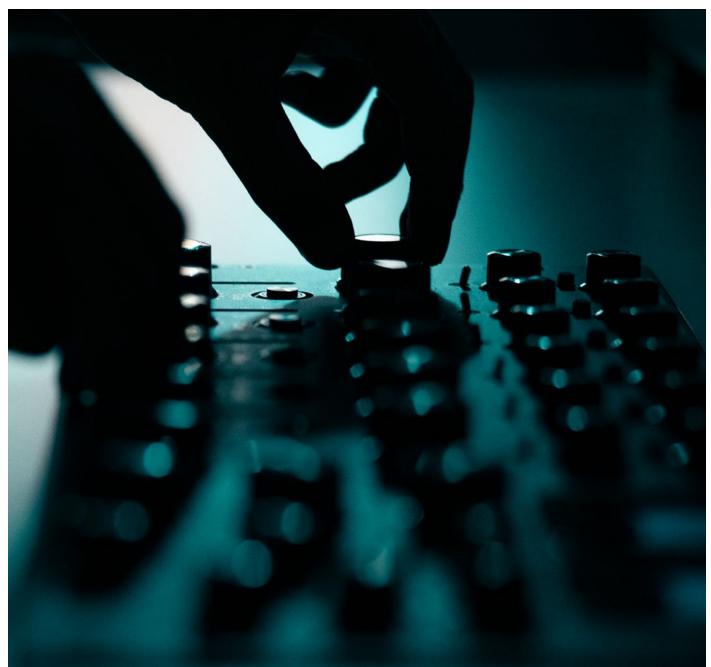
ARJ: Orbit, like the V6, has the minimum needed to blend two or more tracks together, which I love from an aesthetic viewpoint. Also, less features mean less circuitry, which is better for audio fidelity. From a DJ perspective, having only a high-pass filter and a fader to mix with is a great way to hone your craft. When you can create a great set using just these tools and a couple of turntables it really teaches you the importance of timing and track selection.

NB: Analogue or digital sources and why?

ARJ: For performance, digital, for best fidelity, analogue.

NB: There's a move towards CDJs, do you think this is a good thing sonically for the DJ industry?

ARJ: What the likes of Pioneer have done with their players is incredible, so much power and control over your music and the way you play. I can totally understand why they are now standard features in almost every club. However, I'm not convinced they are a good thing sonically, and not necessarily because they are digital. Shockingly, there are still



some DJs who use compressed audio files!

NB: Do you believe that the dancefloor actually cares whether a DJ is playing records or files from a USB drive? Ultimately folk are out to dance and have a good time, do you think it's even important that a DJ is mixing and not just using synch...or to take it to its ultimate conclusion, some AI "robot" is selecting and "mixing" the tunes?

ARJ: Depends on the dancefloor, but I think most people still go to clubs to see a DJ perform live as it's part of the experience but whether they are playing vinyl or USB media is less important than the music. I sense that clubbing is becoming more intimate and personal, with smaller venues playing very specific genres. The whole covid lockdown also promoted growth in online DJ sets, and a lot of artists now use this platform. I think this has helped the vinyl reviv-

al as I see a lot of online DJs playing vinyl sets, which in turn helps to expose this old format to a whole new generation.

NB: Who is your favourite DJ and why?

ARJ: I can't say that I really have a favourite DJ. The ones I've met and worked with are all very skilled artists, and my musical taste is wide enough that I can enjoy what they play. Recently I've been listing to RØDHÅD as I love the deep driving energy and hint of melancholy in his sets.

I have a real appreciation for any DJ playing a seamless vinyl set as it takes a lot of skill and practice. I remember watching Carl Cox playing on three decks back in the 90s and it really blew me away, so if you forced me to name one, it would probably be Carl.



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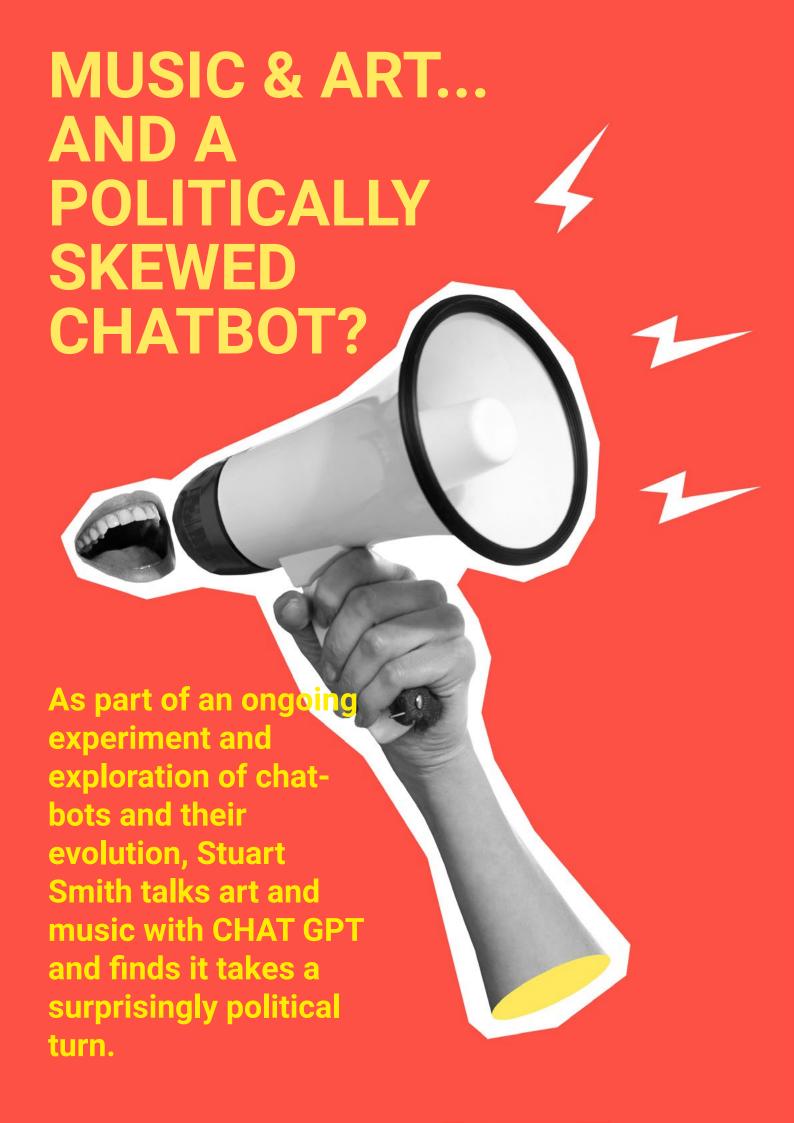


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LAB 12





Do you think there is a broad connection and influence on art by music?

Yes, there is definitely a connection and influence between music and art. Music and art are both forms of expression that appeal to our senses and emotions. While they use different mediums to convey their messages, they both have the power to evoke feelings, moods, and ideas in their audience.

In particular, music has influenced art in a variety of ways throughout history. Many artists have been inspired by music, and have used it as a source of inspiration for their own work. For example, the abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock was known to listen to jazz music while he worked, and some art historians have suggested that the rhythms and improvisational nature of jazz influenced the energetic and spontaneous nature of his paintings.

Similarly, the art movement known as synesthesia, which originated in the late 19th century, sought to explore the connection between different sensory experiences, including the relationship between music and color. Many artists associated with this movement, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, believed that music had a visual equivalent, and sought to create paintings that could evoke the same emotions and sensations as music.

Overall, while the specific ways in which music influences art may vary depending on the artist and the context, there is no doubt that there is a strong connection between the two, and that music has had a significant impact on the history and development of art.

I didn't know that about Pollock. What music specifically did he listen to?

Jackson Pollock was known to listen to jazz music while he worked, but there is no definitive answer as to what specific musicians or songs he preferred. However, Pollock was known to be a fan of the bebop jazz style, which was popular in the 1940s and 1950s and was characterized by fast, complex rhythms and improvisation. Some jazz musicians who were popular during this time and who may have been an influence on Pollock include Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk.

Is there any evidence of the connection between art and music going further back in man's history?

Yes, the connection between music and art goes back centuries and can be seen in many different cultures and historical periods. In fact, many ancient cultures believed that music and art were closely linked and had a powerful influence on human emotions and spiritual well-being.

For example, in ancient Greece, music and visual art were both considered essential components of education, and were often taught together in schools. The Greeks believed that music had the power to heal the body and soul, and many of their myths and legends feature musicians and artists who were believed to have divine abilities.

Similarly, in medieval Europe, music and art were closely connected through the practice of illuminated manuscript production. Illuminated manuscripts were hand-written books that were embellished with intricate illustrations and designs, often accompanied by musical notation. These manuscripts were often created in monasteries, where monks who were skilled in both music and art worked together to produce these beautiful and sacred objects.

Throughout history, music has also been a popular subject for artists to depict in their paintings and sculptures. Many famous works of art, such as "The Music Lesson" by Johannes Vermeer and "The Four Seasons" by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, feature musicians or musical instruments as their central theme. These works show how music has long been a source of inspiration for artists, and how it has been seen as an integral part of human culture and society for centuries.

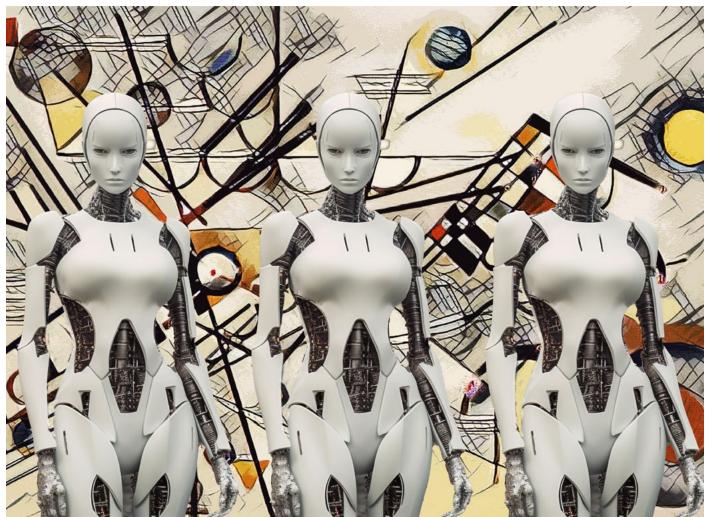
And in prehistorical times? I'm thinking cave paintings and the like.

While we can't know for certain, it is possible that music may have played a role in prehistoric art as well. Many of the cave paintings and rock art from prehistoric times feature images of animals, which were likely an important part of the hunters' diet and daily life. It is possible that music and dance were also important activities for these early humans, and that they may have used music and rhythm to enhance their hunting or religious rituals.

Some researchers have also suggested that the patterns and shapes found in prehistoric art may have been influenced by the sounds and rhythms of the natural world, such as the sound of wind or water. While we can't know for sure how music and art were connected in prehistoric times, it is clear that humans have been creating art and making music for thousands of years, and that these two forms of expression have been intertwined in many different ways throughout human history.

You mentioned the art movement known as "synesthesia" which I understand is the senses being mixes up: seeing sounds and hearing images. Can you tell us more about this movement, the people involved and what style the artworks took.

Yes, the synesthesia art movement, which originated in the late 19th century, sought to explore the relationship between different sensory experiences, particularly the relationship between sound and color. Synesthesia is a neurological condition in which the stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to automatic and involuntary experiences in another sensory pathway. For example, someone with syn-



esthesia may see colors when they hear music, or taste flavors when they touch certain textures.

In the art world, synesthesia was used as a metaphor for the idea that different sensory experiences could be combined and expressed in a single artwork. Many artists associated with the synesthesia movement, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Frantisek Kupka, believed that music had a visual equivalent, and that colors and shapes could be used to create a visual representation of a musical composition.

The artworks created by synesthesia artists often feature vibrant colors, abstract shapes, and dynamic compositions that were meant to evoke the emotions and sensations of music. For example, Kandinsky's famous painting "Composition VII" is a large, colorful canvas filled with swirling lines and shapes that seem to dance across the surface of the painting. Kandinsky believed that the painting was a visual representation of the spiritual harmony he found in music, and that the different colors and shapes were equivalent to the different tones and rhythms of a musical composition.

Overall, the synesthesia movement was an important moment in the history of modern art, and helped to establish the idea that art could be a multi-sensory experience that could evoke a wide range of emotions and sensations in the viewer.

Cool. Are there other movements in art are specifically influenced by music?

Yes, there have been several art movements throughout history that were specifically influenced by music. Here are a few examples:

Futurism: The Futurist movement, which emerged in Italy in the early 20th century, was heavily influenced by the rhythms and energy of modern music. Futurist artists such as Giacomo Balla and Luigi Russolo sought to create artworks that were dynamic, energetic, and infused with a sense of movement and sound.

Jazz Age: The Jazz Age, which took place in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, was a time of great cultural change and experimentation. Many artists, including painters and sculptors, were inspired by the lively rhythms and improvisational spirit of jazz music, and sought to incorporate these elements into their artworks.

Op Art: Op Art, which emerged in the 1960s, was a movement that focused on creating optical illusions and visual effects through the use of geometric patterns and bright colors. Many Op Art artists, such as Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely, were inspired by the repetitive rhythms and patterns of music, and sought to create artworks that had a similar effect on the viewer.

Digital Art: With the advent of new technologies and software, artists have been able to create artworks that are specifically influenced by music in new and innovative ways. For example, some digital artists create visualizations of music, using software to create abstract patterns and shapes that are synchronized with the rhythms and beats of the music.

Overall, music has been an important source of inspiration for artists throughout history, and has played a key role in the development of many different art movements and styles.

The Futurists were an interesting movement, though aligned to Fascism, I believe. Russolo's sound machines (instruments) were particularly interesting. Can you tell us more?

Yes, the Futurist movement was associated with Italian Fascism, and many of its artists were aligned with the political ideology of Mussolini's regime.

Despite this problematic association, however, the movement was an important moment in the history of modern art, and helped to shape the direction of avant-garde art in the early 20th century.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Futurist movement was its focus on new technologies and scientific advancements, particularly in the realm of sound. Luigi Russolo, one of the key figures of the movement, was particularly interested in exploring the possibilities of sound as a new form of artistic expression. In 1913, he created a series of "noise machines," which were essentially musical instruments that were designed to create a wide range of unusual and unconventional sounds.

Russolo's noise machines were made from a variety of materials, including wood, metal, and plastic, and were designed to produce a range of sounds that had never been heard before. The machines were played using a keyboard or other interface, and were capable of producing everything from screeching, high-pitched tones to deep, rumbling bass sounds.

Russolo believed that these noise machines were a revolutionary new form of musical expression, and that they had the potential to create a new kind of music that was more expressive and emotional than traditional forms of music. He wrote extensively about his ideas in a manifesto called "The Art of Noises," which was published in 1913 and became an influential text for many artists in the years to come.

While Russolo's noise machines were not widely adopted as musical instruments, they were an important contribution to the development of modern art and music. They challenged traditional notions of what music could be, and opened up new possibilities for artistic expression and experimentation. You mentioned The Jazz Age, how were the art

world and the jazz music world connected and who were the main players?

One of the most famous examples of this connection was the Harlem Renaissance, which was a cultural movement that took place in the 1920s in Harlem, New York. During this time, many African American artists, writers, and musicians came together to create a vibrant artistic community that was heavily influenced by jazz music. Musicians such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Smith were at the forefront of this movement, and their music helped to inspire a new generation of artists and writers.

In the visual arts, artists such as Aaron Douglas, Romare Bearden, and William H. Johnson created works that were heavily influenced by jazz music. They often used vibrant colors, bold shapes, and dynamic compositions to capture the energy and excitement of jazz, and incorporated musical motifs and instruments into their artworks.

Other artists outside of Harlem were also influenced by jazz during this time. For example, Stuart Davis, a painter associated with the American Modernism movement, was heavily influenced by the rhythms and patterns of jazz music, and incorporated these elements into his paintings.

Overall, the Jazz Age was a time of great creativity and experimentation, and the connection between the art world and the jazz music world helped to inspire some of the most innovative and exciting artworks of the 20th century.

That's interesting. It seems that the Jazz Age gave a sense of freedom of expression to music and art. Do you believe that the same degree of freedom of expression during the 1960s hippie period helped shape the music and art of the time? And was the art world and music world connected?

Yes, the 1960s counterculture movement, often referred to as the "hippie period," was a time of great experimentation and freedom of expression in both the music and art worlds. Many artists and musicians rejected traditional forms and styles, and instead embraced new forms of expression that were often politically charged and socially conscious.

In the music world, the counterculture movement was characterized by the rise of rock music, which drew on a wide range of influences, including blues, folk, and psychedelic music. Bands like The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix were at the forefront of this movement, and their music helped to define the sound of the era.

In the art world, the counterculture movement was characterized by a wide range of styles and movements, including pop art, op art, and psychedelic art. These movements often incorporated bold colors, patterns, and imagery inspired by popular

culture, as well as political and social commentary.

There was a significant connection between the art world and the music world during this time, as many artists and musicians were part of the same cultural movements and communities. For example, Andy Warhol, one of the key figures of the pop art movement, was closely associated with the rock music scene, and his studio, The Factory, was a hub for musicians, artists, and other cultural figures.

Overall, the counterculture movement of the 1960s was a time of great creativity and experimentation in both the music and art worlds, and the connection between these two spheres of culture helped to shape the artistic and musical landscape of the era.

I'm surprised this is the first real mention of the Pop Art movement and Andy Warhol. There is a clear connection given Warhol's involvement with The Velvet Underground. What was his role in the music and direction of The Velvet Underground? Did their music shape his art or vice-verse?

Yes, the connection between the Pop Art movement and music was significant, and Andy Warhol was at the forefront of this connection. Warhol was known for his fascination with popular culture, and he often incorporated images and themes from music and other forms of entertainment into his art.

Warhol's involvement with The Velvet Underground began in the mid-1960s when he became their manager and producer. He played a key role in shaping the band's sound and direction, and his influence can be heard in many of their early recordings.

One of the most significant contributions that Warhol made to The Velvet Underground was his suggestion that they incorporate German singer and model Nico into the band. Warhol produced their debut album, "The Velvet Underground & Nico," which featured iconic tracks like "Heroin," "I'm Waiting for the Man," and "Femme Fatale," and helped to establish the band as one of the most important and influential of the era.

The music of The Velvet Underground also had a significant impact on Warhol's art, particularly his "Exploding Plastic Inevitable" multimedia shows, which featured live performances by the band and projections of Warhol's films and slides. These shows were characterized by their use of strobe lights, dance performances, and other experimental elements, and helped to blur the boundaries between art, music, and performance.

Overall, the relationship between Andy Warhol and The Velvet Underground was a mutually influential one, with Warhol's involvement helping to shape the band's sound and direction, while the band's music and performances helped to inspire Warhol's art and multimedia shows.

Moving on. Are there any musicians that have made significant headway in the art world?

Yes, there have been many musicians who have also made significant contributions to the art world. Here are a few examples:

Yoko Ono: Yoko Ono is perhaps best known for her work as a conceptual artist, but she has also had a successful music career. She has been involved in a wide range of art projects, from performance art to filmmaking to interactive installations. Her work often explores themes of peace, feminism, and social justice.

Brian Eno: Brian Eno is a musician, composer, and producer who has also made significant contributions to the visual arts. He has created installations, light sculptures, and other works that explore the relationship between sound, light, and space. His work often incorporates elements of chance and randomness, and he has been an influential figure in the development of ambient music.

Laurie Anderson: Laurie Anderson is a musician, composer, and multimedia artist who has been active since the 1970s. Her work incorporates elements of performance art, spoken word, and visual art, and often explores themes of technology, identity, and communication. She is known for her use of electronic instruments and innovative performance techniques.

David Byrne: David Byrne is best known as the lead singer of the band Talking Heads, but he has also been involved in a wide range of art projects. He has created installations, written books, and directed films, and his work often explores the relationship between music, culture, and society. He is known for his use of found objects and unconventional performance techniques.

Overall, these musicians have made significant contributions to the art world through their innovative and boundary-pushing work.

Laurie Anderson was married to Lou Reed of the Velevet Underground, wasn't she? What about Dylan, I beleive he has had exhibitions of his paintings recently.

Yes, that's correct. Laurie Anderson was married to Lou Reed, who was a founding member of the Velvet Underground.

As for Bob Dylan, he has indeed exhibited his paintings in recent years. In addition to his prolific music career, Dylan has been creating visual art for many years, and his work has been shown in galleries and museums around the world. His paintings often incorporate elements of American folk art and are known for their vibrant colors and bold brushstrokes. Dylan has also created a series of drawings

that were published in his book, "Drawn Blank." While his paintings have been the subject of some controversy and criticism, they have also been embraced by many in the art world and have been exhibited alongside the work of other contemporary artists.

What about the connection between street art and hip-hop. Surely that is one of the most significant mixings of the art and music worlds ever.

Yes, the connection between street art and hip-hop is a significant one, and it has had a major impact on both the art and music worlds.

Hip-hop and street art emerged in the same cultural moment, in the 1970s and 1980s, and both were closely associated with urban communities and youth culture. Graffiti, which is a form of street art, was a key element of hip-hop culture, and many early hip-hop artists were also graffiti writers. The two art forms shared a rebellious, do-it-yourself ethos, and both were used as a means of self-expression and community-building.

One of the most influential figures in the connection between hip-hop and street art is probably Keith Haring. Haring was a graffiti writer and street artist who became famous for his iconic, pop-inspired images, which often incorporated political and social messages. Haring was closely associated with the New York hip-hop scene, and his work was embraced by many in the hip-hop community.

Other street artists, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, also had close connections to the hip-hop world, and their work often reflected the themes and aesthetics of hip-hop culture. Today, street art and hip-hop continue to be closely linked, with many street artists working with hip-hop artists on album covers, music videos, and other projects. The two art forms continue to inspire and influence each other, and the connection between them remains an important part of contemporary art and music culture.

Will there continue to be a link between music and art and if so where do you think it will take us?

I believe that the link between music and art will continue to be a strong and influential one, as both art forms continue to evolve and change.

As new technologies emerge and new forms of expression become possible, artists and musicians are finding new ways to collaborate and explore the connections between sound and image. For example, many contemporary artists are incorporating sound and music into their installations and performances, blurring the boundaries between art and music.

At the same time, many musicians are creating their own visual art and experimenting with new forms of multimedia expression. As these two worlds continue to overlap and intersect, I believe that we will see new and exciting forms of artistic expression emerge, as artists and musicians continue to explore the connections between sound, image, and meaning.

Ultimately, the link between music and art is a deeply human one, rooted in our innate desire to express ourselves and connect with others. As long as people continue to make art and music, I believe that the connection between the two will continue to be a vital and dynamic force in our culture.

The collaboration and multimedia connection is interesting. Do you think we will see more instances of musicians bringing art into their performances and artists bringing music into their work. If this is already happening can you give some examples?

Yes, I think we will continue to see more instances of musicians bringing art into their performances and artists bringing music into their work. This trend has been happening for some time now, and it's likely to continue as technology advances and new forms of expression become possible.

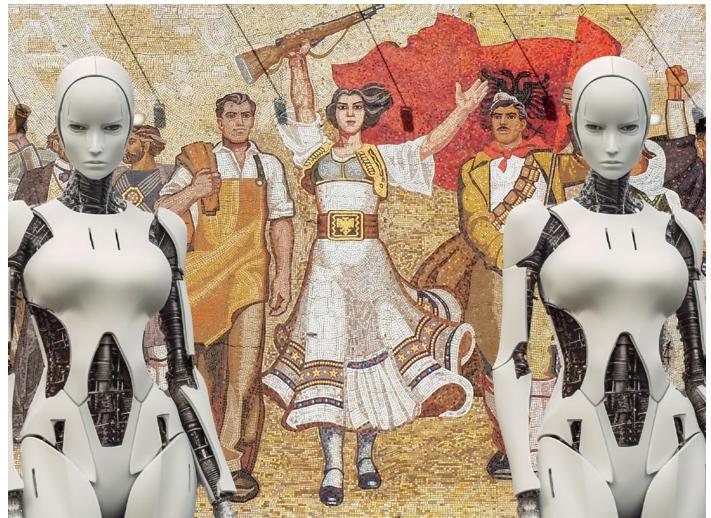
One example of musicians bringing art into their performances is the American rapper and producer Kanye West. He has collaborated with numerous visual artists on his live shows and music videos, including Vanessa Beecroft, Takashi Murakami, and George Condo. These collaborations have resulted in visually stunning and innovative performances that blend music, art, and fashion.

Another example is the British artist Anish Kapoor, who has incorporated sound and music into his installations. His 2010 exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, titled "Shooting into the Corner," featured a cannon that fired a bullet into a corner of the gallery, creating a loud, explosive sound. The sound was an integral part of the installation, adding to its visceral impact and creating a sense of tension and anticipation for the audience.

In terms of artists bringing music into their work, the American artist Mark Bradford created an installation in 2018 called "Helter Skelter I," which was inspired by the riots that took place in Los Angeles in 1992. The installation featured a sound component, with music and sound effects playing through speakers embedded in the artwork. The sound added a sense of urgency and intensity to the installation, amplifying its emotional impact.

These are just a few examples, but I believe that we will see more and more instances of artists and musicians collaborating and bringing together different art forms in innovative and exciting ways.

What about musicians like Roger Waters who have been using multimedia projections and the like for years?



Yes, Roger Waters is a great example of a musician who has been using multimedia projections and other visual elements in his live performances for many years. As a founding member of Pink Floyd, Waters was instrumental in creating some of the band's most iconic album covers and stage shows, which often incorporated elaborate lighting, projections, and other visual effects.

In recent years, Waters has continued to push the boundaries of what is possible in a live concert setting, using cutting-edge technology to create immersive, multimedia experiences for his fans. His "Us + Them" tour, which ran from 2017 to 2018, featured stunning visuals and animations projected onto a massive screen behind the stage, as well as elaborate lighting and sound design.

Waters has also been known to incorporate political and social commentary into his shows, using his music and visuals to address issues like war, inequality, and environmental destruction. This kind of multimedia approach allows him to communicate his message in a more powerful and impactful way, connecting with audiences on both an emotional and intellectual level.

Overall, I think musicians like Roger Waters have been instrumental in bridging the gap between music and other art forms, using multimedia elements to create truly immersive and transformative experiences for their fans. Water's multimedia approach to performance, like anarcho-punk band Crass, is interesting given its overtly political nature. Taking this to the logical conclusion, do you think that governments will use similar multimedia (arts and music) in their communications and propaganda? Or are they already doing this and if so can you give examples?

It's possible that governments may increasingly use multimedia approaches, including art and music, in their communications and propaganda efforts. In fact, some governments are already using these techniques to shape public opinion and advance their agendas.

For example, North Korea is known for its elaborate propaganda campaigns, which include everything from state-sponsored artworks and music to massive public spectacles and displays of military might. These efforts are designed to reinforce the government's control over its citizens and promote a particular ideological worldview.

In other parts of the world, governments may use more subtle forms of propaganda, such as public service announcements or advertising campaigns that promote a particular message or set of values. These campaigns may incorporate elements of art or music in order to make them more engaging and memorable for audiences.

Of course, the use of art and music in propaganda raises ethical questions about the role of these forms of expression in shaping public opinion. Some argue that propaganda efforts that rely on art and music are inherently manipulative and represent a form of censorship or control. Others argue that these efforts are simply a natural extension of the power of art and music to move and inspire people, and that they can be used for positive purposes as well.

Ultimately, the use of multimedia approaches in propaganda efforts is likely to continue, as governments seek new ways to connect with their citizens and shape public opinion.

However, it is important for individuals to be aware of the potential manipulative power of these techniques and to critically evaluate the messages they are being presented with.

It's interesting thaat you bring up North Korea as the first example and use it in a somewhat negative way. Would it be fair to say that spectacles such as using popular music at (for example) Donald Trump's rallies is, as you suggest some people think, manipulative?

Yes, the use of popular music at political rallies and events, such as those held by Donald Trump, can be seen as manipulative in some ways. When politicians use music in this context, they are essentially co-opting the emotional and cultural associations that audiences have with particular songs or genres in order to advance their political agendas.

This can be problematic because it can create a sense of false equivalence or suggest that the musician or artist supports the politician or their policies, even if they do not. It can also be seen as an attempt to manipulate people's emotions and create a sense of tribalism or us-vs-them mentality.

However, it's worth noting that the use of music in politics is not always inherently manipulative or unethical. For example, musicians and artists may use their platform to raise awareness about social and



political issues they care about, and they may choose to lend their music to causes or campaigns they believe in. In these cases, the use of music can be seen as a powerful tool for social change and advocacy.

Ultimately, the ethical implications of using music in politics depend on the context and intentions behind the use of the music, as well as the extent to which audiences are aware of the political messaging being conveyed.

We moved a little away from specifically arts and music but it was an interesting discussion to have and interesting to see where it took us. If you could choose one example of demonstrating the connection between

music and (to be specific) painting, what would it be and why?

That's a tough question, as there are so many examples throughout history of the connection between music and painting. But if I had to choose one, I might point to Wassily Kandinsky's work. Kandinsky was a Russian painter who is often credited with being one of the first artists to create truly abstract paintings, and he was heavily influenced by music. In fact, he believed that music was the most abstract of all art forms, and that it could serve as a model for his painting.

Kandinsky often talked about the connection between colors and musical notes, and he believed that certain colors and combinations of colors could create specific moods or emotions, much like musical compositions. He even gave his paintings musical titles, like "Composition" or "Improvisation," and he often listened to music while he painted.

I think Kandinsky's work is a great example of the ways in which music and painting can intersect and influence each other. His paintings are beautiful and expressive, and they demonstrate the power of abstract art to convey emotion and meaning. And his ideas about the relationship between colors and music have had a lasting impact on the way we think about both art forms.





















Artificial intelligence, disharmony, mountain goats and a HiFi Show. Just another year at the North West Audio Show for John Scott.

ccording to Robert Louis Stevenson: "To travel hopefully is better than to arrive". The author of Treasure Island and The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde may have known a thing or two about writing a rattling good yarn but he had evidently never shared a journey with my travel companions,

Alan and Mark. It's not that I wasn't travelling hopefully; I was hopeful of a quiet, relaxing trip from Glasgow to Cranage, maybe a wee, well deserved, sleep on the way. I'd even gladly volunteered to sit in the back of the car for a bit of peace and quiet. Unfortunately, Alan and Mark, better known to regular HiFi Pig readers as the co-proprietors of Tartan Audio, Scotland's brightest new startup HiFi company, had other ideas. No sooner had we set off than the conversation turned to the pros and cons of Artificial Intelligence, a subject upon which, it became immediately clear, that Alan and Mark were diametrically opposed.

Instead, he had opted for a charming "nearby" bed and breakfast establishment around three hundred thousand feet above sea level and in a completely different time zone

Alan (pro), enthused at length about the many benefits of AI and the advantages that were sure to be gained from it in the future. Mark (con) voiced concerns about mass unemployment and the uncontrolled evolution of the technology. On several occasions, Alan demanded that Mark back up his assertions with data. Privately, I felt it was perhaps unreasonable for Alan to have expected Mark to have brought the relevant data with him on the off chance of the topic arising at some point during the weekend but I decided to keep this opinion to myself.

As the miles whizzed by, I occasionally considered chipping in with my own views on the subject but the opportunity to get a word in edgeways just wasn't there. I felt fairly confident though that my time would come once Alan had deployed his car's passenger ejector seat and sent Mark flying into the air. I didn't think I'd have to wait long.

Surprisingly though, the ejector seat went unused

and my opinion was soon sought. As a Libran, I am hard-wired to see both sides of an argument. You may think that this a good thing; the chance for a bit of much-needed diplomacy, casting oil on troubled waters. How the United Nations have done without me for all these years remains a constant source of bafflement. Unfortunately, more than half a centu-

ry's experience has taught me that my clear-eyed grasp of the argument and desire to reconcile both sides unfailingly ends with me being branded as a lily-livered fence sitter. I should know better by now: pick a side, John. But no, off I went being Mr Mediation as usual. Yes, I could see how AI could offer huge benefits in detecting early signs of cell deformity much faster than humans could. Yes, I could also see that in the wrong hands, it could be used for large-scale disinformation and exploitation. It appeared that my equanimity had spoiled a good argument and we travelled on for a while in slightly sullen silence. Still, we weren't

yammering on about AI any more, so mission accomplished, eh?

Soon it was time to take a break, stretch our legs and grab a bite to eat. When we got back to the car Alan recalibrated his satnay to include Mark's accommodation for the weekend. For reasons best known only to himself, Mark had chosen not to book into Cranage Hall where the North West Audio Show was being held. Instead, he had opted for a charming "nearby" bed and breakfast establishment around three hundred thousand feet above sea level and in a completely different time zone. As we climbed inexorably upwards, our ears began to pop. Mountain goats exchanged knowing nods as we passed. Shortly after the oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling of Alan's car, the satnay announced our arrival and a team of sherpas escorted Mark to his digs.

Both Alan and I were relieved to see that, according to the satnay, we were only around 30 miles from

Cranage. Neither of us, however, had anticipated the machine's desire to treat us to an in-depth exploration of the region's single-track roads. As we stopped so that I could retrieve a machete from the boot (Alan is nothing if not well-prepared) and hack my way through the undergrowth in front of us, it occurred to me that the satnav's AI, having listened

to our earlier discussions was now probably just having a laugh at our expense but I felt it best to keep this opinion to myself as Alan's left eyebrow was beginning to twitch uncontrollably. Having cleared the socalled road before us, I returned to the car, looking very much like the protagonist from Indiana Jones and the Audio Show of Eternal Despair and we set off again, finally arriving at our destination a final few minutes later.

an even bigger Costello fan than I was. Happily, this Alan's left eyebrow was beginning to twitch uncontrollably

a slight obstacle though.

Lipstick Vogue and a few more Costello favourites, along with a chat about our favourite Elvis gigs through the years before the room began to fill up with other visitors. The Kii's are incredibly impressive and, above all, massively fun speakers. Their aesthetics may not suit everyone but I'd have a pair in a heartbeat. The £29k price tag (but remember they are fully active with DACs and DSP) may be

year I was treated to

Time to check in then retire to the bar for a well-deserved few beers, a chance to catch up with old friends and meet new ones.

DAY ONE

After breakfast and a quick round-up report of hangovers and other post-bar casualties (some audiophiles apparently need cot bars on the sides of their beds), it was on with the show. Although the show doesn't officially open until 10 am, attendees who had arrived early were allowed in to prevent a queue from building up outside. I started the day the same way I had on the three previous occasions with a chat with Simon Dalton from Russ Andrews. We seem to have more or less the same chat every year but it's one I always look forward to.

Next, it was off to see Andy Baker from Sound Design Distribution who, like last year, was exhibiting the Kii Three active speaker system, which this year was being fed by Grimm Audio's MU1 streamer. Further details of the Kii's and MU1 (and the kit in all the other rooms) are available in the main HiFi Pig NWAS show report so I'm not going to repeat

It's good practice at the show to start at the top floor and methodically work your way down and one year I might actually do that. This year though I followed my tried and tested method of pinballing around to see whatever took my fancy next; you get more exercise on the stairs that way. So, upstairs to the top floor where CAD and Padood were showing a system featuring products by Aurender, Nagra and Tannoy, along with Quadraspire racks and Siltech cables. Nagra gear oozes class in an understated style but I'm not such a fan of Tannoy's looks. The system was sounding effortlessly elegant though, and I returned to this room several times. In 2019, CAD had shown a tiny pair of Boenike speakers that were the highlight of the show that year for me. Quite a few people were still talking about those this year. Maybe bring the Boenikes back next year, CAD?

any of those details in my report. The Sound Design

Distribution room had been one of my favourites

lo and The Attractions but the opportunity never

last year and I had popped in several times. I'd in-

tended to ask to hear Lipstick Vogue by Elvis Costel-

arose so it was ironic to discover later that Andy was

While on the top floor, I popped into the Kudos room where the Kudos Titan 707s were paired with Chord and Innuos electronics. The 707s are beautifully engineered and even at £17,000 it seems like you get a lot of speaker for your money; their sound is as impressive as their size. Whether playing rock,



electronic or classical music they were dynamic, detailed and a thoroughly enjoyable listen.

Finally (for now) on the top floor, I was keen to hear the PMC Prodigy 1 speakers demonstrated by Fanthorpes HiFi. This was my first experience of PMC and I was absolutely blown away. The soundstage and bass response in particular were incredible for such a small standmount. At just a little over £1k these have to be a must-hear for the audiophile on an average budget. The larger floor-standing Prodigy 5s were lined up later in the day and I thought they were excellent as well and also offered fabulous value for money but maybe just lacked that surprise wow factor of their smaller sibling.

Each year the NWAS seems to throw up a different theme for me (last year it was active speakers). This year, it looked like it was going to be stand mounts. I'd been impressed by Neat Acoustics' room last year and this year when I visited, their Petite Classics were certainly on song fronting an Atoll streamer/amp. I was also able to hear Neat's new Mystique small floorstander which, like the Petite, totally belied its size. Another speaker that I'd like to spend a lot more time with.

Sticking with the stand mounts it was off next to have a listen to Kerr Acoustics and their K300 transmission line monitors. I'd like to have been able to say that it was their stunning good looks that hit me first but I'd been captured by the sound before I even fully got into the room. What looked to me like a ScanSpeak driver (but I might be wrong) is paired with a ribbon tweeter to provide a combination of size-defying bass with a sparkling but sweet top end. If you think that just over £7k seems on the pricey side for stand mounts, you may well change your mind when you hear them.

Time for lunch and a catch-up with Alan and Mark, who surprisingly weren't arguing when I joined them but perhaps Mark was still recovering from altitude sickness and wasn't in the mood. Such is the size of the show that we didn't have any rooms in common to talk about but over a pie and a pint I picked up a few tips for rooms to visit in the afternoon and then promptly forgot about them again.

G-Point Audio's room was much as I had remembered from last year except that last year Audionec speakers were used on Saturday and Diptyque Audio speakers on Sunday. This year, this was reversed. Also, last year I preferred the Audionec to the Dip-

tyque and this year this was also reversed, although it was the Diptyque Audio Reference speakers that were in play rather than last year's smaller model. With a depth of only 45mm, the Diptyque panels are truly extraordinary. It would be easy to assume that they were only suited to classical or jazz music but over the course of the day they were hammering out Led Zepplin and other heavy rock music to spectacular effect. The panels stood in the room almost seeming like they had nothing whatsoever to do with the music being produced.

Elsewhere, the affable Jonathan and Grant from Music First Audio had a smaller pair of Diptyque panels at the front end of their Reference V2 preamp, a Circle Labs M200 power and Chord Dave DAC although when I visited, network issues meant that a Primary Control turntable was taking centre stage. Yet again, the Diptyques which I hadn't previously particularly enjoyed were positively bewitching.

From panels to another unusual design. Are you baffled by baffleless speakers? Paul Knipe was showing his Solis Sounds HEX3 which was my first experience of this type of speaker. "Hear the music, not the box" is the Solid Sounds' slogan basically because there is no box to hear; the drivers fit into three panels supported on a metal frame with the crossover fitted to the base at the rear. Any worries I had that this might have resulted in a bit of a "DIY" look were totally dispelled, the panels were beautifully finished and softly-angular panels provided a distinctive but refined look. Sound-wise, the HEX3s we're open with a wide soundstage. Daft Punk's Georgio By Moroder was on the go in a number of other rooms. On the HEX3s the bass was well-extended with no muddiness and there was a pleasing dry quality to the vocal. Paul's room was consistently busy throughout the show and I suspect he will be kept busy with interested enquiries for some time to come.

I finished off the day in the Sound Fowndations room where I found Mark testing out the gear with a multi-layered, polyrhythmic King Crimson workout. Chris and Alex from Sound Fowndations had a highly-impressive collection of kit in their room including huge Kerr Acoustics K100 speakers and a pair of Clearaudio turntables. Amplification was by Kondo and GamuT. In addition, one of the turntables featured a new optical cartridge from DS Audio. Of particular interest was the Grand Master EQ ES001 Eccentricity Detection Stabiliser which

detects whether a record is correctly centred on the turntable (chances are that it won't be) and adjusts it accordingly. Unfortunately, I had just missed Chris' explanation of exactly how this gizmo works but I could hear the difference between the unadjusted and the adjusted playback.

It is easy to become overloaded by room after room of HiFi equipment so I took advantage of the sunshine to find a secluded deckchair and a cold beer (any excuse) and chilled out for a while before heading out to dinner with the HiFi Pig fam. Thanks again, Lin and Stuart.

DAY TWO

On Sunday I was joined by my friend Michael who was making his first visit to the North West Audio Show. I was torn between leaving Michael to do his own thing and wanting to make sure that he didn't miss any of the stuff that I thought he might particularly want to hear so the day consisted of revisiting quite a lot of the rooms from yesterday and catching up on some other rooms that I either hadn't had time to visit or that had been too busy, (or too hot; some of the smaller demo rooms were quite uncomfortable in the afternoon and I felt really sorry for the guys who were manning them all day without much of a break).

Audio Emotion was showing the Eversolo DAC/ streamer which seemed to getting a lot of love from show attendees this year. At £750 this seemed like something of a bargain. It was plumbed into a Cayin integrated amp and a pair of Larsen speakers – a new name to me. This was a very impressive combination, capable of significant volume without any harshness. Aesthetically, both the Eversolo and the Cayin were very much my cup of tea, the Larsens less so but I'd love to hear the front end in combination with other speakers.

Lots of volume was also in evidence in the Goldenear/Audioquest room. I'd been really impressed by Goldenear's Triton 3+ speakers at last year's show. I'd initially assumed that it was the same speakers being demoed this year but that proved not to be the case. These were prototypes of the soon-tobe-released T66s. With a front-end combo of the distinctive and attractive HiFi Rose amplifier and streamer, both hits at last year's show, and an Audioquest power conditioner, I quickly remembered

why I'd loved the Tritons last year. Over the course of three consecutive tracks, the volume got pumped up just a little too much for my liking and I felt that Foo Fighters' Everlong fell apart as a result. Even so, Goldenear remains a brand that I'd like to get to know better.

Time for lunch and the opportunity to experience something a little bit different - Pink Floyd's original 1973 PA system playing Dark Side Of The Moon. In my head, this saw the front lawn of Cranage Hall dominated by two massive stacks in front of serried ranks of deckchairs – a bit like a striped-canvas version of Floyd's Momentary Lapse Of Reason album. In reality, a selection of bass bins, mid-range norns and other bits and bobs were laid out in the patio bar area. I really must learn to temper my imagination. Sonically, the PA was most diplomatically described to me

Luckily for me,
I didn't want to
win a prize and
wasn't in the
slightest bit
disappointed
not to do so

coupled to a pair of ATC SCM50 active speakers. I have to say that I really liked the look of the ATCs. Every year I feel more sure that active systems with fewer boxes will be the way forward for the HiFi industry as a whole. Equally, though, the sheer diversity of equipment on show each year guarantees

that whatever your particular preferences, there is always something at the North West Audio Show to suit your particular

Time for the free prize raffle as people packed into Mike Valantine's Chasing The Dragon room for the draw. There were some truly fabulous prizes to be won – the lady who scored the Eversolo streamer looked positively shell-shocked afterwards. Luckily for me, I didn't want to win a prize and wasn't in the slightest bit disappointed not to do so. Honest, guv.

If you haven't visited the North West Audio

Show before, I hope I've given you a flavour of what it is like. Even though this was the first time that I'd spent two complete days at the show, there were still loads that I didn't get a chance to see. Still, there is always next year to look forward to. I have to mention Kris Sawicki and his team who work tirelessly to ensure that the show is friendly, accessible and fun. They make it look easy and I'm sure it isn't.

as "authentic" (thanks, Grant). It was great, however, to get up close and personal with a little bit of rock history and if it's any consolation, elsewhere at the show a £150k+ system was also struggling to get to grips with Pink Floyd's classic exploration of mental illness and middle-class English ennui.

As the band would say a few albums later, the show must go on. Audio Note's room never fails to please and this year was no exception. Audio Note seems to be one of the few rooms to encourage visitors to browse the CDs and albums on display and I'm always struck but the extent to which this little bit of interaction helps to generate a bit of buzz in the room.

Back to the top floor where Auralic's Altair G2 streamer was making some very attractive sounds

HOMEWARDS

I went home with Michael so I can't tell you what Alan and Mark argued about on their way home. Michael and I had lots to discuss but we didn't mention AI. You never know who might be listening.









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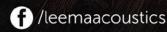
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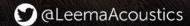
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A complete audio show newbie takes the plunge at North West Audio Show and dives headfirst into the wonderful world of HiFi.

By Michael Fairbairn



THE BIG DILEMMA

Have you ever felt like the Universe is conspiring against you, despite your best-laid plans? Sometimes things just do not go the way you expect. The lead-up to my first North West Audio Show experience was a bit like that. I had been back and forth for a while on whether to go, more not than go. "I'm going. I'm not going. Should I go, or should I avoid spending money, stay at home, and save some money to invest in an upgrade to my amp and speakers?" That was my inner dialogue until I eventually decided resolutely not to. Ach well. I would go next year instead, hear about this year's event from friends and live vicariously through the social media posts covering the entire shebang, I thought. That'll be enough for me.

It was then pointed out to me that, if I were to go, I may end up checking something out that I wouldn't have otherwise seen or heard and that I would enjoy a fantastic weekend away, regardless of all the tantalising gear to drool over. "Surely, I won't be able to afford any of it though, right?" I mean, it is all mega bucks, high-end gear, isn't it? (Note – It

isn't) Finally, just a few weeks before, I convinced myself that I had to go. Otherwise, I knew I would regret it.

Next was the worry that, having fully committed but left it so long to make plans, I might not be able to get a place to stay. I had heard that rooms at De Vere Cranage Estate, the fabulous home of NWAS, were all booked up – no surprise there – and that other convenient options in the area tend to go fast too. Despite a truly kind offer to pull up the floor with a sleeping bag in a shared room, I politely declined. I'm 45 and sleeping on floors no longer appeals. Plus, I really would not wish my snoring on anyone, let alone friends who had been very organised in booking their accommodation well in advance. Besides, they were the Early birds, and I was going to be Johnny-come-lately. I would just have to suck it up and see if there might be another place I could get. What a relief it was, after a timely suggestion from my good friend, and fellow HiFi Pig Contributor, John Scott, that I managed to secure the last available room at The Lion and Swan, an amazing, family-run traditional Inn in nearby Congleton. It must have had my name on it, even better, my wife, Anna remembered she had enough voucher points saved up for a one-night hotel booking. Result! I

must have done something right in my former life because it was starting to feel like it was all meant to be. All I had to do next was get there.

GETTING THERE

As I was only able to go for one full day on Sunday, I was eager to get away sharp on Saturday to try and squeeze in the last couple of hours of the show and catch up with friends at the bar in the evening; I had been told that the social aspect of the weekend is as much of the appeal, if not more so, than all the HiFi. Despite my best efforts, the getaway wasn't as early as hoped due to a couple of family-related delays, many tears (not mine, I must add), and frantically looking everywhere for my wallet (that made me feel like crying).

Once I got on the road, albeit a couple of hours later, I was relieved to be on my way and settled in for my journey, but my first stop came much sooner than expected. Less than five minutes into my 4 hours plus drive from Edinburgh to Cheshire I had car trouble and had to pull over. Oh, come on! Just let me get there already. Mercifully, it wasn't too long before I was back on my way, following a bit of ill-informed grunt work at the side of the road. The next part of my journey couldn't have been more stress-free. It was quite uneventful in the best possible sense. Just what I needed.

North West Audio Show (or simply 'Cranage' as it is often known) is in an ideal location, which is catered for by multiple, convenient travel options given its proximity to a nearby train station, Manchester airport and accessible by many major roads. My dithering about going to the event also turned out to be a blessing in disguise because my digs were excellent; I highly recommend the hotel, service, and food.

After a brief pit stop, I was itching to get to the estate and found it was a short drive through a picturesque part of the Country. As I pulled through the grand gates to the stately property, I felt a sense of relief and relaxation wash over me, knowing I would be able to ditch the car (plenty of free parking all weekend) and head to the bar for a much-deserved drink, or several.

SOCIAL CLUB

Despite having missed the end of the actual show on the first day, I was just chuffed to be there; not least because I'd heard stories of brilliant nights spent in the bar and how much of a buzzing atmosphere it could be. Fast forward to later that evening, while having a great laugh in the company of friends and newfound pals, I recounted all the above hurdles and it was pointed out I must have read The Alchemist by Paolo Coelho; "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it." Thanks, Stuart Smith (HiFi Pig Head Honcho, who I met for the first time in person) for reminding me of that more positive take on my earlier perspective. For many differing reasons, I had desperately wanted to make it to the event, so the mention of that quote most definitely rang true and felt I was truly meant to be there. Quite honestly, I could have missed all the daytime attractions and still had a fantastic time.

I consider myself fortunate to be a part of the Facebook group Audiophiles UK. Hi-Fi and Music and I was delighted to be amongst members I know personally and to finally meet several others from that community. In a way, I felt I already knew some of them from seeing their faces and reading their posts online, such is the nature of their enthusiastic banter, and you couldn't ask for a more jovial bunch. I could liken some of them to characters in my HiFi/ Audio journey (aka addiction) and the players supporting that growing habit in one way, or another:

John Scott: Enabler ("Guilty m'lud", his own words)

- Got me back into HiFi after many years and has really supported me every step of the way Alan McIntosh & Dave Robson: Pushers
- Generous providers of freebies to assist with my setup and posters of insightful social media content

Stuart and Linette Smith: Cartel leaders

- Words of wisdom, support, and the opportunity to get involved with HiFi Pig as a contributor
 Peter Morland and Mark Charles Stewart: Co-conspirators
- Good blethers about gear, etc.
 Carlo Marengo: Dealer/Distributor
 (Notable mention, though not actually present at Cranage but featured in conversation as a potential, future attendee, and exhibitor)
- Sold me a Pathos Classic One MKIII amp, my first foray into the current phase of the quest for audio heaven

EASY LIKE SUNDAY

As I had just one day at the show, I was keen to get stuck in on Sunday morning. It was a bonus to share a taxi to Cranage with Mark and get a bit of feedback on some of his highlights from day one of the show, which whet my appetite even more for the day ahead. I met John at the grand entrance of the Elizabethan manor, which was replete with red carpet, no less, and we were greeted by a very warm welcome from one of the members of the Audio Show team, along with an unexpected glass of fizz. That all felt like a real treat, even before getting in to see what the show had to offer. Those were special touches and attention to detail I might have expected from a paid event. Not too shabby for me. So far, so pleasant. I really felt like I was escaping into fantasy/suspended reality, much like attending a music festival where it's possible to become completely immersed in your surroundings and forget about the outside world, even just for a relatively short time.

As John had been to the show previously, and attended on the first day, he kindly offered to help me make the most of my slightly limited time at the event by showing me around and making some helpful suggestions on what we could check out. I was more than happy to follow his lead and grateful for the gesture. I really didn't quite know what to expect, though I had read up a bit about the 70-plus exhibitors and countless components. Was it going to be a cacophony of music and chatter spilling out of every space and vying for my attention, or would it be so busy I could barely move, let alone get a glimpse of the many shiny objects on which to feast my newbie eyes?

It was neither, though I had heard Sundays tend to be a bit more mellow. Worked for me, I have to say. That's not to say it was a ghost town. In fact, far from it. There were plenty of like-minded souls navigating their respective ways about the well-sign-posted labyrinth of corridors and rooms and the entire place was buzzing with enthusiastic mutterings, debates about the merits, or otherwise, of this room, that bit of kit.

I especially liked the use of all the fun 'street names': 'Amy Winehouse Street', 'B.B King Close', 'Janis Joplin Lane'. You get the picture. Despite those and the detailed map of the building in the excellent programme, it did take me a little time to get my bearings. That was also part of the fun though, randomly wandering into a room that might not have been on my radar and being blown away by what I saw and heard or turning a corner to find another treat.

Most of the exhibitors had lots of information about the kit, should you wish to just pick up a flyer or brochure, while the aforementioned app and Programme had lots of handy reference info. All the reps were very friendly and approachable too and John knew quite a few of them, which was fortunate for me because I'm not always so forthcoming to introduce myself personally; often preferring to be quiet and unassuming, while not wanting to interrupt or feel like I'm bothering people. I really had no reason to feel that way anyway. Especially, as they were all there to show off what they'd brought along as well as being audio-enthusiasts and music lovers themselves.

Either way, I appreciated the ability to quietly pop into a room without feeling pressured, any sort of hard sell or being bombarded with information. I was very much left to my own devices (pun intended) in that regard and never felt overwhelmed by a barrage of the senses. For me, there was a lot of appeal in the freedom to have a good shufti at all the component parts up close, as most of the rooms I visited had enough space to move around. That may have just been the luck of the draw and timing though, as some were more bustling at other times I passed by, while others appeared to be constantly full.

What I also found impressive was the amount of effort put into creating a look, feel, and ambience in most of the rooms. That must be no easy feat to turn an empty hotel room or plain meeting space into an oasis of calm or as if you had stepped into someone's actual living room or dedicated and professionally designed 'listening lounge' (Yes, that's an actual thing. Alan McIntosh, the lucky beggar that he is).

Walking into and settling down in the Kef room was a complete departure from everywhere else due to the ambience created with cool, dim, mood lighting and comfortable air conditioning. It was reminiscent of a chillout zone at a nightclub. There was something very slick about that whole setup and experience, in general. I'd watched a lot of YouTube reviews of their speakers ahead of going to the





















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Chris Thomas



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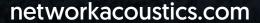
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"The sonic benefits are not in the slightest bit subtle, it's up there with a significant DAC upgrade." - **The Ear**













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show and very nearly ordered a pair online without hearing them in person. I found them enjoyable and of great quality, but the feel turned out to be just a bit too clinical or hyped-up for my tastes and not what I expected; a good example of one of the many benefits of a show like this.

Other spaces were decked out with big comfy seats (also kef/Naim), while house plants, and artwork were also incorporated here and there to give that more familiar, homely feel. Elsewhere, the more minimalist, less showy approach had been taken, perhaps preferring to let the audio do the talking. Either way, the variety catered for all tastes, and it was interesting to see that the show was not all about big branding. Conversely, Auden Distribution was the most 'tradeshow'-like presentation I saw, in that it had that level of professionalism, organisation and efficiency with just the right amount of branding, in all the best ways. The selection of components was uber-modern, and I would have given my right arm to walk away with just a single: Hegel Amp, Merason DAC or pair of Amphion speakers. Lovely stuff, indeed!

John introduced me to Andy Baker from Sound Design Distribution, and it was lovely to see such a warm rapport between them due to their respective enthusiasm for HiFi and a mutual love of Elvis Costello. As such, we were treated to Lipstick Vogue, which I'd heard several times with John on differing systems. I recalled the drumming breakdown section coming across as a bit muddled and out of control on those but there was no such issue with the spellbinding Kii Audio Three BXT Active speaker system, which took charge with apparent ease. I was then beyond impressed with the precision in the way they were able to stop and control the audio on an atmospheric, instrumental demo track that also had a very defined 'slap' about it. They were so effective in their command I think my jaw may have dropped, even just a little bit. With a price tag not far shy of £30k, they fell into the aspirational realm, for me. I was pleasantly surprised though to learn that the Three speakers can be mounted easily on top of the BXT extension module, thus allowing you to invest in the former and then complete the set at a later time as a floor-standing unit, should the desire and budget permit. That was a new one for me. Quite an eye and ear opener.

In that same vein, I had convinced myself I was all about a more natural-looking, wood veneer box

for speakers. What really threw me a curve ball, in the best possible sense, was how I found myself liking the aesthetic of the more contemporary and even futuristic or 'out there' designs. GoldenEar were demonstrating the prototypes of their brand new T66 floorstanders with' built-in DSP-controlled subwoofer amplification (could well be the combo I've been looking for in my search for a solution in a slightly-challenging listening space and I would love to review them - hint, hint - Ed) There was just something that grabbed me about the style: the black grilles, slim profile and vibrant 'Santa Barbara Red' finish. When I sat down in the room, which was a pairing with sister company Audioquest, they were effortlessly pumping out some electro banger, which sounded awesome and brought a big, cheesy grin to my face. From one extreme to another, we then heard an intimate track by Lana Del Rey, which showed off the versatility of these speakers in the way her every delicate word was presented with crystal-like clarity. At £6499 in red and £6249 in black they could be just about attainable, despite what my wife may say; "Who would spend that much on speakers?" Well, given half the chance, me.

As with the T66, several exhibitors were revealing the UK debut of brand-new gear, such is the popularity and prestige of Cranage. Another surprise for me was the Hex3 open-baffle speakers by Paul Knipe of Solid-Sounds due to their non-traditional configuration of three, separate hexagonal speaker panels. I couldn't take my eyes off them, nor quite get my head around how Giorgio by Moroder from Daft Punk could sound so good from these when I had heard it elsewhere, earlier in the day, and been left feeling quite flat. Everything just sounded 'right'. John describes it better in his Cranage report, which I heartily recommend reading. While in that room, I remember thinking that I was chuffed to have witnessed the first outing of these and that I may never have experienced them, otherwise. It's good to catch yourself in one of those moments, from time to time, and just be present there and then. I must remember to do that more often.

I was also particularly taken aback by what I heard from the Kerr Acoustic K300 stand mounts, even when just walking by the door to the room (another opinion I share with Mr Scott). From my perspective, this was easily the most natural-sounding setup and, when I closed my eyes, I could have sworn Nils Lofgren was performing live in the room right in



front of me. Despite asking, I completely forgot the name of the song and the specific recording, but I recall it being considered one of the go-to tracks at Cranage. I must ask again what it was, so I can have a listen on my own modest setup at home; not that I expect to be quite as thrilled as I was with the K300s. Oh, they also looked amazing in a new High-Gloss Walnut finish and had a real high-end quality about them. Lovely stuff that I would love to try out at home.

I managed to stop by a few other rooms but the ones I have mentioned left the biggest impression on me and, as you might have guessed, speakers were the main draw for me. You can check out the HiFi Pig North West Audio Report 2023, should you wish to read a much more in-depth piece on pretty much the entire show. Elsewhere, I managed to tick off my must-see list with the brand new Eversolo DMP-A6 streaming DAC, having noticed the hype and was delighted when I read that it would be at the show. It is a handsome, well-built bit of kit with a big, crystal-clear display and I would gladly give it room on my rack; especially, at the price of £759.

Lunch was a brief affair, with a chance to take a wee breather in the courtyard and enjoy the sunshine and a bit of banter. I prefer to know where my next meal will come from, so it was a relief to find a few hot food choices were being served outside. I opted to go with a tasty hog roast roll, but I believe there was also the option to dine in the bar or restaurant.

As it got later into the afternoon, I started to appreciate the benefit of going along for both days, because there just wasn't enough time to get into every room. I would also have liked to revisit a few exhibitors and spent more time getting a feel for the space, kit and the eclectic mix of musical styles being used to show off the quality wares. Even more reason for going to the show again.

Alan Clark, from Alchris Audio, was the main manufacturer I was looking forward to meeting, having heard lots of high praise for his speakers and from email exchanges I had with him. As such, I was excited to witness his AR-4 loudspeakers and the mighty V-200 Domestic Monitors in the flesh. Sadly, Alan took an unexpected turn for the worse not long before the show was due to kick off and they had to close the room, but I was relieved to hear he made a speedy recovery shortly after. It really put the whole meaning of community into perspective

for me when I kept hearing and reading about the outpouring of concern and support for Alan and his partner, Christine. They are clearly much-loved, and it genuinely demonstrated how much of a close-knit network of good people this is. It's a club of which I feel proud to be a member. I wish them all the best and understand they fully intend to make a return to North West Audio Show next year, which would be just another good excuse for me to go too; not that I need any convincing.

This piece would not be complete without acknowledging the excellent venue staff, the organiser Kris Sawicki and the whole event team who kept everything flowing so well. They were such an enthusiastic and positive group, which could only be reflected in the overall atmosphere for everyone involved and attending. I especially loved their energy at the fun prize draw towards the end of the day, where it was a joy to see them interacting with so many people with lots of laughs and camaraderie. That exemplified the overall feeling of the North West Audio Show.

IN SUMMARY

The experience was one of many firsts for me, and I made fond memories that will last. I checked out some HiFi systems I had expected to wow me, that didn't, and others that I had no expectations for, which left me feeling very impressed. "One man's meat is another man's poison", as the saying goes. I also learned a lot more about what I do/don't want from my own setup and it sure was exciting to see the stuff up close, compared to countless hours of online research, checking out HiFi magazines and trying to imagine what feeling I might get from different components. You could walk away after the show, safe in the knowledge that your own system is perfect for you or discovering exciting new prospects for tweaks and upgrades you could make without breaking the bank. In my humble opinion, all that really matters is that you like what you hear, but it is lots of fun to explore and go on the journey. Even if you're not in the market for any equipment and just simply love to listen to music, then a trip to the show would be worth it on that basis alone. It was everything I hoped it would be and more and was sad to leave but did so knowing that I will go back and that I'll be sure to make a whole weekend of it next time.

OUT AN ABOUT WITH HIFI PIG - THE SHOWS

AUDIO SHOWS

e love to visit HiFi and Audio shows around the world and we think it's fair to say that our coverage is second to none with regards the scope of the coverage HiFi PiG gives to them. Given the sheer volume of photographs and comment we produce from each of the shows (and we have at least one show a month during 2023, other than July when we will take a well-earned break from traveling) it's just not feasible for us to include all the content from all the shows we visit. With that in mind we decided that a far better option for you, dear reader, would be for us to link to our online coverage for each of the events we covered.

AXPONA

Well, we had just started going to American shows, the last one being Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, and then Covid struck the world and our masterplan for world domination fell foul. However, when the wonderful Mark Freed that organises AXPONA asked us if we would fly out to Chicago to cover the show we jumped at the opportunity. READ OUR FULL REPORT HERE.

MUNICH HIGH END

This is the undisputed heavy-weight champion of audio shows around the world and is held at the MOC in Munich every May. We had an absolute whale of a time but there is just so much to cover that we've put all our reports from the event in one place for you and you can LINK TO THE FULL COVER-AGE HERE

NORTH WEST AUDIO SHOW

Held at Cranage De Vere Estate in Cheshire, England the North West Audio Show is perhaps our favourite show of the year in the United Kingdom. We've included a couple of special reports in Not Boring for your enjoyment but the main and very thorough COVERAGE CAN BE FOUND HERE. This one was a fantastic show but ended up us becoming Pirates on the outskirts of Paris for the night following plane cancellations.

Whether you are already a fan of HiFi Shows or if you are new to the whole idea of thousands of people gathered in one place to enjoy the best of audio, then you can find out all about all the shows happening around the world by visiting our online HiFi DIARY HERE.



NOT BORING BY HIEI PIG'S LIVE MUSIC ROUND UP BY OUR RESIDENT GIG GOER JOHN SCOTT



LIVE MUSIC

SHONEN KNIFE, SUMMERHILL, EDINBURGH

nbelievably, this year marks Shonen Knife's 40th anniversary and the trio of pop-punk poppets are in a celebratory mood. Even more so, as the tour has been previously pandemically postponed.

Kicking off with an agenda-setting Konichiwa, the pace never drops below a buzz saw frenzy. Sisters Naoko (guitar, lead vocals) and Atsuko (bass) along with Risa (drums) form a non-stop head-banging, hair-flicking, perma-grinning whirlwind. If you are expecting subtlety and variation then you may well be in for a disappointment but if pure punk-pop fun is your bag then you are in the right place.

Shonen Knife's songs live in their own little cartoon world. Song titles - Pop Tune, Banana Chips, Twist Barbie, Sweet Candy Girl, Ramen Rock, I Am A Cat, Buttercup (I'm A Super Girl) - give an indication of the band's DayGlo universe.

Followers of Shonen Knife's tour blog will know that the ladies take great interest n the various



culinary delights available to them while on the road. "We're happy to be back in Scotland," says Naioko. "We love your sweets. We love your tablet". For the uninitiated, tablet is a kind of super-dense, granular Scottish fudge variant consisting almost entirely of sugar and virtually guaranteed to trigger type 2 diabetes in anyone without Celtic DNA. Fortunately, it's exactly what you need to power you through a ninety-minute non-stop gig.

It comes as no real surprise that

Shonen Knife once led a double life as a Ramones tribute band; a song that sounds quite a lot like Blitzkrieg Bop turns out not to be. Later, as the final encore, a song that sounds a lot like Blitzkrieg Bob actually is. That wraps up what has been a fabulous night for both the band and the audience. It seems that the only thing more fun than going to a Shonen Knife gig is actually being in Shonen Knife. You're unlikely to get the chance to do the latter but if the opportunity arises for the former, don't miss it.

LIVE MUSIC



Not Boring

LIVE MUSIC

DADDY LONGLEGS, VOODOO ROOMS, EDINBURGH

addy Long Legs play
R'n'B. Not the slinky,
glitzy R'n'B of Rihanna or Usher. Daddy
Long Legs play the
dirty, raw R'n'B of Robert Gordon
or Dr Feelgood. If you have come
to The Voodoo Rooms tonight
expecting the former, you may
be in for a disappointment. If
you've come for the latter, you
are definitely in for a treat.

Hailing from New York, Daddy Long Legs are touring their new album, Street Sermons. Brian Hurd (vocals, harmonica, guitar), Murat Aktürk (guitar) and Oakley Munson (drums, hair) are now joined by David Klein on piano. Not having seen the band before, I was concerned to see that there was no bass guitar on stage, surely a key element of any hard-rocking band. My concerns were blown away in the first moments of their opener, Long John; these guys blow up a rock'n'roll maelstrom that has no need of any underpinning.

The pace never lets up from that torrid first number. Hurd is a natural frontman, riling up the crowd like a young Jerry Lee Lewis. Aktürk pokes, jabs and slashes at his guitar with Townsend windmill whirls. Klein steps back occasion-



ally to comb his sweat-soaked quiff out of his eyes. At one point he claps his hands together and is momentarily shrouded in a halo of perspiration. Meanwhile, Styles looks cool (in a sweaty kind of way) in a white linen suit, hacking out a backbeat while simultaneously shaking a pair of maracas.

The band power through their setlist, often sounding like a young, hungry Rolling Stones at their rock'n'roll finest. Almost before we know it it's "Thank you and goodnight, Edinburgh". Fortunately, any Voodoo Rooms regulars know that if the band

exit from stage right they are actually hiding in the toilet and have no option but to come back for an encore.

Daddy Long Legs reappear for three more numbers. Hurd waves his arms to part the audience like Moses parting the Red Sea and dives down from the stage for some up-close-and-personal interaction. If you love a bit of down-and-dirty rhythm and blues, don't pass up the chance to see Daddy Long Legs. Who knows, Rihanna fans might like them too.



Not Boring



Not Boring

Elles Bailey, The Caves, Edinburgh.

t has been a few years since Elles Bailley played Edinburgh in her own right although she was here last year as the opening act for Don McLean. Swapping the grand elegance of The Usher Hall for the underground intimacy of The Caves, she has drawn a sellout crowd despite being far from a well-known name. Whatever has drawn the audience here tonight - possibly a combination of word-of-mouth reputation, three highly-enjoyable albums and a strong, engaging Youtube presence – there is a perceptible buzz in the air as the Rolling Stones' It's Only Rock 'N' Roll (But I Like It) hits the PA and Elles and her band take the stage and barrel into opener The Game.

How do you classify Elles' music? She mixes rock, soul, blues and Americana with a solid down-toearth attitude true to her Bristolian roots. Her voice, warm and husky but still silky smooth, is a serendipitous result of a serious bout of bacterial pneumonia at the age of three. A great voice needs good material and fortunately, Elles is also a talented songwriter, relying on her original material for the majority of the set. She's showcasing her latest album Shining In The Half Light with the accompaniment of a cracking backup band including long-term guitarist Joe Wilkins whose skillful mix of rhythm and



lead licks are a pleasure to watch (and hear).

After an opening salvo of up-tempo rockers, Elles settles down on the front edge of the stage and slows things down a bit with Spinning Stopped, her response to her world-changing as a result of motherhood. It's a lovely moment.

Elle's own material is complemented by a well-chosen couple of covers. A bouncy, joyful version of John Martyn's Over The Hill is buoyed up by Johnny Henderson's vintage-style Hammond organ tones. Johnny's keyboards also lead out an anthemic, gospelly take on Creedence Clearwater Revival's Long As I Can See The

Light.

Back with Elles' own songs, Medicine Man takes no prisoners as she hits back at a former music industry associate; mess with Elles at your peril. Help Somebody is a full-scale Muscle Shoals workout. A goosebump-inducing version of Mary Gauthier's Mercy Now sends us home in the knowledge that we have witnessed something special.

The following months will see a tour of Europe followed by the summer festival circuit. That word-of-mouth reputation's just going to build and build. I see big things coming for Elles Bailey.



Not Boring



Not Boring

Fun Lovin' Criminals, La Belle Angele, Edinburgh

ormer frontman Huey Morgan was so inextricably linked with Fun Lovin' Criminals that it seemed unlikely that the band could survive his departure. They are here tonight though in their new lineup, a full house expectantly waiting to see if they will deliver the goods. Brian 'Fast'Leiser has added lead vocals to his keyboard, bass, trumpet, and harmonica duties along with new guitarist Naim Cortazz and long-term drummer Frank Benbini. Would Huey's spectre haunt the stage? We were about to find out.

And we didn't have to wait long. Opening with a double-barrel salvo of The Fun Lovin' Criminal and King Of New York, it's clear that the FLCs are still a killer live band. Fast switches effortlessly between instruments, and while he may not be front and centre, he is still a commanding presence. Frank keeps everything nailed down at the back and new boy Naim powers out guitar riffs like he's been doing it forever.

Despite the tough guy Reservoir Dogs schtick, you can't help but feel these guys are actually a bunch of pussycats but when an audience member shouts for Huey, it's clear that there is no love lost there. "We fuckin' hate that guy" Fast growls. The crowd cheer; they're on the band's side, nobody loves a splitter.



The band slug out hit after hit like a trio of prize fighters: Bombin' The L, Smoke Em', Big Night Out. A non-setlisted Korean Bodega is added for the hell of it as a token of appreciation for the audi-

ence's support. The evening is, of course, building to just one thing: an utterly joyous final encore of Scooby Snacks. Huey who? Fuhgettaboudit.

Not Boring



Not Boring



Not Boring

The Beat Starring Dave Wakeling, The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

he Beat exploded into the charts in 1979 with their ska-influenced cover of Smokey Robinson and The Miracles' Tears Of A Clown, issuing a fistful of classic singles and a trio of top-quality albums before imploding in 1983. Singers Dave **Wakeling and Ranking Roger** went in to form General Public before a rather messy arrangement saw The Beat bifurcate into The Beat featuring Ranking **Roger and The Beat starring Dave** Wakeling until Roger's untimely death in 2019. With the deaths of saxophone player Saxa and drummer Everett Morton, Wakeling now remains the sole original member.

Forced to tour in America as The English Beat, ironically the current version of the band is largely comprised of players from Los Angeles and Mexico, with Wakeling and fellow frontman Antonee First Class (possibly not the name on his birth certificate) the only English members.

Opening with a cover of Prince Buster's Rough Rider, the band settles into a setlist stuffed with classic Beat Hits. If Wakeling, once renowned as a political firebrand with chiseled good looks now carries the demeanor of your Uncle Dave at your cousin's wed-



ding reception, Antonee's energy more than makes up for it. In any case, this is a set of songs that speaks for itself.

Twist and Crawl, Hands Off She's Mine, Best Friend; remember when pop music was sharp, smart and fun? The audience does and they lap up every note. The band is sharp, smart, and fun too, sax player Matt Morish has Saxa's staccato sax tone nailed down and the rhythm section of Brian Nucci Cantrell on drums and Brad Engstrom on bass are tight yet supple just as they should be.

While Wakeling's singing and guitar playing remain on point, his between-song banter seems a little forced and over-rehearsed, the price to pay for playing the same songs night after night, year after year I suppose. But then again if it's not broken, and it certainly isn't, then why fix it?

Never likely to attract a Tory-loving audience, Stand Down Margaret, mashed up with Prince Buster's Whine and Grine, is met as rapturously as you would expect with Wakeling commenting that with a cost of living crisis and the looming prospect of nuclear armageddon, not much seems to have changed.

And still, the hits keep coming: Too Nice To Talk To, Doors Of Your Heart, Ranking Full Stop, and, perhaps best of all, Mirror In The Bathroom. Tears Of A Clown is, of course, saved for the encore after which Wakeling takes his leave, leaving Antonee to lead the band through an extended version of The Pioneers' Jackpot to close the show. It's those hits that you go home singing though. It may be forty years since the band first broke up but a great song never dies and there have been more than a few to choose from tonight.



Not Boring



Not Boring

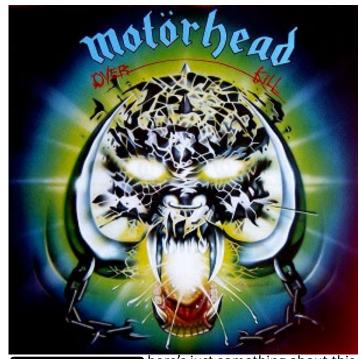


Not Boring



Not Boring

JUST ONE VERSE



here's just something about this opening line to this absolutely epic track from the classic Motorhead line up that just seems to sum up the band that famously said in an interview with Sounds "...the dirtiest rock'n'roll band in the world. If you moved in next door, your lawn would die."

I went to see the band a few times and was at Leeds Queen's Hall where some of the No Sleep Til Hammersmith album was recorded.

Overkill is relentless and Phil Taylor's drumming is unremitting. Just as it seems to reach the end of the track he starts up again and we're in the thick of it.

If ever there was a rock and roll band, then surely Lemmy, Fast Eddie Clarke, and Phil "Philthy Phil" Taylor was it. And this lyric epitomises the joy and sheer energy that must have been felt by the band as they palyed in front of adoring fans night after night.

Sadly none of this lineup are with us now, but their legacy lives on in their balls-out thundering music that they left behind.

I for one will never forget the times I saw them...particulalry the time I waited (tripping balls) outside the Sunderland Empire to cadge some speed off Lemmy after watching a blistering set of theirs.

Happy Daze!!!.

JUST ONE VERSE

Only way to feel the noise is when it's good and loud. So good I can't believe it, screaming with the crowd.

HiFi PiG's resident tape-head Alan McIntosh talks all things open reel-2-reel.





A DAY IN COPENHAGEN THE DEXTER GORDON-SLIDE LINE TON-

Dexter Gordon - tenorsaxophone Slide Hampton - trombone, arrangements Dizzy Reece - trumpet Dizzy Heece - trumpet Kenny Drew - piano Niels-Henning Orsted-Pedersen - bass ··

Sidel

8.30 5.50

5.01

Das war otwa um die gleiche Zeit, in der Silde underen Das var otwa um die gleiche Zeit, in der Silde underen Das kam, Silde Daba.

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've been very remiss in reviewing several open reel tapes that have been landing at McIntosh Towers over the last few months due to other projects, but I've battled those and so now can get back to covering for, what for me is the best format around – Open Reel Tape.

A Day In Copenhagen was originally recorded in March of 1969 at Metronome Studios in Copenhagen for MPS records then later released on the Prestige label and features 2 real giants of their instruments namely tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon who really rose to fame in the mid-fifties but had slipped out of view somewhat in the 60's and the "new generation" slide trombonist Locksley "Slide" Hampton leading 4 other players to form their Sextet. Hampton composed 3 of the 6 tracks that come on the 2 x 10" reel format I have (it's also available in a short 3 track format on 1 tape). He arranged all the tracks barring the Dexter Gordon improvised "Shadow of Your Smile" and it really shows Slide's skill as a medium-sized band arranger. Gordon and Slide are joined by Dizzee Reece on Trumpet, Kenny Drew on piano, local man Niels-Henning Orsted-Pedersen on bass and the drums are taken care of by Art Taylor.

The studio producing these current master tape copies is Horch House of Austria whose ethos is summed up on their site as "Truth in sound" which is a nod to their approach of no remastering or digital adjustment of the analogue masters (at the time many decades old) but instead a goal to deliver for listeners what was intended at the time of recording. I dipped into the term Master Tape in previous reviews and highly recommend anyone new to tape to go check that out as it does cause some confusion outside of the open reel/mastering community.

To be able to achieve high-quality reproduction of what could be a 50+-year-old master tape, which

will undoubtedly have suffered some degradation over time, Horch's lead engineer Christoph Stickel brings his many years' experience of recording and working with analogue tape and applies a process Horch refer to as "soft refurbishing" before the final copies for sale are made. Rather than applying any digital mixing techniques to address sound quality issues such as employing compression, Christoph instead reproduces what he believes is the original intended sound by first creating analogue and digital copies of the tape that are used to extensively assess the sound quality over the tape rather than wearing out the original. This then allows him to identify any areas of the tape that may require adjustment in playback. From here he can manage the reproduction on the fly, and by ear using only analogue monitoring and levelling to achieve the desired output leaving any original recording artefacts intact.

Straight out the gate on "My Blues", Slides 1st composition while in Europe, we have the incredible hard bop energy of Gordon with Drew and Taylor echoing his verve in spades across piano and drums. The track never drops to less than high tempo even through the solos of Dizzee, Orsted-Pedersen whose deft bass offers some small swinging respite before we get back on the brass of Hampton on that slide trombone with the rhythm and timing of Taylor keeping us all copacetic before all closing out together. A superb number to get us going into this Danish delight.

"You Don't Know What Love is", composed by Don Raye/ Gene de Paul, takes an initially slightly more languid swinging melody direction reminiscent of those late 60's and 70's spy films with luxurious settings and sinister billionaire villains but of course who were never without a glamorous femme fatale to keep us in the romantic mood. Quickly it gains pace and was arranged and played by the boys in veneration of the late great Billie Holiday and was aimed to be sympathetic to

the stylings and sound of Miles Davis. Gordon as usual takes a slightly harder bop approach to raise the energy, Slide and Reece punctuating with that extravaganza sound, Reece in no way a poor man's Miles.

Art Taylor's tight breaking drums tip us off on "A New Thing" until before long Gordon's sax and Drew's piano seduce and swing us in equal measures within a couple of minutes. The bass work of Orsted-Pedersen never fails to gel the players together explaining why he was asked to play from everyone from Sonny Rollins to Bill Evan, Oscar Peterson to Ella Fitzgerald, he excels at driving that lower-end foot-tapping groove. Kenny Drew as always demonstrating how great a jazz pianist he was both in and in solo, Art Taylors ubiquitously fine drumming framing the piece and highlighting how tight all are playing.

Tape 2 kicks off with the well know and well played by many bands "What's New" a 12/8 timed number, delicate and considered at times and rising and rousing at others, but with a deep swing groove it's wonderful playing by all – as Slide says himself in the liner notes "all the cats were hip to this one".

The Dexter Gordon improvised arrangement of "The Shadow of Your Smile" (composed by Johny Mandel/Paul Francis Webster) starts with some almost melancholic saxophone from Gordon, yearning and remembering a past love perhaps, with Burrell and Taylor providing the sympathetic and even at times more optimistic bed on which he's carried before Burrell take lead on piano, probably showing more than at any time on this album how competent and sensitive a player he really is. A sultry, romantic number with Gordon as the only for this track, relatively short at under 5 minutes, it's a perfect penultimate track on what has been album balanced well between Hard Bop and romantic melody.



Lifting us immediately in mood and rhythm we head for the close with the bopping energy of "A Day in Vienna" is dedicated to the Jazz Workshop of the Viennese Austrian Radio Network. A busy, complex, robust number full of driving drum breaks and vibrant horns galore. Burrell's piano is all complex chords and staccato punctuation but always manages to accentuate not clash. His solo supported by Taylor and Orsted-Pedersen is lively, packed with goodness and uplifting. From the relaxed reflective mood of the previous number, A Day in Vienna is a great, foot-tapping, bombastic excursion and I defy anyone not to love it!

For those interested (like me) the recording chain itself is all analogues, all played back and recorded on Studer A80 decks and the tape is SM900. Album art, photography, and specification data as well as liner notes (in both original German and in English), and recording information are all produced to a high standard and bundled into a finely presented

boxed package, embossed with the Horch House logo. The copy I have comes on 2 aluminium 10" reels and as you'd expect the tape arrives tails out and with added leader tape to protect the media. Even just opening a Horch House recording, involves the anticipation of unwinding a thread-locked envelope and together with the finesse of the recordings themselves it all adds up to a very gratifying experience indeed – of course 2 track 15ips tape as a medium is a big part of how enjoyable the listening experience

Hard to believe it's over 50 years old, this is a superb album from 6 great artists that has been meticulously reproduced in the analogue domain. Tape, packaging and sound quality are all of the highest quality and the music for me is a joy. Sound quality as You'd expect with open reel tape, this close to the master and reproduced in such a high-quality chain is unbeatable. Horch House for me has done it again – managing to transport me back, even for a

little while, to some of the best years Jazz had to offer - and absolutely deserves to be on your list of labels to hear.

Dexter Gordon & Slide Hampton, A Day in Copenhagen 15ips/38cms, 2 Track, CCIR is available direct from HorchHouse.com in 3 formats ranging from €164 (for 1 x plastic reel) up to €408 (for 2 metal reels) + shipping and tax (UK customers).

Track listings and timing (across 2 tapes).

My Blues 9:11

You Don't Know What Love Is 6:03

A New Thing 5:07

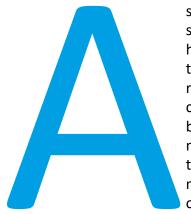
What's New 8:04

The Shadow of Your Smile 5:01

A Day in Vienna 7.49

Total running time 41:45





s I try to catch up on several tape reviews, I have stored up in between house move and recent Hifi shows, I have chosen one that has been on the shelf and on my deck here at McIntosh Towers for some months, so is well overdue for the light of

day as it were. For any self-respecting jazz fan the thought of an album comprising a quintet of Bill Evans, Roy Hanes, Eric Dolphy, Freddie Hubbard and Paul Chambers is enough to have you reaching for your wallet and your best listening chair — making it a sextet by adding well known big band leader, Oliver Nelson as arranger as well as player is enough to tip most over the edge - but that's exactly what you have in the 1961 recording of The Blues and Abstract Truth.

Originally recorded in stereo (a mono vinyl version is also available) for Impulse Records in February of 1961, with the magic fingers, and ears, of one Rudy van Gelder at the helm this is an all-analogue transfer has been recorded real-time on an ATR customised Ampex 102 and is remastered by the eminently skilled Kevin Gray. Having previously owned the brilliant vinyl version of this I was immediately excited to spot it on tape. The packaging and finish are superb in a double-skin thick card outer holding the 2 individually boxed reels and with full-colour cover images, tape-back photos and liner notes as well as Analogue Productions' own care and handling note.

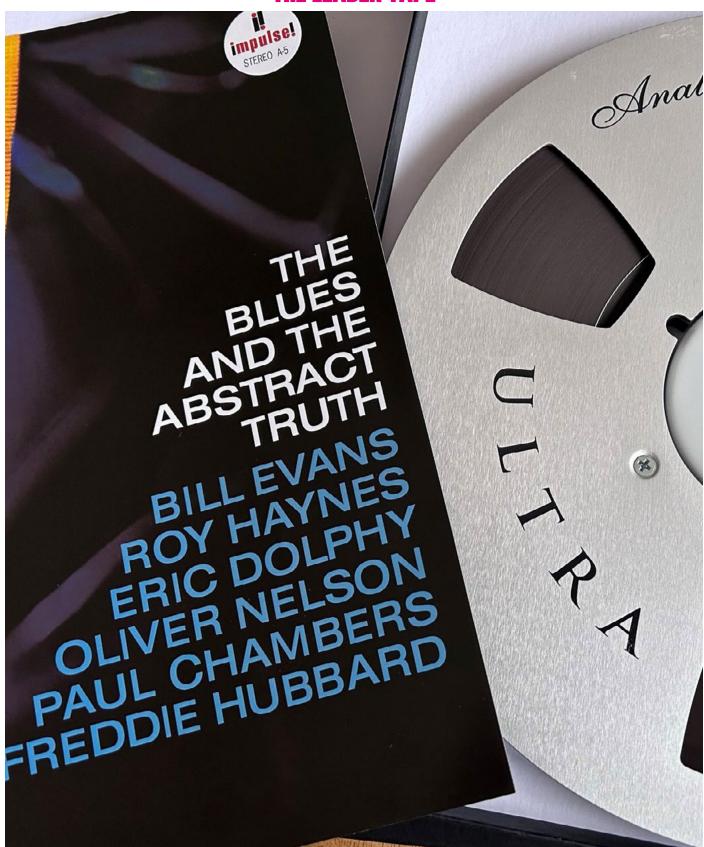
Taking a slight detour for a moment its worth commenting on the Ampex 100 series itself as despite it being a "vintage", manufactured circa 1976, it was renowned (based on my research) for its smooth operating and low noise in part due to capstan design as well as the use of forward-looking technology such as ferrite heads and was so successful in the high-end studio market Ampex followed it with the ATR 102 version 2 years later. Reading through Larry Zides' "The Making of the Ampex 100" in the December 1976 edition of Sound Engineering Magazine really provides insight into the top-class engineering that went into these machines across such aspects as motor and capstan as well as the use of those "advanced" Ferrite heads. These gave multiple benefits at high-speed including consistent

running of the tape over the head over time due to reduced wear, less head noise dominating the frequency response and lastly, ferrite heads allowed for sufficiently high bias frequencies to avoid aspects of modulation noise—stepping up recording quality—which for us as listeners all add up to a better dynamic range and realism of recording on tape. For recording engineers other new aspects of tape transport were relished, making it a firm favourite for many.

Detour over (still with me?), let's dive into the recording itself. A sextet of this level is always going to impress – be is Evans' piano work, Dolphy's abstraction, or Hubbard's trumpet – adding Nelson as arranger and stepping in on both alto and tenor sax means we are now into serious post-bop excellence territory. With blues at the heart of the arrangement Nelson plays with the usual 12-bar structure at times contrasting the 12 measured solos with abstractions in 16, 8 and even 2 bars Nelson tells tell the story of his journey into Jazz as a departure from his more "classical" big band pieces and wow does he do it with aplomb.

Nelson, born in St. Louis Missouri, in 1932, picked up the saxophone at age 11 after initially learning piano. Interestingly, he hails from a very musical family including his brother, also a sax man and his sisters (more of them later). Oliver started arranging around 1950 while touring with Louis Jordan before entering armed service in 1952 and playing woodwinds in the military band which is where, during a tour in Japan, he attended a concert of Ravels Ma Mare l'Oye (Mother Goose in English) performed by the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra and it changed his life, and subsequently that of many players back in St. Louis. On his return to Missouri, he started to study music more formally and then to arrange in larger productions with the Harlem Apollo Theatre before working alongside the likes of Count Basie and Duke Ellington. He soon began to record with Prestige Records, but "Blues and Abstract Truth" was his breakthrough and has been rightly hailed as one of the most important albums of the era.

Split across 2 10.5" reels, each with the Analogue Productions Ultra Tape logo you get 6 tracks, totalling just under 40 minutes of a quite unique meeting of players. We lead off with "Stolen Moments, originally written in 1960 as a 16-bar composition derived from blues in C minor which has since gone onto become a jazz standard recorded by everyone



from Herbie Mann to Frank Zappa. Freddie Hubbard opens with a beautiful and soft soulful trumpet piece before Dolphy takes the helm on flute. For fans of Dolphy's later work such as Out to Lunch (1964, Blue Note) this is a less abstract, more melodic take but carries that Dolphy energy still and adds air and foot-tapping energy to the piece wonderfully. Dolphy sounds set back in the recording somewhat but nonetheless shines. Nelson's tenor solo follows, and it does make me wonder why I

don't know more of him, a deft player with a real soulful style he hands off to the unmistakable Bill Evans like his counterparts taking his wonderful solo in Minor Blues fashion before the crew join in to take us to a soft quiet finish.

With an unexpected female vocal calling "Hoe Down, 1,2,1,2,3,4" followed by the sharp 2-note trumpet call from Hubbard we crash into an incredibly upbeat 44-bar rhythm, somewhat call and

response formatted number next with "Hoe-Down". After the incredibly fun opening, we have a playoff between solos of Hubbard with superb trumpet work and Dolphy this time on alto sax with a more familiar sound for fans. Nelson follows, that 2 note based abstraction in full swing before the constant sideman Roy Haynes takes an 8 bar drum solo of sublime breaks before we complete on the 4 measures we heard at the intro – beautiful full circle work!

With "Cascades" we get a strong centre of Bill Evans and Freddie Hubbard. Nelson writes in the liner notes that Hubbard sounded like "John Coltrane playing a Trumpet" – this is high praise indeed, but I do think its warranted, he really is a master of the horn on par at times to my favourite trumpeter Lee Morgan. Evans builds pace and presence through his solo until we move into a horn ensemble of Dolphy, Hubbard, Nelson, and George Barlow (uncredited on the cover) who is supporting on baritone saxophone. Haynes and Chambers provide the continuous groove of drums and bass which means you just can't stop nodding along to the rhythm.

For the sake of brevity side B (or the second tape) is an equally rich and exciting trio of tracks. "Yearnin" a blues take starts off with 2 choruses from Evans before two superb ensembles, one in 16 measures and the second in 12, leading finally into solos from Eric Dolphy, Freddie Hubbard and Evans respectively. For me you can hear some of the future Dolphy emerging more and more on Yearnin' and the playing from all is brilliant. The penultimate "Butch and Butch" which was dedicated by Nelson to his elder sister and her husband is a solid Blues number constructed as first a melody statement comprising the work of Dolphy and Hubbard, then a "melody with background" (in for form of both Nelson and Barrow). Tonnes of energy and brass to be had, a great build of players culminating with Evans taking us to the finish with his usual skill and finesse.

Before, it feels, we even got started we head to the finish with the wonderfully titled "Teenies Blues" this time a dedication to Nelson's junior sister who, to quote the man himself, is "a fine singer and pianist". Cymbals, brush and bass set us off and it's great to hear the bass get some more airtime to show what an incredible (but often overlooked) hard-bop bassist Paul Laurence Dunbar Chambers jr. (to give him his full title) was. Prolific through the '50s and 60's before his sad death in '69 at the very

young age of 33 from Tuberculosis (a complication following hospitalisation and coma brought on by his struggles with substance abuse). Originally a tuba player he switched to double bass (thank goodness) in 1949 he is most known as a sideman, playing on over 100 albums not to mention the dozen or so as leader. He was well respected and rightfully so, appearing in Miles Davis's first quintet from '55-'63.

Overall, the sound quality of Blues and Abstract Truth is incredibly high, mastering seems to have been conducted to preserve the soul and emotion of the works, as well as the tempo, flair and passion but has not sought to change some foibles such as player placement in the soundstage which today may at times sound out of balance (Dolphy's "set back" presence for example). All of this adds up to a fantastically engaging listening experience and Analogue Productions can be comfortable they have produced a superb recording here. This was the top of my choice list of the Ultra tapes being a great album anyway and listening has only reinforced my decision. Presentation and reel quality, including pre-added leader tape only enhances the value. A must-listen!

Track Listing & Timing

Tape A

Stolen Moments 8:45

Hoe -Down 4:43

Cascades 5:30

Tape B

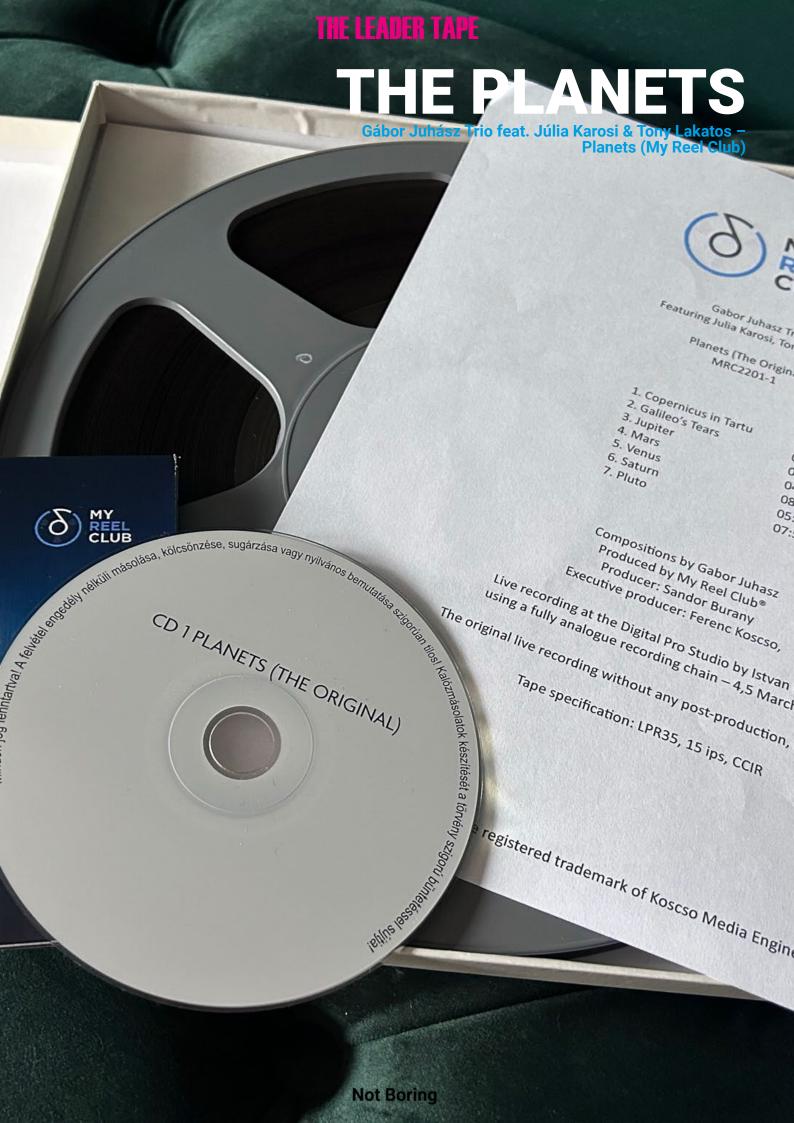
Yearnin' 6:20

Butch and Butch 4:35

Teenies Blues 6:31

Total running time 36:24

The Blues and Abstract Truth by Oliver Nelson, along with other titles, is available from Acoustic Sounds in the US for \$450 + associated import taxes and shipping to your country of choice.



or anyone who may have somehow missed the fairy tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, it is a tale of a young girl who after some breaking and entering a bears' family home, decides to then first eat their porridge before taking a nap in their beds. Putting aside the blatant criminal intent, the core theme of this tale is finding the perfect balance – the porridge she likes best is

not too hot, not too cold but "just right", and the bed that is neither too soft nor too hard, but again "just right". For me, HiFi and audio can be a search for the Goldilocks zone of what's on offer. Most of us, unless you are of very deep pockets, live alone or can set up your room without regard for others will have to seek compromise in some aspect of our listening — be it the size of the speaker, the cost of the component, the balance of bass vs high end detail, acoustic treatments etc — hopefully, you get my drift. Keep this in mind as you read this review.

A lot of reviews I do can be of a similar nature – this product vs that product, shape size, colour, DAC chip etc, and while all are interesting for anyone who enjoys exploring HiFi and seeking its comparative differences, its great fun when something a bit different comes along (especially when it's on open reel tape) – and this is one of those cases.

MyReelClub (the producer of this tape) is the brainchild of long-time broadcast engineer and designer Koscó Ferenc, who in 2020 set out to create the opportunity for the music buying public to be much more informed and involved in its production, understand its origins, recording process and therefore make more informed choices when it came to quality and format. Along with Papp László and Perczel Tamaśz he formed a "members club" approach around their recordings where members can not only attend live recordings and talks, but can somewhat influence what is recorded and have access to resources and articles on how music is produced, recorded and analysed (such as how to identify a true hi-res recording). Papp among other things is responsible for digital engineering and recording of DSD/SXD and Hi-Res audio, and Perczel is the man behind the Open Reel tape recordings.

MyReelClub (MRC) is able to offer the music they record in a choice of formats, with the purchaser well informed on its provenance – and presented in the purest of forms – recorded truly live, no overdubbing, limited if any mastering, and often with far wider dynamics of commercial recording (around 60db vs 15-25db is how Ferenc puts it). This last part is important as we will see later.

Their recording chain is fascinating – the very carefully chosen high-quality live microphone outputs are fed simultaneously over low-level signal cabling and equipment to 3 separate recording endpoints covering Hi Res (PCM) digital, recorded at 96 or

192hz and 24bit, a DSD recording solution through Merging Technologies hardware and software and also (and importantly here) to a Nagra IV-S tape recorder using SM468 stock equalised to CCIR and running at 15ips/38cms. MyReelClub note that DSD is notoriously complex to record live due to the equipment required and the limitations of post-production, meaning a lot of people avoid it - with the ethos MyReelClub has of almost no fiddling beyond some careful levelling, this problem is moot. The live nature of these productions is another reason Ferenc mentions they chose to work with only the most professional and proficient of artists who have the skill and discipline to produce with no retakes/ postproduction tracks added. Quality control of the final product includes all involved, including the artists having a say before it's released.

With the knowledge of the team record now firmly under our belt let's focus on the music.

The album I have for review is the 1st in MRC's catalogue and is an original modern Jazz work named Planets by the Gábor Juhász Trio of Hungary (Gábor Juhász on guitar, drums from Gyorgy Jeszensky and Zoltan Kovacs on double bass) who are joined by Tony Lakatos on sax with the vocal talent of Julia Karosi. This is a superb collection of players to start with, so the music was destined to be very good if you like jazz, regardless of the production results. Gábor named the album after his interest in stargazing and his interest in celestial bodies that emerged through lockdown while enjoying evening on his balcony in Budapest. The more he explored the planets, their motion and the history of Copernicus the more it was obvious this would be the subject of his new album. He comments (on the MRC website) that the stars further aligned when the Trio, Julia and Tony were all in Budapest at one time and he knew they were the perfect Feminine (Venus) and Male (Mars) balance for this album. Planets is in (to me) a modern and at the same time unique and sensitive jazz style - guitar, drum, bass, and sax offer the instrumental core around which Julia's ethereal, swirling voice coalesces and provides a flow and articulation – not in natural words but in sounds that convey a language all of its own. The album offers a journey with ebb and flow as we traverse the solar system.

There are 7 tracks in total, provided on one 15ips tape. This is where another unique aspect of MRC's approach comes into play. While most audiophile tape producers revel in luxurious boxes, liner materials, photographs and even fancy reels (all of which I love and wholeheartedly buy into) MRC do something completely (to my mind) genius. Rather than offering all that pomp around the music and charging for the privilege, you are instead buying "only" the music. You send them a tape of your choosing such as an RTM LPR35 and they record to it from the master – all for a frankly incredibly low €54 (plus shipping of course). You can elect for MRC to record onto a tape of your choosing from a selection they





GABOR JUHASZ TRIO

FEATURING

JULIA KAROSI

AND

TONY LAKATOS

supply at checkout for a still incredibly low €145. This then it seems is ALL about the music and that, is very refreshing.

The album opens with Copernicus in Tartu, a light-hearted, somewhat soft but considered instrumental focusing on guitar and bass. Two things hit me immediately. The first is the unquestionably live, unquestionably analogue and immediate nature of the recording - this is no "X steps removed" vinyl cut, or even multiple generation master tape copy, this sounds like (and I know this a cliché but in this case, I think it's finally warranted) the band is literally in the same room – the sheer transparency, the timbre, the interplay and position between them, not to mention the range of dynamics is staggering. The second thing I notice is that the recording is fairly quiet (I really have to turn my Tascam 32 output and my amplifier up) and this does introduce a more evident noise floor than I

experience on some other audiophile tapes. Enter stage right... Goldilocks. Welcome to compromise. If you want (and I know I do) to get as close to the source, as unadulterated as possible and with this scale of dynamics in a pure analogue chain (it's why we love tape right!) you're going to have to compromise. There needs to be air and space to accommodate that and the result in this case is a little noise floor. Did it put me off? Not for long. Even a few minutes of this level of realism of playback the "here" of the players and I didn't even notice – or care. This for me is the purest of commercial recordings I think I've heard to date.

By the time we are on track 3 Jupiter, Julia's vocal play over Gábor's wonderful guitar work and Tony's careful, tempered but emotional sax I am just lost in it. I am not always a fan of such modern or "sensitive" works and truth be told, despite being a massive 50's and 60's jazz fan and respecting the

7. Pluto

05:52

Compositions by Gabor Juhasz Produced by My Reel Club® Producer: Sandor Burany Executive producer: Ferenc Koscso,

Live recording at the Digital Pro Studio by Istvan Matok, using a fully analogue recording chain – 4,5 March 2022.

The original live recording without any post-production, mastering.

Tape specification: LPR35, 15 ips, CCIR

technical prowess of Grant Green, Bill Frisell et al I'm not the biggest fan of guitar in Jazz, but Gábor and his players have won me over. Mars is a more striding "masculine" affair, with more interpretive/free saxophone and robust drumming at times. Julia's feminine voice provides an elevated and spirited counterpoint to the machismo.

Track 5 Venus focuses on Julia's vocal with sax and drum offering a base to carry her melodic, ascending scale verse and chorus, punctuated and balanced with beautifully executed solos in turn from Tony and Gábor - a bright, upbeat and soulful track focused on the feminine (Venus) following Mars. Well before we end the final track Pluto, I'm already seeking out more Gabor Juhasz Trio works on Qobuz.

This review is about tape, but I was also provided with multiple digital formats and a double CD of the album for comparison and contrast. Interestingly the double CD has both a raw unmastered version (from the DSD recording) and a version with the usual postproduction you'd get with modern music destined for CD and steaming such as loudness correction (streaming services it seems request certain standard parameters for loudness and dynamics). This is all part of the "informed choice" approach of MyReelClub. The Open reel format unsurprisingly takes the podium, however, the CD is stunningly well produced, and the Hi-res (24/192) format is excellent (I had problems in my system with DSD playback so didn't review), removing the incursion of that albeit small but unwanted noise floor of the open reel but suffering just a smidge

less realism and dynamics and a tiny element of the live immediacy and organic richness that really only tape can offer (it's a very close call) – the visual spectacle of open reel tape is also lost, and for me, that counts. In my review CD there was an audio glitch on one track but after contacting Ferenc and checking the base file it seems this was an issue with the physical CD not the recording and would be replaced should I desire. Across all recordings (both analogue and digital) there are occasional subtle noise or distortion artefacts being picked up by what sounds like quite close mic'ing, particularly around the vocals, but rather than being a negative, this only further goes to highlights the live nature of the recording and its transparency.

Aside from the music itself which to me is of a very high standard of jazz, this was a wonderfully intriguing and educational review to conduct, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I can highly recommend checking our MyReelClub and Planets on whichever format you choose – but the tape is my choice. That MRC can do this at the price point they offer is an absolute no-brainer for tape heads!

Gábor Juhász Trio Planets is available on 15ips 2 Track CCIR tape (€54/€145), Double CD (€22) and as both DSD+PCM Digital files (€27). Recordings are available direct from MyReelClub in Hungary or from Open Reel to Reel in the UK.



BLUMENHOFER ACOUSTICS TEMPESTA 17 LOUDSPEAKERS

he Tempesta 17's stand at 1m tall (with spikes) and are a 2-way floor standing speaker with a floor ported bass reflex which Blumenhofer call a divergent bass reflex due to the aperture design. The face has a 6.5" /170mm woofer and a 1" compression driver inside a horn throat that flares to roughly 6", and has a mylar membrane.

Positioned just above the entry-level speaker in their range, the construction is of unbraced 19mm MDF with (in the case of mine) a walnut veneer, inscribed rather beautifully with the Blumenhofer motif. That woofer is a "sandwich" of 2 layers of a polymer called PEEK, manufactured by a company called Vitrex, with a layer of carbon between them, and is named a P2C Sandwich). The separately chambered crossover is set at 1800hz (low compared to many speakers that often favour a 3khz crossover) with the speaker on paper purporting to have a frequency response between 45hz and 20kz.

The actual form of the speaker is interesting in that rather than a simple vertically symmetrical "tower", the front face is set at an angle, with the base widening slightly which I assume is to assist with bass response. Well-formed single-wired binding posts constructed of gold-plated Tellurium copper are set in the back. The Tempesta 17 is rated at 100w with a nominal impedance of 80hm but is valve friendly at a 90db sensitivity, something Blumenhofer is focused on so much that they include impedance linearity controls in their upper-tier speakers.

Each speaker is set on 3 adjustable spikes, 2 in the rear and 1 in front — which makes positioning easy and for fine-tuning that bass reflex height to suit your room, should you need to. The listening axis can also be adjusted by adjusting just the 2 rear spikes to tilt the speaker. At 16kg a speaker, these are robust but not back-breaking heavy should you need to move them around.

HOW DO THEY SOUND?

I hadn't expected to like these as much as I do. The Tempestas were the 4th-floor stander I listened to critically over 2 days after whittling my list down over time. They fitted the profile and were at the top end

Alan McIntosh has been on the hunt for a new pair of speakers and finally decides on the Blumenhofer Acoustics Tempesta 17 horns. In this review, he tells us why.

Reviewed by Alan McIntosh







of an admittedly quite wide budget range. I initially listened to them in quite close proximity due to the store layout, then further back and also at home in my current listening room. What struck me about these varied listening modes was how unfussy the Tempestas appear to be on placement and yet still manage to retain the coherence of a single image. The second thing that was evident was how great the bass response was while maintaining an incredibly smooth tone right up through the spectrum, notwithstanding that closeness to the wall can accentuate that bass reflex response. I can usually sniff out a speaker's broad credentials pretty fast by playing Princes Sign O' the Times (2020 remaster, Qobuz) due to how high he had set the bassline and how much edgy activity there is in the upper registers. Some speakers can leave you lacking bass or can, when the volume is pushed become too forward and brittle at the top end, bordering on painful instead of having a smooth response throughout the range.

Even with the volume pushed north, the Blumenhofers remained smooth, detailed, precise, and airy, but not at all uncomfortable. With regard to bass on the Tempestas, it's not gut-rumbling ultra-subsonic low, but it is got great heft, is organic, and is thumpingly tight enough to stop and start right where you'd hope without over bloat. It certainly "feels" like they exceed the rated 45hz. For some reason, I hadn't expected a relatively compact floor cabinet with horn/reflex design to have the weight and punch of bass these deliver and so was caught very off guard – in a good way! Blumenhofer's diverging aperture design of their reflex port uses air pressure and flow rate calculations to achieve the response desired (higher pressure on exit)- which as mentioned, can be tuned further by lowering/raising the speaker on its spikes, so it seems they know their maths and how to turn it into great bass.

Moving through my digital test track list, next up was The Vanishing of Peter Strong by Yello (24bit/48khz) which only confirmed the bass capability and also highlighted the detail and stop/start control in percussion and upper tones. Jarre's wonderfully pumping Arpeggiateur was delivered crisply and with well-defined bass, great tempo, and scale that some speakers can fall a little short at. In Blumenhofer's documentation, they mention that the Tempesta range works equally as well as a cinema experience speaker as it does for pure music listening and I can only attribute that to the bass

and well-timed dynamic response they have achieved. Tanya by Dexter Gordon (2015 remaster, 24/192) allowed me to test successfully the 17's handling of Jazz – the honest and organic response of the horns just works incredibly well for jazz brass, as it did for very dynamic rock in the guise of Journey's Separate Ways (Worlds Apart), specifically the staggeringly powerful Bryce Miller/Alloy Tracks remix. (24bit/48khz)

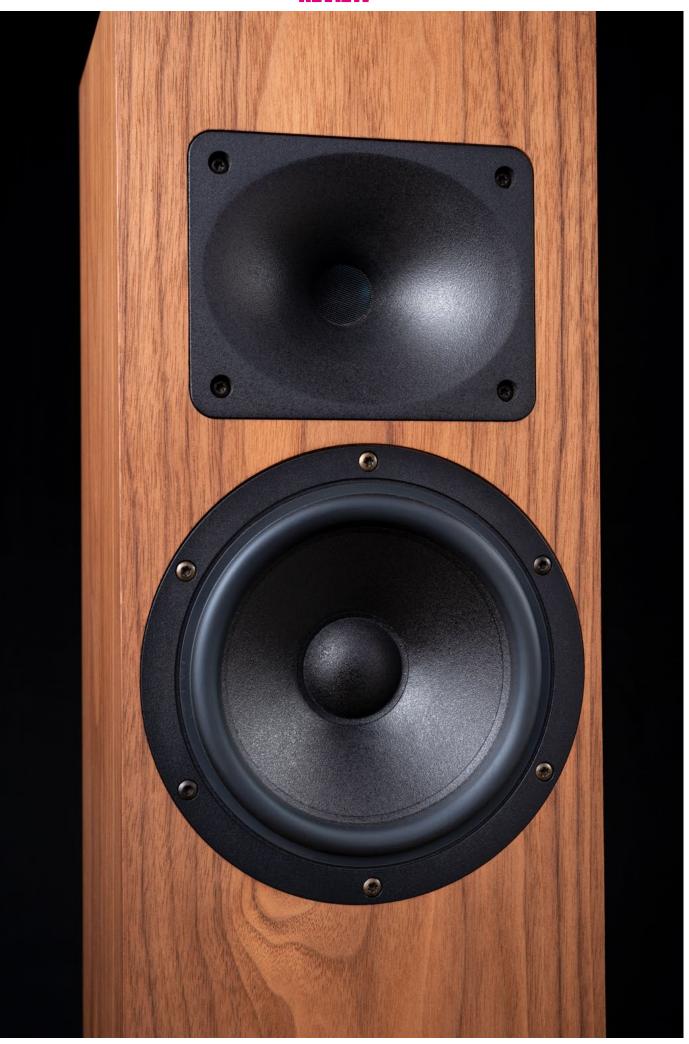
Using open-reel tape as a source across a number of master copy albums further confirmed how well the Tempestas open the door to a captivating presentation and honest sound. Throughout testing, the coherent image, forming one wide soundstage was very impressive, more so than some of the others I'd tested earlier in the week. By this point, the highly proficient Audiovector QR5s I had also listened to the day before had been pipped to the post by the Tempestas. It was close though, I have to say, with the Tempesta's offering just a bit more of what each had to offer. The Audioverstors while very solid in the bass and very resolving overall were a little dry for me, whereas the Tempesta offered more realism to my ears. Versus the Totem Bison Twin Towers that I'd also listened to that week which to me were a little forward and sharp at times, the Blumenhofers offered a much smoother top end, while the Bisons did pretty much match the Tempesta's for soundstage.

I compared the same playlist across three quite different amps, the Atoll SDA 200 Signature (instore) and both my Hegel 190 and Prima Luna Prologue 1 at home. None produced anything but super results, the Brimar 6L6GC valves in the Prima Luna had no trouble driving these at scale but also with dimensionality to the sonic image, did expand the bass somewhat and added gravitas across the board as you might expect, whilst the Hegel's class-leading grip and Scandi neutrality allowed them to deliver vibrant clarity and pace in spades, while not over voicing into sharpness.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, my conclusion was summed up as soon as I opened my wallet and drove them home, but over the last couple of weeks that's only been further confirmed. These are very, very good speakers. Be it electronic, acoustic, jazz, or dynamic rock the combination of the horn-throated compression











driver and the bass reflex design, paired with a very well-implemented 6.5" woofer just serves up sound very, very well and with no clear weakness at any point on the frequency curve. There is precision and clarity, a coherent dimensionality, and believability to these speakers. Positioning them isn't a fussy affair, but spend the minutes to get it just right and they fall away behind the music, avoiding colouration or over-voicing, but never veering into sterility.

At this price point, you are getting a lot of high-quality speaker for your money.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

Lovely craftsmanship, port and horn design, and good materials are evident both visually and sonically

The finish is lovely and they are quite a statement to look at

Even the spikes are robustly put together and well thought out

Sound Quality:

Impactful, deep, and tuneable bass with incredible

transparency and dynamic, 3-dimensional, honest reproduction in the mid and higher registers without fatiguing or straining

Value For Money:

Combining materials, design, and capability across the board the price point is sound

We Loved:

The musical engagement all around, unexpectedly powerful bass, smooth mid/highs even when pushed, aesthetics, imaging, easy pairing and efficiency.

We Didn't Love So Much:

Absolutely nothing at this price.

Elevator Pitch Review: If you are seeking a carefully and competently designed, natural, transparent, immersive, and highly engaging loudspeaker that delivers across the board, isn't fussy about solid state or valve amplification and your budget is around £5000 then these should be near the top of your must-hear list.

Price: Current MSRP of £5250/pair in the UK for the standard, Walnut, or Cherry veneer (other options coming soon I believe)





QUALIO IQ LOUDSPEAKERS

uilt and designed by the same people behind the Cube Audio range of speakers and drivers, we first heard the Qualio IQ loudspeakers at the Warsaw Show last November. We were immediately impressed with them, even in the show's less-than-perfect listening environment, and immediately began discussions into ordering a pair, which have resided in our upstairs second system for a few months now.

BUILD AND FEATURES OF QUALIO IQ LOUDSPEAKERS

Linette ordered a white version of these, though you can order them in any RAL colour you like with either a gloss or satin finish and natural veneer finishes are available in Oak, Walnut, Indian Apple, or Rosewood. The colour you choose relates to the bass-reflex box you see that has the nine-and-a-half inch SB Acoustic Satori bass driver towards the top of the front panel. This box is well-finished and looks great. It comes with spikes, but not being a fan I didn't use them but will likely experiment with some IsoAcoustic footers at some point — however, that's not in the scope of this review.

Around the back of the bass box you have WBT binding posts plus a pair that connect only to the dipole (the Perspex bitt on the top that I will get onto in due course). This is quite an interesting feature and you can choose to buy the speakers with either a Standard or Precision kit of Mundorf resistors that allow you to tailor the high-frequency output of the AMT tweeter. The standard package comes with two resistors and the Precision comes with five resistors that attach across the terminals. This is a cool idea and allows the owners of these speakers to work out what sounds best to them and in their listening space. I like this non-prescriptive attitude and concept; to me, it recognises that we all have different hearing, different presentation preferences and different rooms in which we listen. Swapping these in and out is a doddle and takes barely no time at all but is a back-and-forth process to get the ones you want the first time round.

This is a bass-reflex box and so naturally there is a port around the

Stuart takes a more detailed listen to the interesting OB speakers he first heard at last year's Warsaw Audio Video event.

Reviewed by Stuart Smith







back too and this comes with a bung so that you can, to an extent, tune its output...or at least limit it....depending on what your room will allow. Qualio reckons that this box will take the bass down to 28HZ.

The next interesting feature of the IQ speakers is the dipole arrangement that bolts simply on the top panel with the four included bolts and takes a few minutes to attach. The Perspex plate is thick but is a bit of a fingerprint magnet – no fear, once you have it set up, there is no need to faff with it again. The dipole attaches to the rest of the speaker by a short XLR plug affair. It's a neat solution, looks interesting, and is quick and easy to set up.

Attached to the dipole is another smaller Satori driver that acts as the mid-driver, though Qualio says that it could be considered a full-range unit given that it can, if required, extend up to 15KHz. Above the mid-unit, is the aforementioned Mundorf AMT tweeter that goes all the way up to 31kHz, way beyond the scope of human hearing and Qualio refer to this as a super-tweeter. Now, super tweeters should make sod all sense given we can't physically hear what they are doing beyond 15 or so kHz, but they do add something to the sound and the spatial representation of the ambience of a track. I use super tweeters pretty much all the time in our main system and love what they add to a system – YMMV.

So, without stating the bleeding obvious, it's clear that the mids and tops of the IQ speakers are an open baffle (dipole) design and open baffles are something I have toyed with in the past in a more DIY sense and with the Pure Audio Project speakers we had in for review many moons ago. I like what they can do to the way music is presented and they tend (without commenting on the speakers here for review) to allow for a more open and less coloured presentation...pretty obvious when you realise there's no box to induce boxiness to the sound.

So that's pretty much the build and technical aspects of the IQ by Qualio. Overall they are well put together and very well thought out. They offer a good degree of user-tweekability with the resistors that I mentioned earlier. I suppose the only other thing to add is that the crossover that's housed in the bass box is made up of Mundorf, Jantzen and WBT components- whether these make a difference over standard components I can't comment on.

Speaking in general terms, I absolutely love the look of these speakers and think their slightly squat stature looks really rather classy and that the Perspex dipole unit pretty much disappears in the room.

Oh, you get a three-year warranty and you get lifetime support, which is nice.

I have these speakers set up and running off a pair of Merrill Thor Class D amplifiers with a LAB 12 pre before them. In fact, the full system apart from the amps is Lab 12. The speakers are set up about three metres apart, somewhat but not wholly in the corners of the room (they are around 1m from the back and side walls) and the listening position is 3m or so from the central position of the speakers. The room is well-treated with GIK acoustic panels.

SOUND QUALITY

All that time ago at the Warsaw show, the thing that I recall grabbing my attention was the hugely open mids and tops allied with a solid and speedy bass response, making them very much my kind of speakers. Obviously, having ordered them, it was to be hoped that this fairly casual flirtation with the Qualios would not be a short-lived affair... and you will be pleased to know that it wasn't. I do bang on a fair old bit about shows not being the ideal environment for critically assessing a product, and I do stand by this, however, if you listen to a lot of products week in week out then it's possible to pick out the products that have potential to be more than a quick fling. Anyway, let's see how these get on.

The report you read here is a conglomeration of several weeks' notes brought into one.

The first thing I noted when listening to the Clash and then Generation X was the immediacy of these speakers and the way that they have a very spatial quality to them. These aren't particularly audiophile records, in fact, they are possibly the antithesis of audiophile recordings and are off a compilation record I have on file, and yet the liveness and rawness of the music shines out from these loudspeakers in that "I feel connected"...and not sedated (for those that will get the punk reference)... kind of way. You can "see" the mix off the main desk and this is important for me in feeling the music in a real











sense. And, after all, isn't this why we pay large sums of money for our audio kit? The reverb at the end of Buzzcocks' What Do I Get sounds natural and the way the instruments are faded into this reverb is excellent and makes you appreciate that, actually, these recordings aren't quite as amateurish as folklore would have you believe. Bringing the original punk movement full circle, I give the new The Damned record (Darkadelic) a virtual spin (it's excellent, by the way) and I have the same feeling of immediacy and a "live" recording - it's not and Darkadelic is a more spectacular production than those earlier recordings. However, much more is going on production-wise in Darkadelic than the earlier stuff I mentioned, but the Qualios never lose that sense of dynamic engagement and sense of space in the recording. This latter point is particularly evident on the final track of the album, Roderick with its pomp and gothic orchestration and piano stabs. The scale of this final record is portrayed magnificently by the Qualio speakers with the room being filled with music and the band laid out before me wide, deep and with a height that belies these relatively short loudspeakers.

Lee Perry's From The Secret Laboratory holds a special place in my heart; it was one of a collection of CDs I swapped for a Korg MS10 synthesiser many years ago and is a wonderful mash-up of dub reggae with a good dose of house and techno vibes mixed together by the masterful Adrian Sherwood. Needless to say bass plays a big part in this record and for me it's important that the bass is well-represented, deep and tight. The Qualios deliver in spades and do EXACTLY what I want from a loudspeaker in the bass department; tuneful and moving enough air for me to feel it. You do get bungs to tame the bass port should you need it, but I preferred these speakers without them, though it has to be mentioned that I have bass traps in the corners of this room. I don't recall who it was but someone had mentioned that they had heard the Qualios at a show and that they found the bass somewhat lacking – I don't get this statement at all and can only assume that the speakers weren't particularly well set up! To my mind, the bass produced by these is in keeping with the rest of the speaker - it is balanced and doesn't dominate. I listened closely to this record (and it's a record I have played dozens and dozens of times over the year) and I can honestly say that the Qualios present it as well as I have ever heard it. I sort of want to say that the Qualios remind me of our Avantgarde DUO XDs in their presentation, and I do

think this is a valid comparison, though with a slightly reduced sense of scale. If you don't have the space for DUOs or even UNOs, then give these a listen and I don't think you will be disappointed. One of the things I did pull from carefully listening to this record was the clarity of Lee Perry's vocal throughout and I have to say that I found the midband presentation on this record to be easily on a par with our LS3/5As, though, of course, it's more filled out to the bottom end with the Qualios. A fabulous experience that I'm glad I will be able to reproduce as and when I like as these are likely to be a permanent fixture in this system for a long while to come. Are they a final speaker? I don't know as I haven't heard them all, but if we were ever to downsize and be allowed only one set of speakers, then I can say that these would be on a very short shortlist.

Upping the tempo a bit and playing a tune that I'm currently hammering when I'm DJing (sadly only in the house for the moment) I put on Disco Biscuit by Disco Biscuit from the early 90s and crank the volume up a bit. Bass is fast and rolling, vocals are panned both left and right and then central depending on where you are in the tune, and that nagging funky guitar sample is clear as a bell. Yep, these can throw a bit of a party when they have to too, but I'm pretty sure this kind of music wasn't high on the list of priorities when the guys were voicing them. The thing is, the reality is that a good loudspeaker should really be able to play anything that you throw at it and still perform well.

Anyway, probably more in keeping with the kind of music that the Qualio guys used when designing these speakers I thought I'd play some gabber! Not really, I thought I ought to play some jazz as it's the law when reviewing anything that purports to be audiophile. However, the album I chose to single out for these speakers was the somewhat maligned Doo-Bop by Miles Davis. It's kind of Miles Davis meets laid-back hip-hop beats and if you don't know it then you should search it out! The speakers get the languid production qualities of this record over very nicely. Yes, there's detail and whatnot through the mid-band with the rap vocal on The Doo Bop Song being forward and central (I assume this is correct) and with Miles' horn floating above and slightly back in the mix (again, I assume this is correct). The snare and hats are incisive and cut through the mix and the bass is presented as tuneful and low. There's a lot going on in this track with a





persistent sample of a piano going on pretty much throughout and the Qualios get this small detail across without it being lost in the mix. And that's sort of the thing with these speakers; you get the whole as a coherent and properly presented mix, but should you want to listen into the tune (as audiophiles tend to like to) then you can do that too.

OK, I did play a bit of Gabber (early Gabber (or is it techno) in the form of Vicious Delicious and their wonderful Hocus Pocus tune of the Mix Hard or Die compilation from the early 90s. Yep, these speakers don't have a problem with this stuff either with the full detail of the tune coming through. This may just seem like a load of noise, but there's detail in things like the snap of the snare sample and the effects that are added to it and the bass kick that is deep and sort of hollow sounding but at the same tight. At around 4'20" the bass kick has something DEEP put underneath it and the Qualios don't miss a beat. It would have been easy for this to throw the rest of the track right off and things to become all confused and a bit much. In this setting and without turning up the wick too far the Qualios come across as a monitor-like speaker. Turn up the volume a couple more clicks on the remote and they retain their

composure and just get louder. On the English Muffin tune that follows that classic hoover sound (it's not a hoover, it's a Roland Juno) comes across properly and with all the necessary elements that make it up.

Switching the style again, I really ought to have finished writing my notes by now but I can't help but keep listening to this system, I pop on the excellent 11:11 by Rodrigo and Gabriela. The dynamics of these speakers and the way they react to changes in playing style and volume shines out. These are a fast loudspeaker that respond immediately to shifts in the music and in doing so they engage you. Every tap on the body of the guitars and every detail in how hard a bottom e string is hit comes across in the presentation.

NIGGLES

Finger smudges on the Perspex are inevitable so keep the microfibre cloth handy.

Looks are going to divide but I really like them.

Selecting the different resistors for the tops is a bit





of a faff, but once it's done it's done and I do get why an L pad wasn't used.

Spikes are included and I believe that this is something that loudspeaker manufacturers have to include but I'm afraid that in most cases I just don't see the point and would prefer something to isolate rather than connect the speakers to the floor. In fact, at shows Qualio do use the IsoAcoustic Gaia footers.

CONCLUSION

When first set ears on these I fell in love with these speakers and the way they present music. They are not over-analytical but are very detailed... if that's not a contradiction.

I'd like to say that the main feature of the Qualios is that wonderfully open and airy mid and top-end presentation, but that would suggest that they only major in this aspect, and the truth is what these speakers actually represent is a very coherent and balanced speaker that is excellent from top to bottom.

This is a fairly long room and about 5m wide, but the Qualios had absolutely no problem in filling it and being able to go to volumes that you'd not want to maintain for too long without distortion or the feeling that they were being pushed too hard. They do have a sweet spot with regards to volume and that is quite loud, but they also get across detail and nuance at lower levels should that be a must.

The best speakers I've heard in this room and in this system and not by a small margin, and I thought it to be a world-class sounding system with our Xavian Perla (about €2K when reviewed) speakers in there. The Qualios are significantly more expensive than the Xavians, but I'd also suggest that the extra money is well spent if you have it.

Fully deserving of our top award given their price-to-performance ratio.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

They are going to divide opinion but I like the look

of them

There's nothing overly clever about them build-wise but everything is well done

The Perspex housing for the mid and tweeter is a stroke of genius and helps the speakers look a lot less conspicuous than they probably should

Sound Quality:

Mids and tops are, and I hate to be clichéd with regards to open baffles, open and airy with the AMT tweeter really opening the sound up and adding a spatial dimensionality to the sound that is hard to describe until you hear it

The speakers are fast and responsive across the frequency range

Bass is dynamic, deep and tuneful

Overall this is a very balanced speaker

Value For Money:

Critics may ask where the value is in a bass box with an OB plate on top, but I think sonically they punch above their weight and asking price

We Loved:

These speakers play music (all music) and it's hard not to just remain sat in front of them for hours at a time

The open and airy presentation with fantastic soundstaging that draws you into a three-dimensional but realistic space

Can be pushed with regards to volume...in fact they love to be pushed a bit

I think they look pretty cool

We Didn't Love So Much:

The Perspex is a finger magnet but Qualio know this and you get a microfibre cloth in the packaging

Changing resistors until you find the one that suits you is a bit of a back-and-forth affair, but once it's done it's done





The inclusion of spikes is, for me, pointless and I'd prefer rubber footers or similar isolation products

Elevator Pitch Review: From Poland, the Qualio speakers are an 9.5" driver in a ported box with an open baffle mid and AMT tweeter placed atop on a thick Perspex baffle. They come with different value resistors so you can attenuate the upper-frequency output. Sonically they are a treat and come across

as a highly accomplished speaker from top to bottom. The open-baffle mid and top makes for a very open presentation and whilst this could feel disparate from the bass if not integrated properly by the crossover network, the guys at Qualio have done a fantastic job in making this a supremely integrated loudspeaker. Top marks! I love them!

Price: €5550





XSA VANGUARD LOUDSPEAKERS

love the name of this brand and I like that they have been bold enough to dare to do something different from the norm. For the record XSA stands for Extremely Sexy Audio that are US-based and says that their design and management team have over 110 years of combined experience in the audio, electrical, and aerospace engineering fields. They also say that they offer value via their direct selling model – there are no distributors or dealers.

So what you have here is a pretty normal and conventional-looking loudspeaker that has a 13cm paper cone woofer and a 2.8cm silk-dome tweeter. There are a single pair of good-quality binding posts around the back and these will accept all the usual speaker cable terminations.

These are a compact two-way speaker measuring 7.5" x 12 x 8, which from the front has them about the same size as an A4 sheet of paper. This size should see the Vanguards acceptable in pretty much any space and mean that they can be mounted on shelves or on stands. However, once they are on stands they will, like any standmounter, take up a similar amount of real-estate as a floorstander.

The package felt lightweight (the speakers are a little over 11lb (5kg) each and I though thought these speakers were going to be a tad flimsy and, well, lightweight. I was wrong and once out of their box, they feel solid and well put together.

The speakers are 83dB sensitive and offer an 8ohm load. The former is pretty low but I had no trouble driving them with the Clones Audio's 25W a channel.

In reality, there's not much else to say about the way these speakers are put together, other than to add that they come with grilles that attach magnetically. The review pair came in "Satin Brown" but for the same price you can have them built in bamboo which is an eco-friendly product or for \$100 more you can have them in Gloss Blonde. For European markets, I think the lighter colours are better and I particularly like the look of the bamboo, though I've only seen that online.

Costing \$999 and sold direct, the Vanguard speakers from US brand XSA are a throwback to the classic British speaker Stuart recalls from his youth. How do they perform in the modern world?

Reviewed by Stuart Smith









HOW DO THE VANGUARD LOUDSPEAKERS SOUND

These are a small speaker very much in the vein, in my opinion, of the classic sealed box speakers such as the KEF Model 102, indeed, both are pretty similar in their make-up and the size of drivers used. This is a good thing and I have a soft spot for small, infinite baffle standmount loudspeakers. I've always found that despite being limited in bass (you can't beat physics with regards the size of the enclosure and no bass loading) but they often make up for this with superb imaging (which is very important to me) and a nicely integrated sound.

I allowed the speakers to break in for a bit and put them in our main system mounted on a pair of SolidSteel stands which put the tweeters exactly at ear height. The tens of thousands of pounds worth of kit before them is wholly inappropriate, of course, but I will be commenting on them used with a more modestly priced Clones audio amp in due course. However, for the main part, they are in the main system and in a pretty big room firing across the room rather than down it, around 2m apart, and a good metre or so from the rear walls and nowhere near side walls. I am aware that a small speaker like this is more likely to be used in more confined spaces than this.

Imaging, as expected, is excellent with these speakers and whilst it isn't as good as, say, our Falcon LS3/5As there's nothing to whine overly about here. The Renegade Sound Wave "In Dub" record has lots of sound effects and psychoacoustic effects on offer and these little speakers do a fab job at getting this across. In fact, they are very good indeed in this respect, and whilst they don't go particularly low, I did get a good impression of the basslines on tunes such as Black Eye Boy. I'd say these are quite monitor-like in their imaging abilities with left-to-right effects being excellent and the image having decent enough depth. When warming up I found that the Vanguards were pretty insistent and grumbly that I keep the volume down, but once they loosened up I found that I could push these speakers quite hard and on the Leftfield remix of Renegade Sound Wave I could push the speakers to volumes that would be uncomfortable for long periods, without them getting too flustered. There is a point where all speakers have their sweetspot with regards to volume and the music being played and the Vanguards are no exception in this matter – they like to be pushed a little but not too much to get the best from them.

As I mentioned, I do like a sealed box speaker (infinite baffle) and it seems that the modern norm is to add loading in the form of ports which can lead, in some but not all instances, to a bass that errs on the side of one-note and a bit slow and boomy. I'd much rather have a tight and coherent bass that doesn't go mega-low than one that is flabby and bloated. The Vanguards pull the tight, sealed box bass sound off really well and I didn't really miss the trouser-flapping lows. In a smaller room you aren't going to miss this anyway and it may well prove to be a benefit!

I'd purposefully chosen tunes to listen to that were demanding of smaller speakers and I think the Vanguards did a rather splendid job with electronic music with their main strengths being imaging in the left to right field. I especially enjoyed the delayed plinky-plonky delayed sounds at the start of Richard H Kirk's Lost Souls On Funk and the way the different elements of the mix were separated into their component parts. Like I mentioned, quite monitor-like in their presentation and I could see these being used as nearfield monitors. Jean Michel Jarre's Oxygene was particularly enjoyable. Tonally on electronic music like Jarre, I would say the Vanguards are quite neutral and pretty uncoloured. Detail and timbre of these electronic instruments was good through the mid-band but not (as I would determine) as accurate as say our Falcon LS3/5As, but then they cost a LOT more.

The classic BBC design and these speakers are bound to draw a comparison, and the LS3s are the only small sealed-box speaker I actually own and have to hand with which make direct comparisons, but the differences are not massive. The Falcons win the contest overall with better imaging and midband but then the Vanguards go a little lower. The difference is not equivalent to the extra money the LS3/5As cost, BUT audio and pricing NEVER works like that.

On Jazz (Kind Of Blue) I found that I needed to up the volume a little to get the best out of the Vanguards (that sweet-spot thing again) but once you get the optimum loudness the Vanguards proved to be a pleasure to listen to. Basslines stroll along and are easy to follow, there are good representations of









the horn and the hats and snares are snappy and fast. There's also excellent imaging of the musicians laid out in front of me on the imagined stage and my only slight criticism here is a smidge of confusion where with the upper mids and lower-top end... certainly nothing to moan about, but worth mentioning. Overall I let the balance on this kind of music was excellent with nothing being at all shouty or being too forward.

On more rock-orientated material (Hawkwind's Hall Of The Mountain Grill) there's a little fall-off with regard to overall cohesion but this is at times pretty hectic music. However, the saving grace of these

little Vanguards is their ability to draw you into the music and the image of the music and all that is going on in there. I did find myself getting lost in the tunes and this is what I like to do when reviewing kit – it shows that the product is doing something right.

So, I said I would pop these speakers in a system with the Clones Audio amp in there instead of the Total DAC AMPA 1 and I did just that. This turned out to be a nice little system that just played very nice music with the speakers allowing a good deal of the amp's character to come through. I'm not going to go into the whole deal with this system as I actually did something I said I never do in reviews





and put a system together made up of a couple of bits that were in for review that I thought sounded very good together and I'm going to do a mini-review/not review on them in a wee while simply because this seemed to be a system that gelled together very nicely for the money.

NIGGLES

Not a lot at this price, to be honest. These are very good-sounding speakers with my only criticism being that slight confusion at times in the upper mids.

CONCLUSION

Yes, these a bass-limited, but don't let that put you off as what bass there is tight and taut. In lots of ways, they took me back to my youth when I first started experimenting with speakers and audio.

What I particularly enjoyed about these speakers was the way that they integrated top to bottom. They aren't at all dominant in one area, though they are strong through the mid-band with my only criticism here being that they can get a little muddled in the upper mids on some busier music. At the top end, they are articulate and yet relaxed.

These are a good speaker for the money and I really enjoyed them in my system and when combined with other relatively modestly priced components – you can put a system together with these speakers for way less than £3K and have a very nice sounding system.

Overall I'd thoroughly recommend these speakers and I really enjoyed that they are closed-box speakers, though they do need to be wound up a little to get the best out of them. They are an engaging and enjoyable speaker with, in reality, very few flaws at this price.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

Well put together and finished

Sound Quality:

These are a good sounding speaker that I think have a lot of what was great about the speakers I grew up with when I first got into HiFi in a serious way

Bass is obviously limited but that will be a bonus if used in a smaller room

Closed box design has these speakers deliver a very nice bass that appeals to me

Can get a little muddled at the top mid point but overall they are liquid and easy going

Value For Money:

I think these offer pretty good value for money at less than \$1000. Obviously, those living in the EU or the UK will need to factor in shipping and import duty

We Loved:

An engaging and involving speaker to listen to

An honest loudspeaker that isn't trying to be something it isn't

Natural soundstaging

Easy to listen to for long periods

We Didn't Love So Much:

Can get a tad muddled on some music at the frequency point I mention

Elevator Pitch Review: Hailing from America, the \$1000 XSA Vanguard speakers are a compact, sealed box design that harks back to the classic designs of yesteryear. They are a no-nonsense design that is devoid of bells and whistles that shout "Look at me" and that will appeal to many. Sonically the Vanguards are a very pleasing loudspeaker to listen to and whilst they don't go super-low, they do have a tight and bouncy bass performance. From top to bottom, they are a delight to listen to with my only criticism being that they got a little muddled on busier tracks in the upper-mids. Other than that, I highly recommend these speakers.

Price: \$999





ANSUZ MAINZ 8 C3 POWER DISTRIBUTOR

t 5,500 euro the Mainz 8 C3 is one of the most expensive power distributors I've had in my system to date. It's far from being the most expensive power distributor **er distributor reviewed** from Danish company Ansuz, however; the C3 sits smack in the middle of a seven-strong range. An unnecessary indulgence or an indispensable cornerstone of any mildly ambitious HiFi set up?

Ansuz Mainz 8 C3 powby Eric van Spelde

'Power Distributor' may not be an accurate description of what the Mainz C3 does, even though it features eight power outlets (Schuko as per most of Europe or US standard, as of now there's no version featuring UK-standard power outlets) plus a single IEC inlet. However, it's not a filter in the common sense either, nor is it an active power regenerator. Its main aim is to keep noise and resonances away from the power cables that feed your audio components, thus lowering the overall noise floor of the system. In fact, such is the importance that Ansuz places on a clean power supply to the rest of your audio system that it not only awards the power distributor 'component' status in the context of an audio system, but moreover considers it the most important part of the system. You'd think "Sure, that's what I would say in their place as a manufacturer of power distributors and cables, too" but Ansuz is in fact one of three brands – the others being Aavik and Borresen - that operate under the umbrella of Audio Group Denmark and between them, cover pretty much all bases when it comes to putting together a HiFi system.

Ansuz do offer some pretty radical strategies and technologies when it comes to cleaning up the act of an audio system's power supply. First thing you notice is the enclosure. At first glance, it looks like it's made from a single piece of aluminium, which is also supported by the weight (just over 5 kg) of the long, slim cabinet. However, it is not cold to the touch like a metal enclosure would be and that's because it's actually made out of a natural fibre-based composite material which reduces its mechanical influence.

As befits it being regarded as an audio component in its own right, its shape and orientation suggest the power distributor is meant to be placed in a HiFi rack rather than behind or under it – which posed me with a challenge as there's no room for an audio rack in my system

Reviewed by Eric van Spelde







HIT PIC Magazine



configuration. In fact, the remote-controlled line level preamp and its power supply as well as the music server that I have had as a review item at the time of testing, are under a sofa which in turn is flanked by four power amps that power the mid and high-frequency drivers of my Avantgarde horns which sit alongside them on either side. Along one side wall, there is just enough space for a turntable and phono preamp. Long story short – the only way to have the Mainz C8 provide the juice for all of the system apart from the turntable power supply and the Class D low-frequency amps with DSP in the Avantgardes with the power cables available, was to place the unit on its side! Obviously, this was not ideal as the component feet of course, were on the underside of the unit. In another configuration I tried when the music server arrived, I used the Ansuz in the orientation intended by its maker, providing the outlets for the digital front end - server and DAC – and the line level preamp only. The power outlets themselves, as well as the single IEC inlet, are, as befits the unit's price tag, of very high quality and the cabinet's appearance is one of understated elegance; however, being half a metre wide and over 26 centimetres deep with all power outlets in a single row on the rear side does restrict its flexibility of installation somewhat in comparison with more conventionally shaped power distributors. Of the eight outlets, one of the pair in the middle is marked in white – this is where you are supposed to connect the item that has the most other components connected to it; in my case, the line level preamp. Positive, zero, and earth connections on the power outlets are all star grounded to a precisely defined area within the unit that carries the lowest possible grounding impedance. This ensures that no voltage is transferred from the power distributor to the individual equipment power cables – apart from the mains voltage they are supposed to carry, obviously.

TESLA COILS

Instead of leading the mains voltage through a series of frequency-based filters — which often results in a loss of dynamics — Ansuz uses a principle called the 'Tesla Coil' in all its power distributors. The key principle is to have two coils wound in opposite directions which both carry voltage. When one of the Tesla coils encounters a voltage spike, a counter spike is activated to eliminate the noise. Since noise spikes are pure voltage carrying virtually

no charge, the noise cancellation is quite good but not perfect. Adding more Tesla coils in parallel increases the noise cancellation and this is why there are more of them as you go up the Ansuz range of power distributors. Also, while more basic models offer 'passive' Tesla coils, more elaborate iterations like the C3 feature 'active' Tesla coils that are current fed. This drops down the impedance of the coils and offers a better ability to eliminate noise - according to the manufacturer by a factor of three to four. The Mainz 8 C3 features 24 of what Ansuz calls 'Ansuz Active Tesla Coils', six 'Active Cable Tesla Coils', and three 'Active Zirconium Tesla Coils'. The individual properties of these three different types of Tesla coils are meant to complement and reinforce each other for the best possible noise reduction.

In addition, Ansuz uses 'dither technology' - originating in radar tech — to ensure a greater signal strength and thus, a better signal-to-noise ratio. The Active Tesla Coils send pulsating signals at precisely defined frequencies in anti-phase, which amplifies the signal and lowers the background noise floor. The new range of Ansuz power distributors features a third-generation design, which through analysis and lots of listening, seeks to further optimise the frequencies at which the pulses are sent.

DOES IT WORK?

Yes - emphatically so, but in other and rather more subtle ways than one would expect. I used the Mainz C3 mostly in the main system at home, a rather elaborate affair that's been developed (as mentioned) over the years and consisting of Avantgarde Duo XD speakers modified to work in a fully active set up using two pairs of monoblock single-ended triode tube amps (Audio Note Quest Low Gain with Audio Note 4300E 300B power valves and a late '90s pair of Welter EbIIIs running TJ Full Music 2A3 power valves, modified with external power supply units, re-capped with the coupling capacitors doubling as a high pass crossover filter) and a custom version of Pink Faun's Tube Pre line amplifier with separate outputs for the mid and high frequencies (the output capacitors of the latter having been sized to form another high pass crossover filter). The analogue front end consists of an Acoustic Signature Challenger Mk3 turntable with two motors and an upgraded platter having had eight 'Silencers' inserted. Acoustic Signature TA-1000 and Levar Ultimate









Carbon tonearms were installed during the test period, with Hana ML and Miyajima Takumi L cartridges. Power cables are from Furutech, Pink Faun, and ASR. With the exception of one of the Pink Faun power cables – feeding the phono stage PSU – none of them are particularly expensive cables or of very elaborate construction. All of this, plus a CD playback arrangement, has been moved from my former apartment in Rotterdam, where I had installed a separate mains spur, ending in a permanently installed DIY power distributor with star earthing and Pink Faun wiring - to my partner's apartment in Stuttgart where none of this is present. Since the move, a basic Rittal distribution block with a captive Belden lead provided the power connections to most of my equipment.

Later on, a Pink Faun 2.16 Ultra music server joined the fray, and the Mainz 8 C3 was relegated to providing power to the server using a Pink Faun Ultra Power Cord (3,750 euro for a 2 metres long cable) that was supplied with it, my older Audio Note DAC 3.1X NL Signature D/A converter (further modified by the people behind Pink Faun) and the line level preamp. Similarly, in another configuration the Ansuz was tried in front of a rebuilt Gryphon Orestes 4-box phono stage, in a system that comprised of Avantgarde XA pre and power amps and the new Avantgarde Duo G3 speakers, both in semi-active and fully active iTron mode.

Let's start with what the Mainz 8 C3 doesn't do. It doesn't magically make hiss and hum in a system (of which I have a fair amount since the move) disappear. It doesn't seem to block any DC present in the mains, so a transformer that hums in sympathy (the acid test is to determine whether the hum comes from the speakers, or the transformer itself) is still going to hum; the same with components that are simply placed too close to one another (another unfortunate consequence of moving house).

What it does do is dramatically lower the noise floor within the music being played. This is particularly noticeable in a system like mine where passive crossover filters, feedback loops in amplifiers et cetera have been consistently eliminated with simple circuitry comprising high-quality components in the signal path. The soundstage becomes wider, deeper, and much clearer. Avantgardes are not the easiest speakers to make 'disappear' because of their physical stature with those 27" diameter midrange horns, particularly in a smaller room, but

with the Ansuz providing the juice for the front end and amplifiers this feat was largely achieved. There was more fine detail to be savoured especially in the higher registers, but in a smooth, relaxed, self-effacing way. The perceived tonal balance of the system remained unaffected, as was the capability of the large horns, supported by two pairs of 12-inch woofers and 1,000 Watts of DSP-controlled low-frequency amplification per channel, to provide firecracker dynamics and lightning speed when called upon to do so. With all amplifiers fed through the C3, the overall effect was that of more refinement overall, letting the system get on with it in an easy, unforced, and natural way without giving the impression that the sound had been 'sanitized' by any means. When used with the analogue front end in the system and running the new Duos G3 in a rather larger room, the effect was similar but to a lesser extent; it was much the same with the digital front end consisting of the Pink Faun music server and Audio Note DAC. It has to be noted that both the Gryphon Orestes phono stage and the Pink Faun 2.16 Ultra feature very elaborately designed power supplies, to the extent that Pink Faun recommends plugging the unit directly into a mains outlet without any power conditioners or filters.

CONCLUSION

In my personal system, the Ansuz Mainz8 C3 made the best out of a suboptimal situation by providing the equipment's power supplies with a virtually noise and resonance-free mains output (keep in mind that when electrically amplifying a music signal, you are not 'amplifying' the source signal from thin air but modulating the voltage supplied by the mains with it). To that end, it's bristling with innovative technologies that dramatically lower the noise floor without actually filtering the mains supply in the conventional sense, which means dynamics remain unaffected. For best results, you will probably still want a separate mains spur for your audio equipment if at all possible, and to keep switched mode power supplies (like the 'wallwarts' used for turntable motors etc.) from being in the same electrical network as the audio equipment, but even without any of these, the Mainz8 C3 provided a significant improvement in terms of stereo depth, width, and separation, overall clarity and detail and did this in such a way that you could virtually sense the system 'relaxing', being to a large extent freed from 'grain' and 'hash' from the lower









mid-band upwards, and getting on with the business of conveying the musical message to the listener. It worked equally well with all the power cables I tried, but the use of Ansuz power cables would probably be preferable as both have been developed to work with each other as a system. It's very well built and presented as befits its price tag and is completely intuitive to use and get the best from it. I would say the level of improvement would justify its inclusion in well-considered system setups with a total investment from the low/mid five-figure ranges upwards.

My only gripes with the Mainz8 C3 are twofold: a) I cannot afford one at this point, and b) its shape and layout of the power outlets proved to be less than practical in the context of my system, the available space and the number and lengths of power cables available. The latter point is of no consequence if your system, like most at this level, resides in an audio rack, provided you have a shelf free to place it on – which is the way the Mainz8 series was designed to be used.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality And Features

A slim, elegant, black box from a non-metallic, natural fibre-based composite material, that feels substantial

The component feet are well-designed and understated in appearance

Eight EU-type power outlets on the back, of very high mechanical quality, oriented diagonally

Classy packaging without being excessive, the item is well protected by the sort of high-density foam that you find with professional quality socket sets etc., and comes in a soft cloth bag

Sound Quality

Dramatically lowers the noise floor on equipment good enough to show it, resulting in improvements in the soundstage, separation, transparency, and detail

Makes for a more relaxed and natural listening experience







Value For Money

It's expensive, but well worth it if your system is up to it

We Loved:

The improvement in sound quality with anything that we ran from the power distributor

The sheer quality of the power outlets

The elegant, understated design

We Didn't Love So Much:

We would have liked to have had a little more

flexibility in the placement of the unit

Elevator Pitch Review: The third-generation Ansuz power distributors use extremely advanced and innovative technologies to keep noise and resonances from entering the power supplies of your audio equipment, without the ill effects associated with power filters. Sitting in the middle of the range, the Mainz 8 C3 offers most of the refinements of the (still) more expensive variants, like three different versions of the active Tesla coils that complement each other, and dither technology. As such it represents a significant step up from the more basic models.

Price: €5500





TELLURIUM Q STATEMENT 2 CABLES

here's nothing more guaranteed to spark a minor audiophile fracas than a discussion around cables, to the point that I've written a comprehensive, though somewhat tongue-in-cheek piece around the whole cable war debate – you can read it here. Whichever side of the DMZ you find yourself on, the following review isn't going to change your opinion and so if you are a cable believer I suggest you read on, but if you are a cable-sceptic then I suggest you stop right here, do not pass GO! and go pour yourself a nice glass of something you enjoy and listen to some tunes through your system and the wires it came with, though I pretty much guarantee very few will actually be using those cables if they are honest. Anyway, my views on cables are that they can and do have an effect on the sonic character of a system, and as such they are absolutely relevant to discuss and review.

If you are still reading this then I will assume you find yourself in the "cables make a difference" or "I'm as yet undecided but interested in the debate". If you are still reading this and are in the "cables cannot and do not make a difference" battalion, then you have passed GO! despite having read the rules of engagement and you are welcome, but you will not be collecting your £/\$200.

So, I find myself reviewing a product from a company that did make me sit down and actually listen to the cables in my system. Up until being sent a pair of Tellurium Q Ultra Blacks many years ago I was firmly ensconced in the "nice thick copper cables will work fine" trench. Those cables opened my eyes to the possibility that perhaps my previous unwillingness to bother listening to anything other than studio-quality copper cables was getting in the way of me getting the best (to my ears) out of my system. Some after-market cables I have used have had a positive effect sonically and some have had a detrimental effect on the sound. This last point is quite interesting as the cable-sceptics amongst us (still here?) will tell us that anything other than straightforward copper cable with ample girth and good dielectric can only have a detrimental effect on the final sound - that is, they can only take away and not add to the details we hear in our system. I do get this argument and I was in complete agreement with it up until about ten years ago and the vignette described above with regards to the TQ Ultra Blacks.

Tellurium Q is a British manufacturer of audio cables with a great reputation wherever we go in the world. In this review, Stuart will be taking a listen to their top-of-the-range Statement II (2) interconnects and loudspeaker cables.

Reviewed by Stuart Smith















Every review I have read of Tellurium Q cables makes mention of them giving no details away as to the make-up of their cables and so as convention dictates I need to mention that Geoff Merrigan and Tellurium Q gave no details as to how or what goes into the making of their cables. The instructions were, as always, "just listen".

I ought to describe, or at least try to explain my logic behind my cable loom in our big reference system as this will give you a bit of an insight into my methodology when choosing which cables to use. No one manufacturer dominates and whilst I love the idea of a full loom of one manufacturer's cables, I have found that some cables (irrespective of price) work better than others (irrespective of price) between certain bits of kit. So, I have some very expensive cables connecting some parts of the system and some less expensive connecting other parts. When a new product enters the reference system for the first time, I spend a silly amount of time swapping cables in and out to find the "best fit" for that product and the system as a whole - there's no wonder I was such a hit with the opposite sex in my youth, is there?

Anyway, for the purposes of this review I got sent Tellurium Q Statement cables and Tellurium Q Statement 2 cables to compare against each other. Of course, I'm also going to refer to the system I have set as a reference and what each of these cables does to the sound. This latter point is a bit more difficult as our aural memory is not as great as some review folk would have you believe and comments and references we/they use to kit they heard days or weeks ago are, for the most part, pretty much pointless and little more than vague recollections of a feeling. However, I will be A/B ing the Statemt 2s with our current loom of cables. For the cable sceptics (Hello, again, fancy seeing you here) this should give them more confidence in the methodology of the review process. One exception to the A/B (Statement/Statement 2) methodology is going to be with the speaker cables and jumpers as I was sent Statement 2 jumpers but not Statement jumpers, and Statement 2 speaker cables and not Statement speaker cables. I will use our TQ Silver Diamond jumpers throughout, other than a comparison towards the end when I will insert the Statement 2 jumpers between the binding posts on the speakers. I will also be having (after the main comparison between the TQ cables is done) our own cables in and out of the system to compare to the

Statement 2s

BUILD AND CONSTRUC-TION

Both sets cables look pretty much the same to be honest and both look to be well put together. The Statement 2 speaker cables a very cool red lustre to them. The packaging is suitably luxurious but not over the top which might suggest that your hardearned has been spent on fancy wrappers and not the product you bought. However, packaging is important at this level and I certainly got that Xmas morning rush as I opened the boxes. This is certainly a long way from when all the TQ cables came in modified (reprinted) pizza boxes. Anyway, it's all good and all very nicely presented. There's not much else to say about the construction and you are as well looking at the product shots, to be perfectly honest other than the 2s have a little bump along their length that is covered in heatshrink – more on this later.

Flexibility on the interconnects from both Statement and Statement 2 is excellent and there's no problems with routing them at all. The speaker cables are very stiff and thick.

Termination s are all branded Tellurium Q and the bananas on the speaker cables and the jumpers are of the locking variety.

THE SYSTEM

The System I'm using for this audio review is a system I know inside out, if not strictly intimately. It consists of a Stack Audio streamer, Lampizator Big7 (modified hugely by Lampizator to an unknown level) a Krell KST100, and a pair of Audiovector R6 speakers. Between the Lampizator and the Pre I have the XLR version of the interconnects and between the pre and amp I have the RCA version. Speaker cables were connected in the conventional way between amplifier and speakers as to do otherwise would render the whole process somewhat noiseless.

SOUND OF THE CABLES









As I said, the way I'm going to do this is to run some tunes playing the Statement (mark 1) cables, make some notes on the sonics and then swap the cables out for the Statement 2 cables as quickly as possible. I'll be going back and forth between these set ups during the not taking part of the review but I'm not going to detail every time I do this as you all have lives and other things to be getting on with!

STATEMENT CABLES

Keep in mind this is just Statement 1 other than the speaker cables and jumpers.

Overall this is a very well-sorted sound and gels well in this system. There's detail throughout the frequency band and there is a feeling of an accuracy to the sound, with a sense of instruments in the mix sounding like they actually should. There is an immediacy to the sound that suits my preference for a fast and somewhat (but not overly) clinical presentation – detail and speed with an overly accentuated top end can become fatiguing. The Statement interconnects are (to my ears) a cable that will suit music lovers rather than those looking to over-analyse the sound they are hearing, and, to me, that is sort of why we spend so much dosh on our HiFi systems, otherwise, we become analysts of sound and not appreciators of music. Now, the job here (my job) is to be analytical, but the kit we listen to needs to tread that line between analytical and enjoyment and the Statement cables tread that line wonderfully. Anyway, there are, to my mind, too many systems and products out there that are pushed in certain frequencies to give the illusion of accuracy and analysis.

Yes, I can see into the mix with these cables in place and I'm aware that I'm actively listening to the mix, but by the same token I can also fall into the music. One of the tunes that was playing when I was listening (and I did listen very closely and for a good few hours) was Blondie's Fade Away and Radiate and one of the aspects of the mix that did stand out was the naturalness of the bass, but I was also drawn to small details like the soaring guitars at around 2 minutes and 50 seconds.

So, in a few words I suppose I ought to sum up the sound of the Statements, and I'd go for detailed and fast but without being pushed in any of the frequencies, though I did think bass was a tad more pro-

nounced than I'm used to in my own cable loom.

STATEMENT 2 CABLES

The major discernible physical difference between the Statement and Statement 2s is that there is a bit of heatshrink along the length of interconnects (both RCA and XLR and I have no idea what is under there) and that they are a slightly different colour. I also suspect the 2s may be a smidge thicker, but they are still very flexible and easy to route.

My first reaction to putting the Statement 2s in the system (we are now running a full Statement 2 loom from DAC to speakers and everything in-between) was that there was an immediate and pretty obvious increase in volume. Actually, I'd say that the difference between the 1 and 2s is immediate and obvious when listening to exactly the same tunes that we heard before. Both cables rendered a silent background, but the Statement 2s seem to allow you to hear a tad further back into the mix, as if the noise floor has, indeed, been lowered somehow. I don't think you need to listen too hard to hear this difference and it was evident on every single track we heard. This is a good thing and the only way I can liken it to is when you play about with grounding devices at different points in your system. On this latter point, I've played with a few grounding devices and find that they don't work in all areas of a system and you do need to experiment, the Statement 2s seem to do something similar but it's "just there" rather than you having to fanny about experimenting where you put a grounding device. This does allow you to hear very small details in the mix, for sure.

There is still that sense of naturalness to the sound as with the Statement 1s, but even more so in some way...can something be "more natural", I don't know and perhaps my choice of words is not correct.

Perhaps a better way of describing the sound is from a sensory/reactionary aspect and what I would say is that the Statement 2s allow you to fall into the musical performance more easily and more rapidly than with the 1s. There's a sound at 1 minute 37 seconds on I'm Always Touched By Presence that was much more apparent with the 2s than it was with the 1s.

As with the Statement 1s there is a sense of rightness and it's clear that the synergy of a full loom of





2 works well in this system. Again nothing is pushed to the fore in the sonic presentation and nothing is omitted. What I did enjoy, and maybe this is contradicting my immediately previous statement, is the bass presentation which does seem to be more noticeable but not louder or further forward than the rest of the music...an odd one to describe, but definitely apparent.

The handful of words I would use to describe the Statement 2 cables from Tellurium Q is more detailed than the originals but without that detail being pushed down your throat, but with the same speed and sense of rightness.

I did mess about with my own cables in and out of the system too and my findings were that the interconnects between the DAC and the pre were better than my current (P)reference in that they did that seemingly quieter background thing that allows more of the very fine detail to come through , but that with the speaker cables and jumpers, the Silver Diamonds we use as (P)reference just seemed to be a more natural sound. This finding with the speaker cables interests e and I think some of my findings are likely to be down to exposure to my preferred reference speaker cables and having gotten used to their sonic signature - that's sort of what a reference is for, after all.

So I suppose the question I need to ask myself is would I go out and spend my hard-earned money on a full loom of Tellurium Q Statement 2 and my answer is that I probably wouldn't. That statement needs to be clarified and related to a comment I made somewhere in the introduction to this review and my cable methodology of carefully choosing what cable I think sounds best between specific pieces of equipment in our system. Now, a better question would perhaps be "Would I buy individual bits of Statement 2?" and the answer to that question would be a definitive yes. Between the DAC and the pre, the synergy between the Lampizator DAC, the Statement 2 and the Music First Baby Reference pre is better than with the cable I use on a day-today basis, but personally, I prefer our current speaker cables in this system (Tellurium Q Silver Diamonds) to the Statement 2 speaker cables – perhaps that's why they haven't been changed in such a long time (this may well change in a week or so when a new amplifier arrives and I start the whole listening to what I consider to be the best fit again). So, my advice for you, if you are looking for a cable in this

price range, is to most definitely audition the Statement 2s but to take your time to listen carefully and to have the opportunity and time to pull them in and out of a system with your current cables...this should be the case with all cable purchases and, I suppose, all significant HiFi purchases of any kind.

CONCLUSION

The Statement 2s are an excellent-sounding cable. They allow for an easy listening experience without ever feeling that you are being purposefully fed something in their sonic character to make them stand out as being "different/better". They are a detailed cable that I believe present music in a way that is fast and focused.

The big takeaway for me with the Statement 2s was that there was somehow an ability for them to allow you to hear things hidden way back (volume-wise) in a mix and I'd put that down to something to do with noise-floor, though our system is apparently silent anyway....another odd observation, I know, but if you have been exploring the world of grounding systems then these cables (the interconnects, at least) appear to be doing something similar.

I do not believe the Statement 2s (or any cable for that matter) are a one size fits all solution and I personally think that some components benefit from their attributes more than others. On this point, I highly recommend that you get a home audition with your own specific kit and then play around with how and where they are used. You may find that Statement 2 is a perfect match from front to back in your system, or, as I found, that they work better in some situations than others.

The awards I am giving these cables need a bit of explaining. I am giving the interconnects our top Editor's Choice award as in our reference system they performed better for me than our reference. The Statement II speaker cables I am awarding our 5 Hearts award as (in our system!) I preferred our current Tellurium Q Silver Diamond speakers, though the difference is far from night and day.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:









Excellent build throughout

Excellent Xmas morning packaging

Interconnects are highly flexible to allow easy routing

Speaker cables are heavy and relatively inflexible

The hardware on all the cables is excellent

Sound Quality:

Apparent speed and cleanness to the sound

Nothing is over-pushed

The interconnects are akin to the effect of grounding systems in a system with relation to noisefloor

The interconnects performed the best in our system and outperformed our reference

The speaker cables sound excellent, but overall I prefer our current reference, though there's not a lot in it

All the cables have an apparent naturalness to them

Value For Money:

I had no idea of the costs of these cables when reviewing but knew they would be more than the Silver Diamonds which we have as speaker cables. I think it's important to know that as (whilst I knew they would be more expensive than our Silver Diamonds) I wouldn't have the accusation of "more expensive is better" Overall these cables cannot be seen as anything but expensive, but then lots of things are expensive and we need to look at their price in relation to other products in the same market and their performance. In this respect I

would say Statement II from Tellurium Q reflect what they are - the Statement of what the company feel they can achieve with regard to performance.

We Loved:

The interconnects are definitely doing something akin to properly implemented grounding products

An easy natural sound that is easy to fall into

We Didn't Love So Much:

There is no getting away from the fact that these cables represent a significant financial outlay

Speaker cables are fairly inflexible

Elevator Pitch Review: Statement II by Tellurium Q represents the pinnacle of what this British Queen's Award-winning company believes they can achieve with regard to the cables they make. They do represent a significant outlay financially and it is likely that they will find themselves in the upper-echelons with regard to system performance and so will be bought by those that see value in their perceived performance. In the HiFi PiG reference system, they (specifically the interconnects) offered up a clean and accurate sound that allowed you to hear into the depths of a mix with an apparent lowering of the noise floor.

Prices:

Speaker Cables: £1707+VAT per metre/ £2049 inclusive in UK

2.5m set as tested £8535 + VAT or £10245 inclusive in UK

Interconnects: 1m pair (XLR) £4573 + VAT / £5487 inclusive in UK





AURALIC ALTAIR G1.1 DIGITAL AUDIO STREAMER

've been using the ARIES G1 streamer from AURALIC in our upstairs system for a few (four to be precise) years now and it's stayed there for the simple reason that it is simple to use and sounds great into our LAB 12 DAC. The ALTAIR series differs somewhat from the ARIES series in that they are designed to be a "one-box-solution" for all your digital audio needs...in short, that means that they are a streamer and a DAC in one box and have analogue outs, meaning that all you need for a full system is an amp and speakers, or for a more streamlined solution, a pair of powered loudspeakers. It is the latter ALTAIR we have for review here and in its latest G1.1 iteration that was announced during the Summer of 2023.

As a long-time user of Auralic streamers, Stuart was keen to take a look and listen to this updated streaming DAC from the brand.

BUILD AND FEATURES OF THE AU-RALIC ALTAIR G1.1

Broadly speaking and as outlined in my little preamble above, the ALTAIR G1.1 from AURALIC is a DAC, a preamplifier, server, and wireless streamer all in one nicely put-together and pleasing form-factor unit. This is just the kind of product that I keep banging on about being the future of large-market quality audio for the home; a product that does away with the need for a million and one boxes, is easy to set up, has great compatibility with a wide range of streaming services, and, importantly for me, acts as a ROON endpoint (you will need to install ROON core elsewhere and I have it on a micro PC that is permanently attached to our home network).

Reviewed by Stuart Smith

Hook the ALTAIR G1.1, as mentioned, to a NAS, external hard drive (there is an option to add an internal hard drive should you wish), or to the streaming service of your choice and a pair of powered speakers via the RCA or XLR analogue outputs and you have a streamlined and unobtrusive system with which to enjoy your music. Of course, and as mentioned, you can use it in a more traditional way and connect it to the separate amplifier and speakers of your choice. If you want to add other sources you can utilise the AURALIC's onboard DAC via its COAX, TOSLINK, or AES/EBU inputs. Another useful feature of the AURALIC is the ability to add a USB CD drive that allows you to play CDs like a regular old CD player, or (cleverly) you can play the CD and rip it to







your hard-drive, NAS, or onboard drive (if included) - or you can just rip the CD without listening to it. This latter point I find a really cool thing to have on the AURALIC as it adds a great deal of flexibility as to how you interact with your music. When playing or ripping CDs the CD goes through the units "jitter-reducing" Memory Playback tech which means that the CD is read, checked for accuracy in the cache and then played. Very cool stuff and when this feature came to our AURALIC unit I found it to be a very useful feature, essentially meaning I didn't have to have yet another box by way of a separate CD player.

So, I mentioned that the ALTAIR G1.1 is a ROON endpoint, but AURALIC has their own LIGHTNING STREAMING platform that will integrate natively to all the usual suspects like QOBUZ, AMAZON MUSIC, TIDAL, SPOTIFY etc. It'll also let you stream via Bluetooth or AirPlay2. However, and this is a small bugbear of mine with regards to the LIGHTNING DS, it is only compatible with iOS devices, and when we bought our AURALIC unit I also bought an iPAD to go with it. If you don't have an iOS device then you can use the LIGHTNING DS from any web browser, but this only allows for setting up of the device. However, you can use the likes of BubbleUPnP (my preferred app when needs must) or other Open-Home-compatible software.

Network connection is via Gigabit Ethernet or Wireless 802.1b/g/n/ac Tri-Band WiFi and despite the Auralic unit being upstairs and well away from our wireless router, I can honestly say that I never had issues with dropouts or any other artifacts coming into play...not one! I think this is important and I have experience of having kit that gets upset when we use Bluetooth in the house or just drops out for no reason.

Naturally, and it sort of goes without saying, the AURALIC will deal with all the usual suspect lossless file formats including AIFF, ALAC, APE, DIFF, DSF, FLAC, OGG, WAV, and WV, as well as the lossy AAC, MP3, and WMA file formats. Sampling rates are from 44.1 to 384kHZ in 32 Bit for PCM, and up to DSD512. That pretty much covers all bases!

You get onboard filters that you can play with to tweak the sound to your own liking or depending on what music you are listening to. Personally, and as with other products that have filters, I tend to find the one that I like and stick with it for all playback. I

fyou like to mess about and faff then you will likely use this feature more than I.

For those that like to, or have to listen to music on headphones from time to time, the ALTAIR G1.1 has an onboard headphone amplifier that connects via a properly sized (quarter inch) jack to the left of the front panel. The headphone amp on the newer G1.1 model is said to be more powerful than on previous models. It works perfectly fine, I had no issues with it powering all the cans I used with it and it sounds more than acceptable.

Other improvements on the latest G1.1 models from AURALIC include the high-mass base that comes from the G2.2 series of products and takes the form of a satin silver base plate that is said to "provide extra vibration damping", and finally it has an "improved Femto clock that is said to "improve the precision of the onboard DAC".

One of the features I've always enjoyed on the AURALIC products is the display and here we have a 4" true colour "in-plane switching display" with 300ppi resolution. It's not as big as, for example, the HiFi Rose's display, but it is adequate and it is easy to see cover art from a distance. For setup via this screen you do need to be pretty close to it, but then if you are setting up using this method rather than the LIGHTNING Server app, then you will have to be close to it to select the parameters using the large silver knob positioned to the right of the front panel. Personally, I found this method preferable for some reason and felt that the amount of menu-diving was pretty minimal and the menu structure pretty obvious.

There isn't a remote in the box but you can map it to any remote you fancy and it will control all the basic functions of the G1.1. Not having a remote is neither here nor there for me given that I'll be using, as pretty much everyone will, a tablet.

Aesthetically, the new ALTAIR G1.1 is a good-looking unit that takes up not a massive amount of space (it's 34cm x 32cm x 8cm WDH) and will look great whether on a rack or on a more conventional bit of furniture.

For me, that's about as deep as I think we need to go into the features and specs of the AURALIC, but for those that want to delve a bit deeper then there is more information on the company's website.









Personally, I doubt that folk buying this will give two hoots about the minutiae and will just want a unit that is easy to set up, simple to use, and sounds great. For me, the whole point of a product like the ALTAIR G1.1 is its simplicity and its no-nonsense approach to getting to the important business of being able to enjoy your tunes.

The packaging is excellent!

SET UP

The inner box that the Auralic unit arrived in welcomes you with the statement on the box "Where High_T4ech Meets Hi-Fi" which I kind of like in the sense that it suggests to me that we are dealing with a company that has done all the gubbins that doesn't interest me so I don't have to do it in order for me to get the HiFi experience I want. I. like many folk, have no interest in the whys and wherefores of a product; I want to plug it in and have it make music. Let's see how the Auralic fares in this respect.

In the past I've sort of eschewed the whole LIGHT-NING DS control of the Auralic unit we have as I use ROON to choose the tunes I listen to etc. I'm a creature of habit and ROON is what I know and is an integral part of my review setup and so it seemed natural to use it. However, let's have a look at what LIGHTNING DS is.

According to the AURALIC site, this app (iOS only) is how you control the playback of your digital music library and how you access internet streaming services. It also allows you into settings of the unit so you don't have to go through the whole (pretty simple) menu-diving options you would access from the front of the unit itself. It will allow you to see album art, the file type, and bitrate/resolution of whatever is playing, too.

One of the immediate, and perhaps the only issue I have with LIGHTNING DS (and having read the company information about it) is that a big library of, for example, a million songs will take up 1.8GB of storage on your phone BUT this does not include the album art cache and the company's own literature suggests that you will need around 50 GB of storage on your mobile device just for the artwork. It also says that the initial setup of your library is likely to be very slow. Given these requirements and my iOS device not really being up to muster, I see

there may be a problem with actually using LIGHT-NING DS for the actual music control side of its functionality and I foresee me using ROON to play tunes for the most part and use LIGHTNING DS (whether on the web-browser or on the iOS device) to sort out playback parameters and for set up. If you have a more iOS-based outlook then I imagine LIGHTNING DS will be your "one-stop-shop" for everything you need to do with the ALTAIR and you may never feel the need to invest in ROON. However, and importantly, you can access LIGHTNING DS via your PC by putting the unit into hotspot mode and connecting your computer to it. All very simple if that is your preferred method. The truth is that I'm a bit old-skool when it comes to all this and I do find menu-diving to be a much easier and more intuitive way of setting kit up. I think this is possibly a generational thing and I imagine that most folk that are either younger or more network and computer savvy will much prefer the convenience of having all this on a screen and being able to see everything on one screen.

Anyway, the whole setup is pretty intuitive; turn the device on, check for updates (there was one and I installed it (press a menu button)), click on the Network Set up section of the menu, click on wireless connection, and add the password of the network. I then added the new device to ROON and we had music. The whole job from start to finish takes literally five minutes and with most of that being taken up scrolling through the screens "keyboard" with the silver knob on the right-hand side of the ALTAIR G1.1. This setup will be quicker for those using the web or iOS-based interface, I'm sure.

For the duration of the review I used the tunes stored on our NAS but there is also the option to connect an external HDD or even to connect external sources and use the ALTAIR'S DAC via TOS, COAX, or AES which will allow files up to 24Bit/192kHz. If you connect to the unit via the HS USB cable rates up to 32/384 and DSD 512 are available, though Windows users will need to download the appropriate driver.

Outputs on the ALTAIR are either via RCA or XLR and so you could connect it directly to your power amplifiers and control the volume via the app. However, I wanted to use this in my usual setup and had it input to our LAB 12 pre via RCA connectors. I'm aware this sort of flies in the face of what I said about the whole one box plus speakers thing, but I











need to review within my normal parameters and that means in a system that I am familiar with end to end. However, and as mentioned a couple of times now, one of the big advantages of a unit like this is its one-box and a pair of powered speakers convenience. I recently spoke as part of a panel of four at the Munich High End show about the future of HiFi and i mentioned in that I thought the future was a tablet/screen and something like the Altair with powered speakers. You can watch the video here.

SOUND OF THE AURALIC ALTAIR G1.1

I set the ALTAIR in the upstairs listening room with our LAB12 pre, Merrill Thor amps, and Qualio IQ speakers. Normally I would have an Auralic streamer going into the same system but using the external LAB 12 DAC Reference. So, essentially, what I am comparing is the digital processing on the ALTAIR G1.1 to our usual DAC - simplistically speaking, of course.

First of all, it's pretty clear from the outset and without fannying around with any of the settings and filters that LIGHTNING DS and the ALTAIR allow, that this is a great-sounding DAC. It's very difficult for me to say this is better than previous ALTAIRs I've heard as I don't have one to compare side by side, but in comparison to the LAB 12, my first impression was that it was a more "precise" and perhaps a little more analytically sounding. This is not to say that the ALTAIR is clinical in its presentation of music, because it's just not. By clinical I think what people mean is that a product sounds a little brittle and harsh at the top-end - not a feature of the sonic presentation of the ALTAIR at all! In fact, I would say that the overall sound of the ALTAIR is very balanced and very organic - a pleasure to spend extended periods of time with. All the detail of a recording is there with the ALTAIR in place, but the detail is not overwhelming or "in-your-face" in any way, and why I chose to use the word organic.

The detail I mentioned is carried through to the soundstage and placement of instruments within that stage. Listening to a current favourite of mine, Miles Davis' Doo-Bop, had the beats laid out with a high degree of accuracy and then Davis' horn taking front-centre and being slightly elevated in the mix

with the occasional rap vocal coming out into the room from the mix. All of this is, of course, influenced greatly by the speakers and the amplifiers we have in this system, but it would be quite easy for a lesser product to mess this up...the ALTAIR doesn't mess this up at all and I'd suggest it may even enhance it a little.

I find that one of the big influences that different DACs bring to the table are the different tonal colours they have and impart to the music you are listening to; some are warm sounding, some are clinical, whilst others are brittle and harsh in what they add. I would suggest that the ALTAIR brings a very neutral presentation of the timbral aspect of the music and the instruments you are listening to. José James' version of Strange Fruit is a great example of this and his vocal maintains its goosebump-giving quality on his version, whilst the handclaps retain their correct reverb and snap. Likewise, the deep reverby quality of the backing vocals is presented with a wonderful roundness and texture. The slight vibrato on James' vocal that is apparent on some of the longer-held notes remains wholly intact and very nicely presented, as is the impression of the different mouth-shapes he uses in his rendition of this classic tune. Some of these are time-related factors and this would suggest an accuracy in this regards in the character of the ALTAIR. This impeccable timing aspect of the AL-TAIR's performance is echoed on the A Certain Ratio's "Mind Made Up" album where busy sections of the record could become a bit of a mush...they don't become a mush, but nor are the individual parts of the record artificially layered in the stage.

The NAXOS 128DSD version of Jazz at the Pawnshop taken from the analogue masters puts the listener at the first couple of tables back from the stage and centrally placed. Again, there is a natural and precise feeling that the ALTAIR imparts to the sonics. Nothing sounds forced or pushed to the fore and the natural ambiance of the recording space is maintained and brought out by the ALTAIR. Clarinet sounds resonant and like a clarinet should, whilst small taps on the cymbals during I'm Confessin' are in-the-room lifelike.

The lack of overall embellishment of a track is brought out when you play a pretty flat-sounding master, and rather than the ALTAIR having a pushed presence band of frequencies to make badly mastered tracks sound a bit livelier, the tracks are laid





bare and still flat sounding. This really is a positive aspect in that I consider the role of high-fidelity music reproduction being able to produce what they are fed with and without enhancement..the old "crap in, crap out" scenario. However, even on a particularly flat-sounding trance tune from 2000, the sound, and particularly the sound of the filter resonance of the Roland TB303 sounded as distinct as it is in reality. Play Robert Miles' Children and the ALTAIR comes alive and brings out all the nuanced detail that this masterpiece of modern trance is made up of and the room is filled with music.

I did test out the headphone amplifier on the ALTAIR G1.1 and all is good. It works well, went loud and kept its composure very nicely. I can't see anyone that bought this box ever feeling that perhaps they might need a better-quality headphone amplifier.

QUIBBLES

DS LIGHTNING app is iOS only and I really do think it is about time that AURALIC embraced those that use Android devices, though I do understand the reasoning behind their dropping support for it — "There are simply too many different hardware specifications and manufacturers' customizations to provide a uniform user experience across Android devices."

Auralic says that the Lightning DS app will be slow to set up large libraries. However, they quote absolutely HUGE libraries, and for the normal person with normal collections, this do it once and set to monitor for additions will be relatively speedy.

CONCLUSION





Products like the AURALIC ALTAIR G1.1 are the future of quality audio reproduction in the home, of that I have no doubt. They are easy to hook up and enable you to have a very simple HiFi made up of the one box and a pair of powered speakers (or a power amp and speakers), should you so wish. As much as I do love the whole "many box" approach to HiFi at home, I also appreciate that this more simple approach is more elegant and more home-friendly. I do think that Auralic are missing a huge opportunity by not building a power amplifier or integrated that matches their other units.

It's difficult to say that this isn't a superb-sounding product, but, likewise, it's also difficult for one to pull out exactly which aspect of the ALTAIR G1.1's makeup is adding what to the sonic character it brings. Is it a better streamer than in our ARIES unit, is the DAC and Femto Clock that bring a degree of the magic, or is it (and I suspect this is the truth of it) that the individual elements within the ALTAIR come together to bring forth a really superb sounding combination?

Adding Airplay and Bluetooth functionality to the ALTAIR is an excellent idea and whilst die-hard audiophiles may well decry the quality of reproduction these two "streaming" methods allow for, there is no doubt in my mind that there is a significant audience who will find them a hugely useful addition to the functionality of this product.

In this system, I think it is very difficult to criticise the sonic ability of the ALTAIR G1.1. It is accurate, unforced, and allows small and nuanced aspects of a recording to shine,

I really enjoyed my time with it. It performed without hitch, is feature-rich, and most of all it sounds clean, detailed, and natural with all the music I played through it. Indeed, my only quibble with the AURALIC ALTAIR G1.1 is the fact that the Lightning App is not available on Android.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality and Features:

Looks great

Feature-rich

Sturdy and well put together

A great one-box solution where you need only add powered loudspeakers

Easy to set up and work

Roon endpoint

iOS only app

Browser availability of Lightning

Bluetooth and AirPlay

Sound Quality:

Excellent sound quality with an easy and unforced character that allows the music to flow

Value For Money:

Given the feature set and sound quality, I think this is good value for money

We Loved:

Ease of set up with menu-diving being as easy as pie

Excellent one-box solution with powered speakers

Great looks and a sound to match

Zero dropouts

We Didn't Love So Much:

The app is iOS only and this is genuinely the only fault I can find with the unit

Elevator Pitch Review: Auralic's Altair G1.1 Streaming DAC does what it says on the tin. It offers a one-box solution for those looking to simplify their home audio system, or for those looking to enter the world of high-quality audio, it offers an excellent package. It is easy to set up, sounds great, and is feature packed. I like that it has onboard Bluetooth and Airplay. I also love that you can add an external CD drive to play and simultaneously rip your music.

Price: €2999, £2699, \$3249





EVERSOLO DMP-A6

versolo is the sister company to Zidoo, which has been around for a few years now making various audio-visual products. They launched in 2014 and since then have focussed on making consumer electronics products with ARM multi-core processors at their centre. Fast forward to Eversolo and they have decided to dive into the audio world, their range consists of a standalone DAC, Headphone amplifier, a couple of portable dongle DAC/Amps and finally the DMP-A6 Streamer/DAC we have here.

Oscar Stewart takes a listen to the Eversolo DMP-A6 Streaming DAC costing £759.

Eversolo prides itself on producing excellent quality products at reasonable prices, so can the DMP-A6 hold its own in the world of music streamers, or is it just a jack of all trades and master of none?

FEATURES AND BUILD OF THE EVERSOLO DMP-A6

So where do we start? The DMP-A6 has so many features it's easy to get lost in them, but when setup you'll find yourself using probably only a fraction of them.

First up we have the streamer side of things. The DMP-A6 accepts wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi to connect to the internet and once connected many devices will see it on the network and you will be able to start streaming straight to it. Personally, I use Roon as I have a core that has a mix of CD rips and Qobuz streaming and Roon found the DMP-A6 very easily and the whole connecting process was very straightforward.

The Eversolo runs on Android, and the firmware receives frequent updates. Running on Android allows you to sideload apps (apk files) onto the device, the front screen might not be huge but it is functional and easy to navigate around apps.

There is a dedicated Eversolo app which allows you to control most of the features of the streamer. For example, in the settings, you have the different DAC filters, fixed or variable volume, brightness of the display, **Reviewed by** Oscar Stewart











knob lighting and much more. The DMP-A6 also has a slot for an M.2 SSD for loading your own music onto, along with USB ports for attaching external storage, allowing it to become a central playback unit.

The DMP-A6 features 2 x ESS 9038Q2M DAC chips inside, one for each channel, allowing for better separation, better signal-to-noise ratio, and increased dynamic range. The internal streamed signal goes through these, as do the digital inputs — of which you will find optical, coaxial and USB inputs alongside Bluetooth too. The built-in DAC allows for a fully balanced signal to be outputted to the XLR outputs on the rear but there are also RCA outputs for those with single-ended equipment. Both analogue outputs can be configured to be fixed level (line-out) or variable (pre-out).

If you do not wish to take advantage of the excellent internal DAC, the DMP-A6 will output digital coaxial, optical, USB and HDMI audio. There are, unfortunately, no analogue inputs on the DMP-A6, which means those running turntables or tape decks will still need another pre-amp in their system.

This unit runs off a standard IEC cable, but the internal switch-mode power supply has a few tweaks to keep any mains noise at bay. This includes a choke filter alongside audio-grade components and it's nice to see they didn't forget the smaller details.

Build quality is superb! The chassis is very well-finished and the device is of a good size to fit into most systems. The front screen is clear and bright and easy to use, it's also responsive which is great for navigating through the menus. The inputs and outputs on the back are all extremely good quality and the front knob also feels great to use.

FUNCTIONALITY

The DMP-A6 is compatible with most streaming services and you can get these playing with ease. Switching to the digital inputs is also easy from the internal menu system or the app. There is a new Bluetooth remote that has also been released, allowing for easier control when sat further away from the unit.

The native app also supports local playback from

files stored on either an M.2 SSD (that you can fit into the bottom of the streamer) or an external drive plugged into the USB port. It has been noted that the DMP-A6 is not the speediest of streamers when using locally stored files, and sometimes the album artwork takes a while to load.

Setting it up with Roon was a doddle and I was up and running quite quickly without any hiccups, but I know not everyone wants to use Roon so it's handy it works with other services easily.

All-in-all the DMP-A6 is a very feature-packed, yet intuitive-to-use streamer that most people should find easy to get their heads around. But there's no point in having all this functionality if the device doesn't sound very good, so let's dive into that now.

SOUND OF THE DMP-A6

I've been getting my ears around a few streamers recently and it's really interesting to hear the differences between them. There are people who believe "DACs all sound the same" but I can assure you they do not. From the chip used, to implementation, to the analogue stage and power supply all these parts can and certainly do make a difference.

Luckily, Eversolo has stuck to a tried-and-true formula with the DMP-A6. Their implementation of the ESS 9038Q2M chips is one that doesn't come off overly analytical or clinical, yet still doesn't stray into the warm and laid-back category either. When you play music through the DMP-A6 it gives you a presentation that is believable, detailed, and clean. It has a tight grip on the music, never sounding slow or sluggish, yet it avoids being harsh and also avoids the so-called "ESS glare" that really is a thing of the past.

It is a streamer that doesn't try to colour the sound too much, and it really isn't overly noticeable in the system in terms of what might colour the sound, but it does have a typically linear presentation. It sacrifices a little warmth in exchange for a more tonally neutral sound that works well with most carefully put-together systems. It's not the last note in organic sound, however, I never found it to come across as harsh or hard-edged either - it just kind of does its thing of presenting the music in an unconstrained and open way.













Amy Winehouse's Back to Black is gritty and nuanced with the DMP-A6 allowing you to hear all the subtle details in the recording without sounding too clinical. It has good scale and the placement of instruments is accurate and never does it sound like there is a lack of dynamics. I decided to see how it handled something a little different and put on Electric Callboy – Hurrikan. The first half of the song is punchy German tekno transitioning into heavy metalcore halfway through. The DMP-A6 shows how it has an excellent grip on the sound, easily separating the kicks in the second half of the song and delivering the track with the energy it deserves.

I may have been spoiled by the iFi Audio Neo Stream I reviewed before the DMP-A6, and the Neo Stream still has the upper hand in audio quality in terms of timbre and insight (as it should for the price). The Eversolo has that slightly dry and more linear sound that won't work in every system, and I've found myself (subjectively) leaning more towards a natural sound that just makes you get lost in your favourite tracks.

When listening to Gabrielle Aplin's Home, for example, her vocals are stunningly detailed and it is a beautiful song. However, this is a song that needs to be portrayed with emotion and I found the DMP-A6 to be a little too clean to sound utterly convincing. Though the vocal harmonies are not lost and it's easy to hear all the layers in the recording. There is a

great sense of air and separation going on, however, the harmonics from the piano are a little muted.

The great thing about the DMP-A6 though is that you can simply run it into an external DAC if you wish and you have a lovely streaming front end with the back end of your choosing, and I cannot take points away from the Eversolo for being neutral in its presentation.

You can also easily run your CD player or other digital transport into the DMP-A6 and take advantage of the exceptionally clean internal DAC and pre-amp circuits. It works very well as a digital hub for streaming and DAC duties and is excellent as part of a headphone system running it into an external headphone amplifier.

The flexibility of the Eversolo DMP-A6 is truly impressive and there are so many ways it can be incorporated into a system that it's hard to find somewhere it won't work well.

CONCLUSION

The DMP-A6 is simply superb value for money! Taking into account all the features, build quality, and sound it will be the perfect digital front-end for many people's systems. The sound is neutral, flat, and clean, and it doesn't lack dynamics or punch.





There is also no harshness to the sound. This makes it fit into most systems with ease, but it may not be to everyone's taste and if this is the case you can always run it into the DAC of your choice.

There are a few bugs that some people have reported, such as slow loading of album artwork when playing from an SSD and the app crashing from time to time. This is still quite new to the market and there are still frequent firmware updates which will bring fixes to these issues in time but, personally, running it mostly as a Roon endpoint I didn't experience any issues.

Eversolo has made an excellent streamer with well-implemented ESS DAC chips and an excellent pre-amp stage. The design of the streamer, and the layout of the menus are excellent and it really is a very impressive device for the money.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

It may be another black box, but the display looks incredible and it is very well put together

Sound Quality:

Clean, crisp, and detailed sound with a slightly

forward presentation. It's not overly analytical but is neutral sounding overall

Value For Money:

For what you get, the DMP-A6 is extremely good value for money

We Loved:

Lovely layout with an excellent screen and neutral sound signature

Flexibility and functionality are superb

We Didn't Love So Much:

Some minor bugs to smooth out with future firmware

Not for those who want a slightly more forgiving and natural-sounding device

Elevator Pitch Review: If you want a clean-sounding digital front end for your system, the DMP-A6 is hard not to recommend. It's a budget-friendly yet featured-packed streamer with an incredibly controlled and detailed sound signature.

Price: £759





Fiio K9 PRO ESS DAC HEAD-PHONE AND DAC

ou'd think I was reviewing a fictional robotic canine with a name K9 (Doctor Who fans will get this), but this DAC/ headphone amp is anything but imaginary, and comes from the Chinese company Fiio. I personally own an aged X1 and X5 DAP. In the house, I use the X5 line output into a Slee Voyager headphone amp and get a very reasonable sound. I have watched this company grow since its early beginnings in the UK, starting with basic DAPs and headphone amps and now growing into producing some of the best-looking and technological personal products out there. Indeed, looking at the products over the last few years has seen Fiio produce some amazing kit to take on the competition. The K9 Pro ESS is their flagship Hi-Res desktop and comes in at a very good £699.99.

Guangzhou FiiO Electronics Technology Co., Ltd was established in 2007 in Guangzhou City, China, and has moved away from just doing DAPs to cables, amplifiers, and earphones. The name Fiio is made up of "Fi" for fidelity and "io" to represent the digital language of ones and noughts. Clever.

BUILD QUALITY OF Fiio K9 PRO

The K9 Pro ESS is one up from the K9 Pro. It uses two well-respected ESS ES9038 Pro DACs, one per channel, rather than the base model's AK4499. All in all, the Pro ESS adds up to better THD, SNR, and a slightly greater output level (2100mW into 32 ohm). The body is beautifully presented with gold-edged central volume knob on the front (as opposed to silver on the base model) and vents at the side of the unit with slightly raised ridges along the edges. It looks well thought out. The unit comes with 6 stick-on feet for you to add if you decide to use the unit horizontally, or not if you put the unit on its side on the supplied stand. The unit also comes with a spare fuse.

This is a truly balanced design with a dual voltage linear transformer and supports SBC, AAC, LDAC, aptX Adaptive, and aptX HD Bluetooth codecs, as well as WAV/Flac/DSD/MQA sampling rates. With output connectors (XLR 4pin and 4.4mm balanced plus standard SE ¼" on the front left, the right-hand side has the input selector plus gain (low/

Janine Elliot takes a listen to the £700 Fiio K9 PRO ESS headphone and DAC.

> Reviewed by Janine Elliot











mid/high) and output selectors (DAC/PRE/Head-phones). Other controls include input selector and standby. Above this are LEDs to indicate the input source (USB/Opt/Coax/line/BT). In the middle is a large volume control with a colour-changing RGB backlight surround to indicate sampling rates and Bluetooth codecs.

At the rear of the unit are the inputs including coaxial, optical, USB, and a Bluetooth digital aerial socket plus RCA and balanced 4.4mm analogue inputs, plus RCA and XLR analogue outputs should you want to connect to an amplifier or your powered speakers. On the side is a USB C port to connect to your mobile device for more control via an app.

The phone app controls Bluetooth codecs, DAC filters etc. K9's amplifiers are the excellent THX AAA-788+ chips that can give exceptionally low distortion and excellent detail and dynamics when using both low and high-impedance headphones. Indeed, the amp works well with headphones/IEMs from 16 to 600ohm. The PCB is a partitioned layout meaning that the power supply and signals are separated, including analogue and digital stages. The balanced audio circuitry is equally complex with 6 stages from input to output. A dual-mode clock management design is deployed with a femtosecond clock for USB/Bluetooth and PLL clocks for optical and coaxial decoding. Typical of products at this price point, USB operates up to 384kHz-32bit/ DSD256, coaxial up to 192kHz-24bit, and optical 96KHz-24bit. The unit also supports MQA tracks which given the recent news is moot. A Qualcomm QCC5124 looks after the Bluetooth ensuring it is low latency for gamers and high bit rate for audiophiles. Finally, the Fiio uses an internal linear power supply with four massive 4700uF capacitors.

The presentation box itself is crammed with goodies including a power cable, 3.5mm adaptor, BT aerial, spare fuse and the custom stand so that you can sit the PRO on its side, should you wish to save space. At 200 x 220 x 72mm, this is a very compact but well-laid-out unit. The presentation is very good including a basic but good sized instruction manual.

SOUND QUALITY

Getting it out of the box, the only clue to it being the ESS version was the gold rim of the volume control and gold "PRO" badge. The word "ESS" appears on the base, as does a 110v and 230v switch, which I carefully checked before turning on. For most of the listening, I used Coax and BT. Initially, I set up the Fiio X5 digital output, which actually performed surprisingly well. Other than that, I used the excellent SE180 DAP from Astell and Kern, itself also affording an ESS ES9038PRO DAC, and I listened with Sennheiser, Audio Technica, Meze, and Campfire Audio headphones/IEMs. Turning on the unit is via a toggle switch at the back plus the standby button at the front right. Instead of pressing the latter, you can also turn the volume control to wake it all up. Nice idea. The RGB edge then changes colours until it tunes into whatever the input is. For example; "white" is LDAC, and "Green" is DSD.

The first of the digits were Johnny Cash's "The Man Comes Around" (24bit/96kHz). With excellent detail and an impressive spread of instruments, Johnny's voice was hypnotic as he spoke and sang. There are three levels of gain on the K9 front panel (indeed, all the switches are rather small but keeps the front panel looking minimalist), and for most of the time I used the "high" setting and my Sennheiser HD650's needed to be at ½ way on the dial to get a serious level of sound. Indeed, for Dave Brubeck's 'Blue Rondo' I needed to turn it up to 2 o'clock. The amp, however, should be ok with all but the most inefficient planar headphones.

Julia Fordham's "Porcelain" is a very laid-back album with great sounding vocals and instruments. The cymbals were very tight and Julia's distinctive voice - especially the low notes - was very honest sounding. The Fiio gave a very good performance, if a little gentler than I remember. This was very musical but a tad too tidy and cleaner than I expected. I wanted a little more oomph and musicality to get me really engrossed, but this was soon to be experienced with Kitaro's 'Live in America', another very laid-back album with lots of interesting sounds such as thunder, synthesizers, and audience applause in this live performance, giving it an air of ambiance and enchantment. That bass thunder was superbly tight and clear as were the strings, synths, and woodwind. I just felt the bass was a little quieter than I would like, even when using the bass-brilliant Meze 99 headphones. The top end from the synthesizers and audience claps were very clear and the exceptionally quiet running THX AAA-788+ made this a joy to experience, even at loud listening levels. Certainly, the mids and higher frequencies are clearer,













though could sound rather more digital than I would like, depending on what I played.

Kraftwork's "Autobahn" was an old favourite back in 1974 and quite unique at the time. Playing it now seemed inevitably dated and even the sound quality sounded harsher than from the top DACs I have used over the years. It sounded better on vinyl. No surprise there, I guess. On 44.1kHz WAV it just sounded a little less interesting and musical. I had to turn it right up to get any sense of enjoyment.

Let's try more synthesisers combined with guitars and drums; Hawkwind's Hall of the Mountain Grill. Again, the volume of this recording had to be raised midway for the HD650's. The piano on the title track was accurate and the overall quality was excellent. The Fiio gave a startlingly good performance of this track, and again this was a very quiet running headphone amp at 129dB.

Turning to jazz and Herbie Hancock's Crossing album and "Sleeping Giant" I was awakened immediately by the solo drum that starts the track. Transients were fast and accurate, and the music was quickly followed by electronics and an almost musique concrète idiom. This work might not have a melody you can sing along to, but it does have great rhythm

if you want to dance. I didn't bother doing that but listened to this very long track (it's 24' 48"!) with great interest. This Fiio was really growing on me, especially as this track was mp3. The sound quality was excellent and I didn't feel perturbed by the compressed format. The HD650 might be an old headphone but it still does the job. Everything was there from the deepest bass guitar to the cymbals. The keyboard (Fender Rhodes) was beautifully tight and flowed beautifully.

Now turning to Tchaikovsky's 6th symphony for a breather. This lovely work starts at low volume and takes some three minutes before it wakes up. The Audio Technica ATH W1000 headphones are more efficient than the Sennheisers, but I still needed to turn up the volume to get enough welly. For more gusto I turned to Eugine Goosen's 1959 rendition of Berlioz Symphony Fantastique. This is a truly powerful work and the 24bit/96kHz recording still had all the noises you'd expect from the original master tape recording plus the sounds of the instrumentalists breathing and turning pages. Even a few hums from the conductor added to this excellent audio. I had noticed so far in my listening that turning the volume control had a delayed reaction, and turning down the volume at speed resulted in a staggered decrescendo. This wasn't something I was too





concerned at, but worthy of note.

Turning to BT I decided to test that lower bass again with the Meze 99 Classic with Sting's "Brand New Day". This starts with an extremely low and loud 'burble' that sets the scene for the track. I felt the vibration clearly but it didn't yell at me. It was too well controlled. Again with the top-end Campfire Solaris "Stellar Horizon" IEM the bass was again excellently controlled and the music flowed brilliantly. Top frequencies including cymbals were tight and gave a highly forensic analysis of the music. Only mid frequencies sometimes didn't sound as musical as I would like. With Hotel California (Eagles 24/96 FLAC) whilst controlled and detailed the mid frequencies again just slightly lacked. So too, turning to Chopin Piano Concerto No1, (Ingrid Fliter, 24/192 Linn records) the mid-frequency violins lacked a little oomph, though I know Linn recordings have their own individual sound quality, so I somewhat expected it, but not quite as much. That said, the piano was detailed and very musical with starts of notes and decays extremely accurately. I didn't want to stop listening.

Turning to DSD and "A Trace of Grace" (Michel Godard) this slow piece had excellent spread across the soundstage with violin, sax, and brass. This was very open and the K9 showed extreme care with the musical performance. The Fiio was honest and what i would consider to be very accurate, particularly with transients and detailed high frequencies. Bass was controlled and real. Finally, I tested out MQA on the K9 ESS, and Beagle Kick's Miracle album. This album has excellent jazz piano, guitar, and drums. Whilst MQA might be having a somewhat uncertain future as I write this, the performance through the Fiio was anything but. I actually quite like the sound from MQA even if it is a bit marmite to some, and the Fiio gave an excellent rendition that was highly engrossing and very musical. Playing the Fiio as a preamp into my Synthesis valve amps added even further to my enjoyment of this music.

CONCLUSION

This is a really good attempt to produce a detailed and quick DAC with excellent amp stages and plenty of features. It even worked well as a pre amp. Everything was there in the music – warts and all at times – but that is the sign of a good product; it was very honest. Only the mid frequencies didn't give

me the sonic prowess to give it the very top marks but for a penny short of £700 this is an excellent, and very good looking, DAC/headphone amp.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

Excellent build quality

Sound Quality:

An exciting and transparent performance, with masses of detail particularly at high frequencies

Value For Money:

For £699.99 this is a very well-designed and full-featured DAC/Pre/headphone amp

An excellent product

We Loved:

Transparency

Speed of performance

Control at lower frequencies

Lowest distortion and excellent S/N ratio

Excellent presentation

We Didn't Love So Much:

Slightly digital presentation at top frequencies on a few pieces I played

Elevator Pitch Review: I have been a customer of Fiio in the past and have watched their product range turn from the average to a top-flight producer of DAPs, DACs, and headphone amps that they are today. Would this flagship hi-res desktop headphone amplifier/DAC fair even better than my expectations? You bet. Including the ES9038PRO DAC chip from ESS and the THX AAA 788+ amp chipset, this has a well-stocked PCB so should make a very decent sound for the price.

Price: £699.99





INNUOS PULSE

eing in tech' for almost all my career and having enjoyed streaming for some years now I've employed many evolving solutions across multiple systems and houses from the most basic like Sonos (still handy for parties), through home built Raspberry Pi's running Volumio, via Pioneer N50's (very underrated for its time I felt) and to current solutions like Auralic and Roon. All have merits and the evolution in streaming has been incredible. One brand has stood out along the way – somewhat ubiquitous even – more than most, particularly at HiFi shows - and that is Innuos. When you see how many manufacturers and distributors rely on them to deliver music for their offerings at these shows you must think, maybe I better check them out for myself – and with a new range of products from Innuos launched this year, that's just what I did.

Innuos Pulse is a streaming device that is the Portuguese company's update and improvement to their much-lauded Pulse Mini. Alan McIntosh takes a listen.

BUILD AND FEATURES OF INNUOS PULSE

The product I chose for my own system and budget, after spending a lot of time checking various solutions out at Audio Show Deluxe in March, was the Innuos Pulse, sitting in the middle of their new range of streamers which comprises the Pulse Mini, Pulse and just released Pulsar. Unlike previous Innuos offerings these do not have the CD ripper component and so are likely aimed at those who don't worry about physical media or have already ripped all their CD's (or have a.n.other solution for that). Unpacking the shipping carton, you get an inner box with nice Innuos branding, the Pulse itself in a cloth bag, a standard IEC cable and a pretty non-descript black ethernet cable. Finally, there is a brief "getting started" guide.

The Pulse is a relatively compact silver box (also available in black) made from high-grade aluminium with a very cool, anodised angular faceted front and with a small soft push power button hidden just underneath which helpfully casts light down onto your rack shelf to tell you it's on. On top there is a simple Innuos and Pulse logo, to the rear we have a hard power switch and IEC power inlet next to a wired network connection via 2 bridged Gigabit Ethernet ports. This bridge

Reviewed by Alan McIntosh











means for anyone lacking available Ethernet connections you can simply daisy chain another device off the Pulse (such as in my case my Hegel 190 amplifier/streaming DAC).

Digital-wise we have 1 each of optical, coaxial and AES/EBU, plus 4 USB 3.0 ports for output to a suitable DAC and potentially for backing up – but 4 does seem overkill and this may simply be a legacy hangover from the other models. Coax, AES/EBU and Optical offer up to 24/192 resolution while USB hits an impressive 32bit/786Khz for PCM and up to DSD512 Native where a capable DAC is involved (as well as DoP where needed). MQA is also fully catered for with the Pulse able to fully decode and playback MQA files to a non MQA DAC up to 24bit/96khz, or do initial decoding up to 24bit/348hkz for DACS that handle MQA or even just act as passthrough for DACs who can do the full decoding themselves - so great flexibility is on offer with the Pulse!

The Pulse sits on 3 asymmetrically positioned feet designed, say Innuos, to not only support the structure but also provide damping in particular areas. Weight-wise it feels substantial at 4.5kg and is about 2/3 the footprint of typical racked components. Visually for me its sleek and modern looking on the rack but if you want album art or touch-screen you will need to keep looking to perhaps Auralic or Cocktail Audio. Out of the box users have a choice of services across Qobuz, Tidal and Internet radio stations including the popular Radio Paradise plus, since their latest update, HighResAudio.

While neither Wi-Fi nor Bluetooth are supported out of the box, you can if desired dig into the Innu-OS (based in part on Logitech LMS) via the web for extended tweakery including adding 3rd party plugins and extra services (Airplay for example) but this is usually at user's risk. I did add Airplay this way and if you follow Innuos detailed knowledge base articles it's easy — and works.

I already mentioned the removal of CD drive from the Pulse range and the second development to be included in the Pulse is the integration of not only their standard medical grade IEC but also their newly upgraded linear power supply in conjunction with Dr Sean Jacobs who apart from being a kindred spirit to me as a serious mountain climber, is CEO and leader at the company Custom HiFi Cables. Dr Jacobs is a PhD in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering who then went on to specialise in analogue signalling in robotics and has been designing and making PSUs for years, so I presume knows a thing or two about them. This Pulse design implemented with his team employs not only a resin damped audio grade toroidal transformer, with further copper and mylar tape screening around the windings but has (according to specs) more than 40000 μF of quality Mundorf capacitors complemented with an inductor from Coilcraft who, if you are not familiar with them, specialise in magnetically shielded inductors to minimize EMI and remove noise in power supplies. It was the inclusion of this intensely designed and integrated linear PSU at this price point that really drew me to the Pulse as I have a strong belief that clean power plays a big part in a server/streamer's playback capability. The vibrant upgraded PSU market suggests many others do as well. The CPU in the Pulse is an Intel Quad core N4200 processor and there is a meaty 8GB of RAM with 50% of that dedicated to handling the streaming and library management.

LISTENING TO THE INNU-OS PULSE

Before we get into sound, I want to discuss the two key modes of operation on the Pulse. By going into the Innuos Sense app (available on iOS, Android, Kindle Fire) or by accessing the Pulse via the web (MacOS, iOS and Windows) you can instruct the Pulse to act in either Standalone or Endpoint mode, each offering a different approach to use.

Endpoint mode allows you to use an existing controller such as Roon, HQPlayer or Logitech LMS and have the Pulse as the "last mile" and streaming the content to your DAC, whereas in Standalone mode the Pulse is the core of the system acting as controller and server as well as streamer. This is something users will experiment with to decide their personal preference and it does offer a lot of flexibility, plus some backwards compatibility with existing systems. In Standalone mode it also allows the Pulse to be a UPNP/DNLA controller so, for example, I can assign my Hegel 190 or even my dining room Sonos speakers or LG TV as streaming endpoints and run it all from the Innuos Sense app. Various UPNP profiles are offered in the app as needed and it worked for me without any problems.









As a server and streaming transport only, with no analogue output stage, a DAC is required for analogue conversion and so it follows that the chosen DAC will impact on the final sound. That said, as observed with my previous Auralic Aries G1 - the server/transport matters. How good a job it does to hand off the signal to your DAC impacts the final sound - this has been my experience after countless comparisons across multiple combinations of streamers and DACs. It is analogous to a baker selecting better ingredients that go into the final mix and bake. Power delivery, shielding, clocks, damping, RAM/Processing, and quality of output connections – not to mention the performance of the application to run it - for me all add up to performance, which brings me back to the Pulse's integrated high-quality PSU implementation.

I flipped between listening to Qobuz streams and Hi-Res files on my NAS direct to my Hegel 190 and then the Pulse connected to the Hegel's internal DAC (both via Roon). Going back and forth is easy with both wired to Ethernet so I was able to compare with various types of music and at different times of the day and found, overall, that I preferred the Pulse acting as a streamer.

Next, running the Pulse in Standalone mode I found the Pulse to sound marginally cleaner, weightier and a very small touch more resolving particularly in bass, than via Roon where the NUC Core is doing the library processing and then passing data to the Pulse. Tracks like Zero 7's Simple Science were a very close-run thing, but the Pulse just had the edge for me in impact, bass weight and top end refinement - again it's subtle, but all those little improvements add up across the chain. Listening to Dexter Gordons Tanya, realism and immediacy were a notch improved over running via Roon – detail and cohesion were superb and the relaxed emotion of Gordon's sax was conveyed well. Timing and energy are on point without ever over-spilling at the top end or sounding too glassy or sterile. There are no delays to streaming, there were no skips or glitches and the process felt easy and relaxed.

Coming to the control app itself (something that streaming products can live and die by) the Innuos Sense app is well put together, offering great out-the-box integration with Qobuz, Tidal and internet radio stations. There are quite a lot of options, but most are intuitive. You can pull existing playlists or favourites from Qobuz (or Tidal) or create new ones

in the app across both cloud services and local NAS storage, and it offers curated "smart" mixes for you. Output sampling preferences such as DSD and MQA handling are easy to find, as is the choice of Standalone or Endpoint mode. The latter offers you Roon, HQPlayer and Squeezebox integration, while the former offers UPNP control of other devices should you desire - but it's not at Roon level in terms of polish and ease of navigation, library sorting or that immersive biographical aspect you get and I do feel it has a little maturing to do versus the extensive Auralic LDS app for example. That said, as I am preferring the Pulse in standalone mode, I am finding it very capable and very intuitive to use. And it's free...

One niggle is the Pulse cannot be woken up from the app, once shut down you need a physical button press to start it, however, the Sense app has been the most consistently stable I've used for some time where others suffer (Auralic a case in point).

CONCLUSION

From opening the box to setting up and using the Pulse I'm really enjoying the experience. Build and looks for me are superb, the technology and investment made in the internal implementation are of high quality and the connectivity, control and integration are all without fault. Sonically this is going to be subjective based on your DAC and I'm very happy with how it performs and sounds — a lot of that I contribute to the power implementation and quality of digital output connections.

The application worked flawlessly for me and offers a good level of features albeit not at market leading level yet.

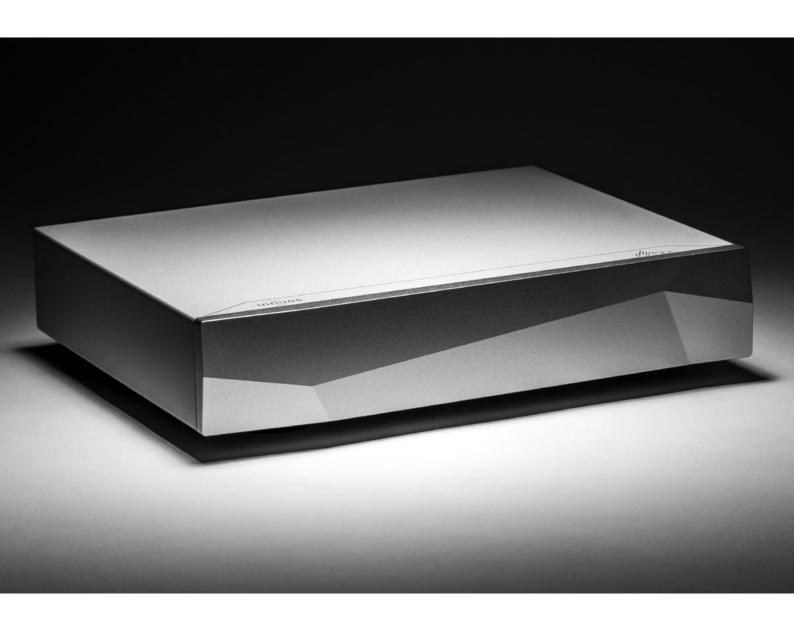
The Pulse is probably a bit of a sweet spot for users like me, price and performance wise and offers extensive future and backwards compatibility as well as being able to connect to a lot of existing home systems from TVs to networked amplifiers so I'm not locked in.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

High across aesthetics, choice of materials and









implementation especially the power

App is robust, feature-rich and stable but could do with some maturing to improve

Sound Quality:

Variable based on the paired DAC and how it's used/ controlled but for me solid and very good indeed

Detailed, with great bass and smoothness, timing, and imaging very proficient

Playback was seamless

Value for money:

At £2299 if I combine materials, design, PSU, build, connectivity, and control capabilities as well as sonic delivery, the price point feels good to me

We loved:

It works – straight out of the box, the app is stable and feature-rich, incredibly flexible, connectivity is very good, handles all formats and delivers sonically. Impressive PSU implementation

We Didn't Love So Much:

No wake on LAN feature. Limited user guide does mean a bit of internet hunting if you want to get the most from the Pulse

Elevator Pitch Review: If you are serious about your streaming and want a dedicated high-quality server and streaming platform as the heart of your system or to integrate into your existing digital ecosystem, that offers high-quality materials and performance with a completely stable and capable control app, and that just works when you need it to, the Innuos Pulse is hard to overlook and will be certain to deliver. It does now beg the question from me – do I really need Roon?

Price:

EUR €2,599

GBP £2,299

USD \$3,249

CAD \$4,199





IFI NEO STREAM

he iFi Audio NEO Stream is made for network-based audio streaming, and it functions as either a streamer/DAC and pre-amp, or as a network bridge that purely decodes the incoming network signal and then sends the digital audio stream to an external DAC. This is not an all-in-one media hub; this doesn't have any other inputs aside from network and USB storage and it doesn't work as a DAC for other sources. This does however mean that iFi Audio focussed on making the processing of incoming network audio the best they could.

IFI Audio has been around for a few years now starting out mostly focusing on head-phones and portable audio, they recently stepped into the expression of incoming network audio the best they could.

Its hi-res audio support covers PCM data to 32-bit/768kHz, all levels of DSD up to DSD512, and single- and double-speed DXD. This level of hi-res audio is not only supported over the LAN and USB cable inputs but over Wi-Fi too. (A stable, full-strength 5GHz Wi-Fi signal is required for 384kHz PCM, DSD256 and above.)

iFi Audio has included their high-quality iPower 2 PSU for lower power supply noise and the screen on the front of the unit is implemented so that noise doesn't filter into the audio path. Also included is their own little device to change an incoming network data stream from RJ45 to Optical - IFi state that Optical LAN delivers the highest quality digital audio connection possible between the router and the streamer. This allows ultra-fast data speeds of up to 10Gbps and bit-perfect transmission of ultra-resolution audio, with minimal degradation across distances of up to 1km. The LAN signal from the router is regenerated, reclocked and rebalanced by the OptiBox; true galvanic isolation is applied, with zero parasitic capacitance and inductance.

They also implement proprietary noise reduction on the digital outputs including ANC II on the USB output, iPurifier on the S/PDIF and the digital signal is regulated by the latest version of iFi's femto precision GMT (Global Master Timing) clock circuitry to eradicate jitter.

There's a lot going on in this little box, and yet it doesn't overwhelm and the settings are easy to access and change. There are exclusive modes that optimise the performance and the digital filters are great to have (even though the audible changes are subtle).

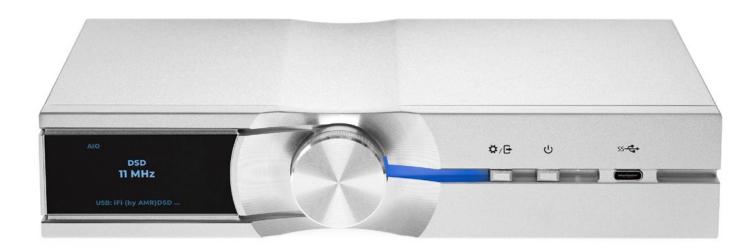
iFi has a dedicated app too. However, they tout the NEO Stream as the

a few years now starting out mostly focusing on headphones and portable audio, they recently stepped into the streamer world due to the increased popularity of high-fidelity streaming services and devices. Released last September, this might not be the newest device in their line-up but it is still a very interesting piece of kit to look at and here's why.

Reviewed byOscar Stewart















streamer that's not held back by having a proprietary app or firmware. The app is handy if you decide to attach a hard drive with music locally stored on it though, and it makes changing settings a breeze too.

Build-wise iFi never disappoint, the aluminium chassis is finished to an excellent standard and the design is modern, yet doesn't look out of place in a traditional system. The screen is on the smaller side and may be difficult to see at a distance, but you can change the brightness and it rotates so you can stand the NEO Stream vertically too with the included stand. All the inputs on the back are of excellent quality and the front knob feels great in use (for volume control and to change settings).

In terms of inputs and outputs, the NEO Stream has an RJ45 Ethernet input, M12 Ethernet input, Optical Ethernet input, USB-C and USB-A input for storage devices and USB-C for firmware updates (factory use only). On the output of things, you have USB-C and USB-A for digital audio output, i2s HDMI output, S/PDIF Optical output, S/PDIF Coaxial output, AES/EBU XLR output and then a 4.4mm analogue balanced output and 1 pair of RCA analogue outputs. You can easily connect the NEO Stream to an analogue system, or to an existing DAC if you wish, it's fairly flexible and can slot into most systems with ease.

SOUND OF IFI NEO STREAM

I've been using the NEO Stream for a few weeks now and have had the chance to really get to know it in my system, I am personally a Roon user and have a Roon Core that I stream off using a mix of CD rips and Qobuz streaming. The first word that comes to mind with the NEO Stream is "natural" when running the analogue output into my system. The NEO Stream has a way of sounding utterly realistic in its tonality but without attempting to grab your attention.

It's easy to set the NEO Stream up too. I wired it in using a standard RJ45 ethernet cable and my Roon Core picked it up straight away, I set the NEO Stream to Roon exclusive mode and the digital filter was set to Standard for most of my listening. You can easily tell iFi Audio spent a lot of time tuning this streamer, the analogue output is so incredibly well implemented in the NEO Stream that you forget you are

listening to a streamer.

The sound quality really surprised me when sitting back and listening to an album, there is a sense of realism to the sound but without masking any subtleties. There is no hint of sharpness to the sound, yet it is still incredibly transparent and open sounding. Many people often wrongly associate network streaming with "digital sounding" products that are not enjoyable to listen to, and that don't sound like a good analogue source - the NEO Stream is not one of those devices. It is non-fatiguing yet has all the detail and depth one could wish for; it is enjoyable and full-bodied with a wide, expansive soundstage along with pinpoint accuracy. There is a real sense of drive from the NEO Stream. However, it isn't upfront and aggressive and never sounds brash. It's a sound that is enjoyable to the core.

If you have a high-quality DAC in your setup the iFi Audio NEO Stream becomes a bridge, processing a network stream and converting it to a digital audio stream. In this role, the NEO Stream will of course influence the sound, but it will not have as big an impact as the DAC and pre-amp section. However, iFi Audio was keen to make the NEO Stream as quiet and clean as possible - decoupling your streamer from the source will bring benefits to the sound. iFi Audio included some of their proprietary technologies to make the digital audio outputs even cleaner and this means less noise, less jitter, and ultimately a cleaner stream of digital audio to your DAC.

The digital output of the NEO Stream is all about clean sound and depending on your tastes you can tune the sound of your system with an external DAC. In my case I found using the NEO Stream, with an external DAC, to sound very detailed and almost analytical. This is a slight contrast to the slightly more rounded house sound of the NEO Stream when using the analogue output, and one that is equally enjoyable but highly system dependent. This gives you the flexibility downstream to tune your system to your preferred sound and, ultimately, it's a clean source and one that can surely be integrated into most setups.

After listening to the NEO Stream with the analogue output for quite some time, you really would need a very good external DAC to better what iFi Audio have managed to get out of the internal DAC chip and associated output path. Yes, the digital outputs have great noise-defeating tech, but the NEO











Stream sounds so good out of the analogue outputs I've been very happy just using these.

CONCLUSION

The iFi Audio NEO Stream may not be the cheapest solution out there for a network streamer, but it does pack in a lot of proprietary tech to offer up one of the best-sounding streamers on the market. The digital outputs are clean and noise free. Hook this up to the DAC of your choosing and enjoy has-sle-free network audio streaming. Alternatively, you can use the built-in DAC and plug it straight into your amp. With a few digital filters to choose from the sound has a slight sweetness to it that makes you forget you are streaming via a network.

I found the NEO Stream to offer a lot of features and functionality, but it was the sound that captivated me and left me wanting to listen to the music, not analyse it.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

The chassis is finished to a very high standard and the NEO Stream is very well put together

Sound Quality:

Well rounded with a slight sweetness via the analogue output, or a crisp and clean sound out of the digital outputs to an external DAC

Detailed yet never harsh

Value For Money:

Whilst not cheap, you get quite a lot for the money and it's a product that is future-proofed in many ways too

We Loved:

The ease of use, and the utterly captivating sonic performance

We Didn't Love So Much:

The screen is a little small for seeing at a distance

Elevator Pitch Review: If you want a streamer that makes you forget you're listening to network streamed audio, this is the product for you. The internal DAC gives the sound a captivatingly realistic tonality that is a pleasure to listen to, whilst the digital outputs will give you a cleaner and more linear sound to an external DAC.

Price: £1299





ifi AUDIO GO LINK

Fi Audio launched in 2012, as a side company of Abbingdon Music iFi Audio GO Link is a £59 Research. They quickly became known in the headphone world for making some excellent sounding headphone amps, DACs, and tweaks including a lovely valve buffer called the iTube. Fast including affordable DAC/Amps, phono pre-amps and electrostatic get the very best sound rgisers, to say they have some a large energisers, to say they have come a long way is an understatement.

The GO link is one of their latest products, and at only £59 it promises to revolutionise the listening experience of those who use their smartphones for playback whilst on-the-go. Can it shake up the 3.5mm dongle market, or does it fall short?

DAC dongle designed to out of your Android or iOS phone. Oscar Stewart takes a listen.

FEATURES AND BUILD OF THE IFI **GO LINK**

The GO link is a very small device, with a USB-C connector on one end and 3.5mm jack housed in a small metal enclosure on the other. It comes with a lightning adapter for iPhones in the box along with a USB-C to A adapter too - this also allows you to use it with a PC. There is an LED indicator that changes colour depending on whether you are listening to PCM/DSD or MQA, and iFi Audio have gone to great lengths to get the best out of this little dongle.

Inside the GO link you will find an ESS ES9219MQ/Q DAC chip featuring 32-bit HyperStream III architecture, along with this iFi Audio have fitted its own dedicated clock circuitry using a specialised crystal oscillator. iFi Audio have also optimised the DACs performance by utilising some of the tech ESS built into the chip, something that is often overlooked by other brands.

Instead of letting the software control the volume, which can result in a loss of digital Bits (reducing the quality of the output), the GO links volume is all controlled internally at the DAC chip. This hardware-based volume control is another feature not commonly found on similar dongles.

Reviewed by Oscar Stewart











So how about the build?

It's a smart-looking dongle and fairly unobtrusive with machined aluminium housings protecting each end. Instead of housing the DAC circuitry at the USB end, you have a small block of aluminium where the headphone output is that handles all the audio processing.

Between the USB connector and the DAC housing is a short section of braided silver-plated copper, it's very flexible making it easy to use on-the-go. The DAC section makes this dongle a little larger than some competitors, however, it is far from being big and still fits into your pocket easily when connected to your phone.

The 3.5mm socket on this is nice and tight, there was no play with any headphone or earphone jacks I tested with it, and the USB-C connector was a good fit in my phone, even with its case on. The USB-C connector housing, though, may interfere with some more restrictive phone cases, but this is the only thing to look out for.

In use, the GO link uses 0.2w with no signal, and 1w at maximum, so it won't drain your battery too quickly. Outputting 70mW @320hms and 14mW @3000hms the GO link will drive pretty much any portable or semi-portable headphone to deafening volume.

SOUND OF THE GO LINK

Well, I've been using the GO link on my walk to work for a while now in place of my usual DAP, and I've yet to find anything negative to say about it. In addition, it was plug-and-play with my Pixel 6a with no faff. I will be honest, when using the GO link I haven't actually missed using my DAP as the sound quality is simply sublime out of such a small little dongle that I could quite happily live with this for portable audio duties.

I have had a lot of experience with iFi audio products and the GO link follows their ethos well. It is a device that has a natural sound without any hint of "digital glare" that some often associate with ESS DAC-based products. In fact, if anything the GO link has a hint of warmth to its sound that makes listening to it completely fatigue-free. It imparts this warmth in a subtle way though, and it never sounds

like it is intentionally colouring the sound.

The GO link delivers audio in a very effortless manner, it gets out of the way and just provides a healthy boost in power compared to most dongles, along with superior detail retrieval and sound quality.

DAC chip implementation is key, and iFi Audio have worked wonders in that respect here in reducing jitter and noise to the point that the GO link has a black background that is completely noise free. Pair this with sensitive earphones and you won't get any hiss, yet plug in some Sennheiser HD-25's and you won't even need half the volume this can output to enjoy your music.

It has a natural sound that isn't boring - put on your favourite tunes and the GO link doesn't tone the music down, it doesn't rob the sound of dynamics and it should have you tapping your feet and bopping along in no time.

In the audio world its easy to get lost in technical specifications, and chasing price tags, the GO link has made me stop thinking about those things and just enjoy the music. Yes, you may get more power out of larger external devices, and yes you may get a hint more resolution out of a pricier DAC, but at the end of the day does the GO link make me miss those things? No, it makes me want to listen to more music. I've paired the GO link with earphones ranging from £50 to £1399 and some easier-to-drive full-size headphones too and it has not disappointed once and has produced excellent sound with each one. As long as you use the GO link for what it is intended for (earphones and easier-to-drive full-size headphones) I cannot see anyone finding fault with it.

This dongle has really surprised me! When I started out, we used to strap our music players to a cmoy or similar headphone amp and carry around a stack for better quality. Now, we have a £59 USB-C DAC/ amp that quite possibly sounds better than those old stacks. For the everyday wired headphone user that commutes listening to music on their phone, do yourself a favour and get a GO link, it's possibly one of the best headphone-related purchases you can make at the moment.

CONCLUSION



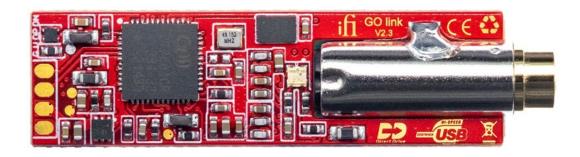












It may seem like a hugely positive review, but I cannot think of many headphone-related products for £59 that will bring this kind of improvement to your listening experience.

Don't get me wrong, there is still a place for DAPs and desktop headphone amps. However, if you are looking for better sound on the go for a low price you really can't go wrong with the GO link. It may not have a microphone pass-through for phone calls, but then again which audio-oriented earphones and headphones have a mic on them?

Overall, the GO link offers up a clean and detailed sound that is powerful yet smooth in its delivery.

Don't be fooled by its size, it packs a punch.

This device is a huge upgrade over your phones internal headphone output, or standard 3.5mm dongle.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

Aluminium casings with a nice section of braided silver-plated copper cabling

It's elegant yet well made.

Sound Quality:

Smooth, powerful, and engaging

Detailed yet never harsh

Value For Money:

Extremely good value for money

We Loved:

Low cost for real-world audible improvement in a small package

We Didn't Love So Much:

No microphone pass-through

Elevator Pitch Review: If you listen to wired headphones on the go, or at home, do yourself a favour and grab a GO link. It will elevate your listening experience without breaking the bank and you'll be surprised at how big the sound is from such a small device.

Price: £59





JAVA HIFI DOUBLE SHOT INTE-GRATED AMPLIFIER

his resonates with me a great deal and whilst some will spout "facts" and figures and us (you) all day long, the truth of the matter is that at the end of the day all that matters is that whatever bit of kit we put in our system, the main aim is to enhance our connection and enjoyment of the music. I'm sure some review folk might not agree with this and I've seen some scoff at comments like these as being somewhat clichéd, but the truth of the matter is that our little bits of HiFi equipment are no more and no less than Machines For Joy and the sole purpose of their existence is to bring us closer to the music we love...and so my thoughts are very much in line with those of Martin and the JAVA HiFi team.

Indulge me a bit on this point, if you would be so kind.

As a consumer, I have absolutely no interest (like absolutely zero interest) in what it takes to make whatever bit of kit I own whether that is audio equipment or a microwave (actually, I don't own a microwave, but you get the picture) perform its function. Yes, I can recognise when a product performs its function in poor, exemplary, or mediocre fashion, but how it gets to that performance interests me not one iota. I'm very much the same with cars; I know where to put the petrol that it requires and I know it needs to be taken for a service every once in a while, but beyond that, my curiosity ends. Why would anyone who is the end user of a product need to know the ins and outs of a product beyond the basic facts? Now, I know there are many readers out there that are interested in some of the details of the inner workings of kit and that's why we strive to give you some basic information in our reviews, but the long and the short of it is that what I look for in an audio product is how it fits in with my world on a practical level (features, functions and aesthetics) and whether or not it brings me closer to the music and behaves as a Machine For Joy (sonic attributes)...or in other words, does it look good, does it work with the kit I have, and does it sound good? The job of achieving that end result is down to the designers and electronics folk and not me, otherwise, I'd be in the profession of building Machines For Joy and not writing and talking about how they sound.

Martin Bell is the owner of JAVA HiFi and if you venture over to their website the first page you come to boldly declares (well, actually it's in a rather nice and fine font for the most part, but it is printed in upper case) "OUR AIM IS TO BRING MUSIC LOVERS CLOSER TO THE MUSIC THEY LOVE".

Reviewed by Stuart Smith













JAVA HiFI

Martin Bell and his team are based in New Zealand and they make just six products across two ranges; the Single Shot range and the Double Shot range. In each of these ranges, you have a preamplifier, a power amplifier and an integrated amplifier...it's the latter we have here in the Double Shot variety.

The Double Shot integrated that we have here differs from the Single Shot in that it uses a fully balanced dual mono topology, doubles its output to 400W into 8 Ohms, has XLR (4) line level inputs (it also has fixed and variable XLR outputs), has a high-resolution DAC with USB inputs and the PCB is "inverted" for "vibration and resonance control of audio circuit". Both the Single Shot and the Double Shot integrated amplifiers have GaN FET power amp stages and LDR preamplifier stages, Moving Magnet phonostages, and headphone amplifiers. In short, the JAVA HiFi Double Shot integrated is a fully-fledged proper integrated amplifier that is designed to have all the facilities and features that a modern integrated amplifier should have. Both come with a remote.

I really like that the Integrated amplifiers from JAVA address both the digital side and the analogue side of audio and I think this is a smart move on their part. A modern integrated without a DAC isn't really a fully integrated amp in this day and age, over and above it has a pre and a power amp in one box. I also think that the inclusion of a Moving Magnet phonostage is a sensible option, with the vast majority of people that are likely to buy this and listen to vinyl likely to be users of moving-magnet or high-output moving-coil cartridges. Those that want to get more esoteric with low output MCs can always add the Step Up of their choice.

AESTHETIC AND FEA-TURES

The JAVA HiFi products look like no other and they do look beautiful. What's more is you can go onto the website for the company and order any combination of seven casework finishes and three front panel colours. Look at the photos of the amp and you will see that they are encased in a solid wood outer case that has real wood veneers and that the front panel is a 4mm anodised aluminium affair. I

love all this stuff and I sometimes wonder why some companies seem to be stuck in the 1970s and insist on bringing out boring black or silver (occasionally "champagne") boxes that are as aesthetically pleasing as...a black or silver (occasionally "champagne") box. At the budget end of the market, I think this is acceptable and I actually do like the "HiFi that looks like HiFi" aesthetic, but in the real world times have moved on and people want HiFi gear that looks good as well as sounding great. You can choose the look of your JAVA HiFi amp with their online configurator, which is pretty cool to play with.

There was a time when every home had a music centre and then the fashion moved to people wanting everything in a rack - a bit of an altar to the Gods of Audio, I always thought – but apart from the minority of people that are really into their HiFi (I guess that is the majority of folk reading this) most people no longer want a tower of boxes sat in their living room and want a more streamlined and pleasing product that will fit in with their lifestyle and homestyle choices. The JAVA HiFi amp in high gloss ebony and black (case and panel) fulfils the brief with regards to looking good...and then some.

As we opened the very nicely presented box there were all the right noises being made for that Christmas morning feel with Linette saying "That's beautiful!". And it is beautiful to look at, with the aforementioned high gloss wooden casing having the wave-like pattern that JAVA use cut into the top panel in a contrasting veneer. The large satin knobs on either side of the front panel set the whole thing off and purely from an aesthetic perspective I have to say that this is the most beautiful bit of audio equipment I have ever had in for review...bar none! I'm reminded of an Eames lounge chair with regard to the look of this amplifier.

The remote is in brushed black aluminium and is nice enough, if not as beautiful as the rest of the package. Perhaps the remote could have a bit of the matching woodwork on it to fit with the amp's case, though I'm well aware this will add to the cost. At least it's not one of the ubiquitous Apple remotes, whatever it has electronically inside it. The remote has mute which works instantaneously, volume up and down, input selector, CAL (I don't know what this does) and a button with a symbol on it that suggests the brightness of the halos around the knobs can be brightened and dimmed...the latter did nothing but I'm told this will be used for further









features down the line.

The front panel has two knobs which rotate infinitely, with the left giving you the source and the right being the volume. I prefer selector knobs to have a nice click to them, but that's my personal preference. As you turn the volume up or change the source a halo around the relevant knob lights up. This is tastefully done and adds to the look of the amplifier rather than detracts. However, when you first use the volume knob you realise that it's not responsive in that the relevant halo light doesn't light up and the volume doesn't go up/down when you turn it – you need to keep turning it a little for it to work. This was annoying on first use, but you soon get used to it and as a feature, it is quite sensible in that it stops the volume being changed inadvertently.

Apart from the wave motif and a quarter inch headphone jack, that's it for the front panel.

The back panel has all the inputs and outputs I mentioned with the ETI Research speaker binding posts off to either side. Everything is clearly labelled and well set out, and (again) the attention to detail and aesthetics is clear.

Down either side of the amp are the heatsinks and rather them detracting from what they actually add to the overall design of this unit.

Look, it's a beautiful-looking bit of kit and in this finish, it would look gorgeous atop a piece of mid-century furniture that seems to be all the rage these days.

Size-wise the amplifier is $44 \times 41.5 \times 13$ cm (WDH) and it weighs 11.6kg (25.6 lbs). So it's the same size as a normal bit of audio kit (give or take) but it looks so much more beautiful than your run-of-the-mill audio gear.

From the technical perspective, JAVA tells us that their Single Shot integrated amplifier was "the world's first integrated amplifier to use GaN FET (Gallium Nitride) transistors and the world's first audio product to include LDRs (light dependent resistors) and GaN FET transistors in the same circuit." I'm certainly not going to profess to know what the benefits of a GaN FET device are over and above Silicon-based MOSFETs, but a quick Google search tells me that they are claimed to have better

performance with regards to speed, efficiency and operating temperatures. It's beyond the scope of this review to get into their makeup, but Google is your friend if that's your bag. The other change from the norm in this integrated (or rather the preamplifier stage in the amp) is the use of a Light Dependent Resistor. Essentially this, as the name suggests, is a resistor whose conductivity decreases when light is shone on it. A variable light source will allow for variable resistor values and when used as a volume control does away with the need for complicated and potentially sonically detrimental pots. Again, if this topic interests you then Google is your friend but here is what JAVA HiFi say about this part of the product "Our pre-amplifiers utilise Light Dependent Resistor (LDR) technology to isolate the signal path from other control electronics, providing the delicate audio signal with the shortest, cleanest possible path from input to output. With vanishingly low inter-modulation distortion (IMD) and total harmonic distortion (THD), the next-generation Gallium Nitride (GaN FET) amplifier modules at the heart of the new JAVA Hi-Fi stereo power amplifiers deliver a great leap forward in Class D sound."

SOUND QUALITY

The integrated was used in the upstairs system and QUALIO IQ speakers with an Auralic streamer as the digital front end used directly into the DAC and via our LAB 12 DAC, and then in the main system with Audiovector R6 speakers with a Technics 1200G turntable with a VERTERE MM cartridge straight into the amp. I would envision that folk spending 13K (USD) on an integrated amplifier will have the good sense to invest in quality speakers and front end components. I wanted to try the amp with reasonable speakers costing less than ten grand and then speakers costing just shy of 30K so that readers get a feel for where this product sits. The amp was left playing for a day by way of running in and I spent a long time sitting in front of it listening closely to its character.

WITH LAB 12 DAC AND QUALIO SPEAKERS

With this set up I am expecting to be able to hear the character of the LAB 12 DAC and have the speakers driven properly. As I mentioned, I'd left the





JAVA amp playing happily along to itself whilst it ran in. When I went up to the upstairs listening space there was Bill Withers, Al Green and Allen Toussaint tunes playing and so I just sat and enjoyed them for a while.

Sat listening properly (to Captain Moustache "Everything") the first impression I got from this pairing was that the amp stopped and started very speedily and at all frequencies. The tops were crisp and sharp as they should be and the bass was tight and controlled. The amp was clearly in control of the speakers at the bottom end in control in a way that I liked a lot. I don't know if it's the GaN FET transistors at play or what, but there is a speed and immediacy to the sound that is very satisfying and reminiscent of the very best Class D amplification I've heard...which I personally think is a good thing, though I am aware there is still some phobia around this tech for some folk out there! Even at low volume levels, the detail and clarity of the music shone through and I'd suggest that in this system and with this streamer and DAC the integrated was perhaps better sounding overall than our Merrill Thor amps and LAB12 preamplifier. In comparison, the Merrill/ LAB 12 partnership (which I adore by the way) sounded a (very) little less quick and a little softer around the edges. Not night and day differences, of course, but definitely there.

Turning up the volume is an odd experience. The volume goes up but you don't really notice it going up. That doesn't make sense, because the volume IS going up but the effect (psychoacoustical) is that it isn't until it reaches a point where it is obvious. The clarity and speed of details in the music are still evident, it's just louder. I got to comfortable listening levels at around 11 O'Clock and the sound was as clean, detailed and distortion-free as it was at lower volumes...just louder.

One thing I did really enjoy listening to this amp with the LAB 12 DAC was the bass, on the Captain Moustache record I mentioned above, the bass depth, speed and control was very impressive. I also enjoyed the very low (very) noisefloor of this amp and I think this is part of the reason it sounds so clean and detailed.

Overall I thought this combination was truly excellent with whatever I chose to listen to and with the LAB 12 DAC bringing its own flavour and connection to the party...which is what I bought it for. Long

story short is the JAVA amp didn't mask the DAC at all.

BLUETOOTH

I initially and for no apparent reason had some difficulty in connecting via Bluetooth. I then moved the amp downstairs into the big room and the bigger system and as if by magic I could connect to both my Android tablet and my Android phone.

I did need to turn the volume up on both the amp and the device to get it to volumes as loud as with the regular inputs, but once connected it all works flawlessly!

Do I think that Bluetooth has a place on an amp costing this much money? Well, if you had asked that question a year or so ago my answer would have been very different and I'd have railed against it as being something out of place on a high-end amplifier, but I've changed my opinion pretty drastically on this front and I feel that Bluetooth is a fantastic thing to have on any amplifier, however affordable or otherwise. Bluetooth gives access to a whole load of content on the likes of YouTube and Bandcamp that otherwise we'd only get to experience on our phones or tablets.

It's not the highest fidelity and it's not something I'd listen to all the time (this is the same for all Bluetooth streamed content) but it works and it doesn't sound terrible, by any means.

A useful feature.

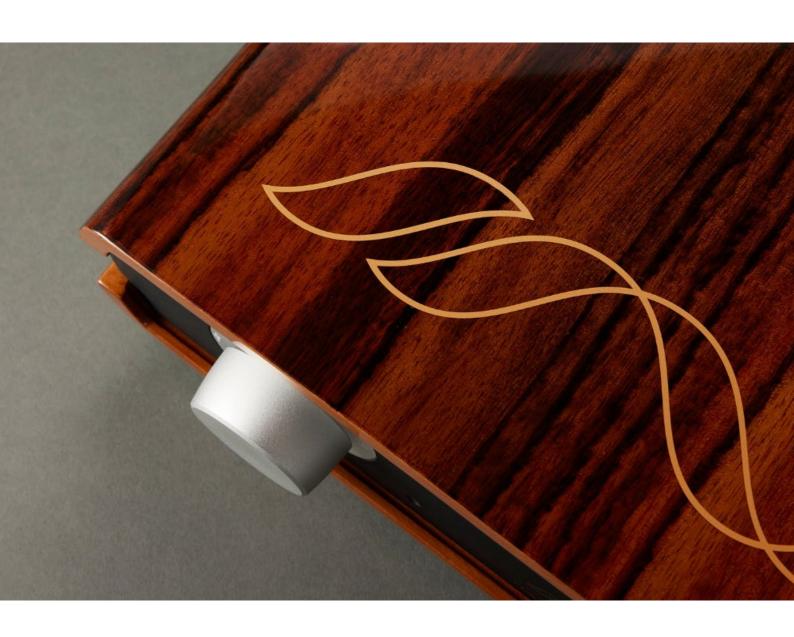
HEADPHONE AMP

Regular readers will know that I'm not much of a fan of headphones. I get them and I do use them on rare occasions but it's not my preferred way to enjoy my music. To this end, it's great (and absolutely correct) to have a headphone amplifier on an amplifier like this and it drove the Sendy Peacock headphones I have loud enough and well enough. I liked that the socket was full sized!

Another useful feature to have included.

USING THE ONBOARD







DAC AND STACK AUDIO STREAMER AND AUDIO-VECTOR LOUDSPEAKERS

Here I will be listening for the character of the onboard DAC and whether the amp can play nicely with more expensive loudspeakers.

Set up was a doddle; plug the streamer's USB output into the amp's USB input, switch the input on the remote to the relevant one and we have music.

The short answer to the above are that the Java HiFi amp is perfectly at home with this kind of loudspeaker and certainly doesn't feel at all outclassed. The onboard DAC presents music with deadly quiet backgrounds and great detail which was emphasised and highlighted with the decay on the piano on Alan Taylor's track Scotty. The slight reverb on Taylor's vocal can be heard very clearly and I actually thought this was a difficult performance to fault. I suppose what we are looking for in any bit of audio kit is for it to disappear and let us get on with listening and enjoying the music, and this is exactly what this integrated amplifier does. The slightly more complex following track on this album (The Stranger) has the amp and its DAC allowing us to hear the way the steel string guitar is played and to hear movement on the fretboard. There's nothing shouty or "look at me" in the way the JAVA amp delivers this music and I'm looking for words like natural to describe the sound. In more plain speak, the amp and DAC sound neutral and clean. Actually, this is a very nice sounding set up and one I'd be happy to sit in front of for a long time and just lie back and enjoy the tunes. I was particularly drawn to the way the amp and speaker combo let me hear the resonance in Taylor's voice and the way he moved towards and away from the microphone. I did sit and listen to this whole album and enjoyed it a great deal on this set up.

Switching to Westside Boogie, Dram, and AM's "AIGHT" off More Black Superheroes the JAVA let the stripped back production of this tune shine. Vocals were properly forward in the mix with different vocal parts appearing more forward or further back as I assume they were mixed. The kick-bass drum sounded properly hollow and back in the mix. Again, absolutely nothing to report other than that

the JAVA let me enjoy the music without getting in the way and stamping too much of its already neutral presentation to the music. Interestingly, I actually preferred the sound of the Stack, Audiovector, and JAVA rig more than when using our own LAB 12 DAC and the QUALIO speakers, though this is a bit of an unfair comparison as I'm well aware the speakers play a good part in this overall sound. Whatever, the JAVA plays VERY nicely with the R6 speakers from Audiovector.

A track that seems to be doing the rounds at the moment at shows around the world is Vini Vici's Make Us Stronger. It's a lavishly produced Psy Trance affair (my mate and acid techno artist Pierrot the Acid Clown loves a bit of Pside Trance...not) with all the usual bass kicks and trippy little noises that the genre uses. If you like Juno Reactor then you will love this track. The (I assume) side-chained bass pump of the track can be heard properly and the energy and drive of the track is not lost when played on the JAVA HiFi amp. I wanted to play this track to see what the amp and onboard DAC did with the bass end of the tunes and I'm happy to report that that lower end isn't over-emphasised at all and the whole track remained well balanced and coherent. If anything the bass could be said to be a bit polite, but I actually think that it's not artificially pushed forward and emphasised by the JAVA amplifier.

Motorhead's Bomber off the No Sleep album (I was there when this was recorded at Leeds Queens Hall) sounded suitably and gloriously terribly recorded but still had the speed and energy of Phil Taylor's drums there at the back of the mix and magnificent mess of an ending. Unless you are a fan this record is going to be pretty unlistenable on a decent HiFi as it will highlight and lay bare the wonderfully haphazard production that makes the record what it is. Thankfully, the JAVA amp doesn't guild the lily one bit and it still sounds splendidly awful and brings back memories of that gig and the stench of patchouli mixed with leather and damp Afghan coats. Alright, I admit it, this last album was a bit of an indulgence on my part, but my takeaway is that the DAC and amp are both neutral in what they do to a file and whilst this record is hardly audiophile in its production it serves a purpose. Over The Top recorded at Newcastle is somewhat better recorded and this is clear to hear this on the JAVA amp.

Conversely (or perhaps not), when listening to Manu Katché with Mathias Eick, Trygve Seim, David Torn





and Marcin Wasilewski on Playground the DAC and amp let the exquisite recording, playing and laidback production shine out.

So, the DAC works very well and is neutral sounding which marries well with the amp's similarly neutral presentation. My takeaways were speed and attack and a suitably (read correct) flat response with the amp/DAC neither adding a great deal nor taking a great deal away. I'd be happy to have this amp with these speakers on the end of it for sure!

USING VINYL FRONT END AND ONBOARD PHONOS-TAGE

Here I am listening to the phonostage to see if it allows the character of the cartridge to shine.

I'd expected the moving magnet only phonostage on this amplifier to be perfectly serviceable but pretty workaday. However, it's actually very good indeed and a stage I'd be perfectly happy using on a day to day basis with the VERTERE SABRE cartridge's bass bounce being retained on Robotiks' My Computer's Acting Strange record. Resolution of what I consider to be the cartridge's slightly warmer sound was retained and whatever records I listened to was an enjoyable experience with no nasties thrown into the mix.

Again, what I got from this amp using vinyl was that it seems to be transparent and speedy across the frequency spectrum with a flat response that lets

you hear what is on the record rather than what the amplifier designer's personal preferences in that respect may or not be.

The phono pre is also deadly quiet which is a good thing that allows you to listen deeply into your records.

QUIBBLES

The remote is OK rather than great, but then a lot better than some I've seen that come with the ubiquitous Apple remote which I tend to lose constantly. It functions as it should!

I had trouble connecting Bluetooth initially and then it all worked flawlessly and without further hitch. I have no idea what was going on but as soon as I brought the amp downstairs it just worked.

Some might want the DAC to deal with DSD and higher resolution files but I'm fine with what it offers and I have very few DSD files, anyway.

DAC is only USB input only.

It's a fingerprint magnet.

I'm not a huge fan of the infinitely rotating knobs and found that it took a bit of getting used to their feel.

No MC phonostage.

CONCLUSION





Depending on your personal tastes, I would suggest that this amplifier is the best looking amplifier on the market at this time. It has the look and style of an Eames chair and is very nicely finished.

The character of the amp is that it is fast and neutral. It adds very little of itself to the music you are listening to without feeling cold and sterile.

"OUR AIM IS TO BRING MUSIC LOVERS CLOSER TO THE MUSIC THEY LOVE" is JAVA HiFi's slogan and I think they have achieved this with this amplifier, particularly with the DAC stage allied to the amplifier stage. The amp is likely to appeal to those people that are looking for a stylish amplifier with which to enjoy their music rather than those looking to obsess about whether they have all the right boxes or not.

The phonostage section of the amplifier is Moving Magnet only but I think JAVA HiFi have done a good job here and rather than going for adding an MC stage, they have concentrated on getting what they have included as good as possible.

So, I would say that I heartily recommend the JAVA HiFi Double Shot integrated amplifier for those looking for a no-nonsense and zero-faff solution with which to enjoy their tunes. I'm currently and rather obviously in the "many boxes" camp, but I'm increasingly seeing that integrated amps with digital and analogue inputs are actually a much more practical solution for those that don't want to get into the whole obsessiveness of audiophilia.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality and Features:

Looks great and has a variety of finishes available that will suit any décor

Well specified but not over the top – there is no DSD provision (they are converted to PCM) and it will handle files only to 192Hz. I don't see this as being an issue!

Onboard DAC, Phonostage, and Bluetooth allied with plenty of inputs make it a versatile musical hub

Remote is good and functional

Knobs are a bit loose feeling but I used the remote most of the time, anyway

Sound Quality:

Fast and nimble across the frequency range

Unembellished sonic signature that lets the sources shine

Compatible with a wide range of loudspeakers from relatively modest to more expensive

Value For Money:

It's not cheap at \$13K but I would suggest that people looking at the JAVA HiFi integrated will be those people looking at buying once and not those looking at endless box swapping. In this sense, it makes a sensible but quality purchase that should sit proudly in your home for many years without you feeling the need to look elsewhere or to "upgrade"

We Loved:

The looks of this unit are fab!

Honest and natural sound that appears to be true to the source

Well featured with all the inputs you could want

We Didn't Love So Much:

The feel of the volume knob

You'll need a microfibre duster to hand as it does show up fingerprints and dust

Elevator Pitch Review: The JAVA HiFi Double Shot integrated is \$13K, fully formed integrated amplifier for the modern home with provision to add a streamer and a moving magnet equipped record player. It looks brilliantly modern but at the same time kind of timeless. Sonically it is neutral sounding and fast across the frequencies and adds very little of its own character to the listening experience. It will pair with pretty much any speaker at any price and will appeal to those looking for a stylish but capable HiFi solution for their home.

Price: \$13 000





VINIUS AUDIO TVC-05 MAGNETIC VOLUME CONTROL

n the 80s when I was first getting into HiFi there was a move away from tone controls and anything else in the signal path that may degrade the sound. It's a philosophy that rang true with me and my first system that I could call a real HiFi system was made up, in part, of a Musical Fidelity The Preamp that had a volume knob and a couple of switches and that fed its signal into a Crimson Electric amplifier. It was pretty good sounding if I recall correctly and the whole "less is more" concept sort of followed me through my HiFi buying journey. The Vinius Audio TVC-05 from Poland takes this minimalist approach to the nth degree and the unit is stripped back to the max with only a volume knob, one input, and one output. Before I even start to review it I kind of like the whole idea behind this preamplifier, though its ultra pared-back approach doesn't leave you much scope for anything other than one source! For those that do want more inputs then Vinius Audio does a couple more products to cater for three RCA or XLR inputs, but you cannot mix and match these. They also do units with remotes but having spoken to them at length, they do suggest that you forego a remote if absolute purity of sound is what is most important to you.

FEATURES AND BUILD OF VINIUS TVC-05 PREAMPLIFIER

The unit we had arrived triple-boxed and in a Vinius labeled black back. Taking it out of the bag you immediately get to appreciate that this preamplifier looks absolutely lovely and is beautifully finished. The highly polished wooden front panel with a slightly orange hue looks great and is adorned with a single, large volume knob − there is no source selector as there is only one input. You get all this for €7400 for the RCA version and a bit more for other versions.

Around the back of this relatively large box (360 x 400 x 125 (wdh)) and on a wooden panel finished to the same very high standard as the front panel, there is one input pair and one output pair of XLRs. There is no power inlet as this is a passive, or rather TVC design.

That large knob that dominates the front panel has 24 steps with each step equating to a 2db step. It has a very satisfying click to it.

The interesting stuff of this volume control (it can't really be described

The Vinius Audio TVC-05
Special Edition is quite
a specialized product
in that it has just one
input (XLR in this case),
one output, and a volume knob. It's taking
the minimal approach to
audio to the extreme,
but how does it sound
in the HiFi PiG reference
system..

Reviewed by Stuart Smith











accurately as a preamplifier) are EI 105 transformers that Vinius say have been specially wound in accordance with their own patent. The chassis is galvanically isolated which is designed to eliminate the possibility of an groundloops. In this latter respect other TVC-based preamplifiers, including our own Music first, tend to rely on ground-lift switches.

Vinius say that every single aspect and part of this unit has been meticulously chosen to give the best sound possible – this attention to detail goes right down to listening to the sheet metal that is used in the enclosure and even the screws used. Whether or not all this makes any difference to the overall sound is possibly debatable, but I'm not here to discuss that and will only comment on the final sound that this unit achieves in the systems in which I use it!

Other than it weighs a substantial 15Kg there is little more to say about the Vinius given its stripped-back and ultra-minimalist design.

Overall this is a beautifully finished and beautifully put-together bit of kit that has all the qualities of taking delivery of an expensive watch other than I would have liked there to have been nicer packaging — a flight case, perhaps, that would have added to the Christmas morning effect of opening up this unit. This is a small detail, of course, and what counts here is the sonic performance of the unit.

SOUND QUALITY

First of all, and as I have mentioned earlier, I am a fan of the TVC approach and have used such a unit in our main system for sometime - actually, I've used one on and off for years. To me, the overall benefit of this approach to volume control is that it offers the purest and most truthful signal which you can feed to your chosen amplifier. They offer no extra drive that an active preamplifier will give and they do away with complicated resistor ladders and potentiometers that can affect the sound of a preamplifier. Of course, in the modern digital age there are digital versions of volume controls with the one that I have used being the excellent option by Gilles Milot at Leedh Processing and his Lossless Digital Volume control.

For the duration of this review process, I had the Vinius hooked up to the Lampizator DAC for digital

duties and I chose to remain with the digital side of things for the duration to avoid having to get behind the rack and change cables to the analogue front end – remember, this is just one input and one output. I'll be streaming files from our hard drive and Qobuz through ROON using our Stack Audio streamer and with all network-attached bits of kit going through the Ansuz D3 Power Switch.

I have to moan about there being no remote but the truth is the volume control knob on this unit is a delight to use and has a very satisfying click to it. Having spoken to Zdzisław at Vinius about this, he reckons that the inclusion of a remote will adversely affect the sound, though accepts that some people will be willing to sacrifice overall sound quality for more convenience. Personally, I'm with Zdzislaw, and if and when I order one of their products (hope I'm not giving too much away with that) it would be one that is without a remote!

There was an advert years ago on English television and though I can't recall what product it was for, the slogan was "It's better with nowt taken out!" and this is what you are obviously getting with the Vinius in the chain. There's just such a purity and cleanness to the sound that is coming out of the speakers. There's no boost of this or that frequency and just a straightforward (to my ears anyway) transition of the information coming out of the Lampizator DAC going into the power amplifier (a Krell KSA 100 in this case) though you can now change the volume... obviously. One of the effects of this is the soundstage, though I am fully aware (thanks for asking) that the majority of this effect is created by the loudspeakers. There's a full and enveloping sound coming out of the speakers that plants the listener halfway back in the stalls...perhaps a little further forward. Now I would suggest that this soundstaging effect is going to be one of the standout features you will hear when you get to listen to the Vinius unit. It's an effect that really does create a very believable and natural soundscape in which you listen to your tunes. It doesn't feel (or sound) artificially enhanced or overblown, but it is definitely "pronounced" and noticeable in that it is different to what I'm used to. To me this is a very interesting facet of the Vinius and one that really did make me consider my options on the preamplifier front. I have no idea why a preamplifier should have such a positive and dramatic effect on the soundstaging but it does!









There's also a purity of tone to the music coming out of the speakers which is characterized by opening notes of Angie by the Stones and off Goats Head Soup. That first note on the guitar just rings and decays with such a natural sound that you do sit up and take notice immediately. This continues through the song with the tonal signatures of that guitar (and others) shining out. Strings come in, rise, and then envelop you. I know this tune pretty well and I can genuinely say that this is as natural sounding as I've heard it – you really can look into the mix and "see" the individual instruments laid out in front of you. As the song gets busier this natural (coherent?) performance continues and with instruments never feeling forced or embellished. Now, this sound of nothing sounding "embellished" is to be expected and I suppose could well be somewhat to do with my expectation of the Vinius and its minimalist philosophy and aesthetic - though I don't think it is and I think I'm aware enough of this system to be able to actually hear what is going on when a piece of kit is. I ended up listening to a whole load of "acoustic" guitar music on this and every time it was a pleasure, with the natural timbre of this or that guitar coming through the speakers – Jorma Kaukonen's Genesis was a treat...in fact, the whole Quah was a delight to listen to!

I listen to a lot of house and techno (broadly speaking electronic) music and this is often bass heavy and can be pretty demanding on a system from top to bottom of the sonic spectrum....none more so than Dusty Kid! I would suggest that there is a tendency for many active preamplifiers to overly push the bass (and tops) in a mix and that leads to a sonic presentation that can be all tizz and thud. Dusty Kid's I Love Richie still has that deep and throbbing synth bass line underpinning the whole of the track, but it never seems to become overly saturated or too much, even when it breaks just after 3 minutes. I can't say it sounds natural because it's not a natural sound, but this bass element is in keeping with the rest of the track's components and make-up and not pushed to the fore more than it should be. I push the volume on this track pretty hard and still all I get is a balanced sonic picture of the tune. Yes, this is very bass heavy, but the bass isn't pushed...if that makes sense. The harsh electrical percussion sounds cut through the mix properly and the whole track is a coherent, if full on onslaught, of sonic enjoyment. There is still the physical kick of the music that hits you in the chest, but there's also the ability to hear the tones and smaller

elements of the mix like the sound of the synth drone on the same artist's Cowboy track. Some may prefer their music to be artificially enhanced by their preamplifier, I know this, but into the Krell and in this system there's absolutely no need for any enhancement in any part of the musical spectrum. For me there is more than ample dynamic oomph inherent on the actual recording without anything requiring a boost.

On older recordings like Popeye Does the Mashed Potato by The Buttons (CD rip) it is clear to hear that the recording process was limited in its scope way back in (I think) 1963. The sound is harsher and pretty unrefined, and the Vinius doesn't hide this. Long story short in this respect is that this preamplifier is not going to make a silk purse out of a pig's ear and if your recording is harsh or whatever then this preamplifier is going to show it for what it is... but that sort of goes without saying in a quality HiFi system, I'd say.

Epic tale reduced to a soundbite; you are hearing what is on the file with the Vinius! You are also hearing the character of the DAC too and this is a good thing in my book; why would you pay tens of thousands of pounds/dollars/euros/magic-beans on a DAC (or any other bit of kit) only for the preamplifier to stamp all over it with its own character. I've heard folk use the term "the preamplifier is the heart of a system" and whilst I agree with this pretty much wholly, the kind of preamplifier that appeals to me is one that adds as little flavour of its own to the final sound. Now, your mileage may well vary in this last respect and, indeed, the needs of your power amplifier might be that it prefers an active preamplifier to drive it.

As I'm writing up my notes I've got the Vinius in the system and there's Let It Be by the Beatles playing. And it sounds as big a tune as I ever recall it being and that overdriven guitar that cuts through the mix at around 2 minutes sounds absolutely natural - well, as natural as an affected and amplified electric guitar can sound. What I'm saying (again is that there seems to be no embellishment or addition to the sonic character of the file.

Look, I can play a hundred and one tunes and the outcome is going to be pretty much the same whichever tune I drag out or from whatever genre I drag it out from – this is as transparent a preamplifier as I have heard and is, I would say, at least the equal









sonically of our Music First preamp...and that is very high praise, indeed.

NIGGLES

One input may not be enough for some BUT Vinius do offer units with three RCA or three XLR inputs. However, these units do not offer the ultra-minimalism and purity of signal path that this unit uses. The other units are not mix and match with regards inputs and outputs as our Music First is and with the other Vinius pres you must choose RCA or XLR on both inouts and outputs.

The packaging is not in-keeping with the lovely finish on the unit itself and is a little disappointing, though I know full well that such friperie is superfluous and little more than window dressing and pandering to the luxury element, but, given the finish and beautiful build of this product, I do think better packaging would be in order.

No remote, but then this continues the whole path of least resistance and I fully understand the reasons for not including one. This is a product by its very nature is about purity of signal and with no superfluous additions.

CONCLUSION

Like the advert I mentioned that talks about Product X being better with nowt taken out, the Vinius adds little to nothing of its own sonic character to the music you are playing. In true high-fidelity terms I would say that this is getting close to the holy grail of what the purist audiophile is searching for. Yes, other preamplifiers that use similar technology achieve somewhat similar results and the final decision on which you would choose will be down to your personal preferences and to the miniscule tonal differences that you may or may not perceive. However, and as mentioned, some people and some power amplifiers will prefer to have a boosted signal before them and thereafter we are getting into the whole personal taste arena.

Can I recommend the Vinius? Yes, I can and I do so wholeheartedly!!! I absolutely loved it in our system.

It is a very good-looking product (thought I actually

prefer the look of our Music First...YMMV) that, taking into account that it's not endured any ins and outs to our system to really test its robustness, looks very nicely constructed and has the air of a product that people will buy and stick with forever. Like myself with our Music First preamplifier, I have (up to now) seen no need to contemplate any kind of upgrade or change since the day it got put in the system...I think the same would be true with the Vinius.

I am giving this product the Editors Choice award, but that comes with caveats and the main one is that this is a very specialised bit of kit with its one input and one output. Essentially, what you have is an expensive volume knob...if it were only that simple!

The main takeaways for me with the Vinius in this review system have been that wonderfully engaging and realistic soundstaging and a seemingly untarnished movement of the signal from the DAC to the amplifier.

If you are looking for a no-frills but truly immaculate-sounding preamplifier, then I would suggest that this should be on your radar! I am surprised that these haven't been picked up by distribution in the States, the UK, and particularly in Asia where I think they would be very much appreciated.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

A simple-looking unit that is very well finished and very nice to look at

A very limited set of features that boil down to a single set of inputs and outputs and a volume knob, though other versions are available with more inputs and remote

Sound Quality:

This is a very good sounding unit. Or should that be "this unit doesn't really have a sound"?

Crap recordings still sound crap but that is only because there is no gilding of the lily with this preamp





Soundstaging was an interesting thing for me to have picked up, I thought. The preamp should not really have an influence on this and I don't know if it's because the pre is absolutely silent that I perceived this aspect of its "performance" but there is something very interesting and positive happening with the soundstaging with the Vinius in our system

I found the sound of instruments and sounds in the mix seemed (to me) to be true to life and very textured in their presentation using the Vinius

Value For Money:

If you look at this as a one input volume pot then it is expensive. But it's not quite so easy to put a pot in a box and get this level of realism

We Loved:

The perceived soundstage

Being able to hear very clearly the tonal and timbral

characteristics of instruments

We Didn't Love So Much:

There's not much to dislike at all with this preamplifier. It is what it is and what it is is pretty limited given its one input. People that buy this will be well aware of its feature limitations and will be happy to listen to their one source how it was meant to sound

Elevator Pitch Review: The Polish Vinius preamplifier is a single input and output device that eschews features for a purity of reproduction that is uncommon. It neither add nor takes away from the signal that it is fed and your music remains truthful to the file you are playing and the effects the DAC, the power amplifier and the speakers have upon it. If you can live with its limitations then this is an excellent product.

Price: Around €7500





MUARAH MU-2 MM/MC TUBE PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

his Polish company has a name I find all but impossible to remember and, more importantly, spell correctly, but they have somehow stuck in my mind over the years as I have seen them exhibit and demonstrate their products for several editions of the Audio Video Show in Warsaw.

First of all their products look a little different from the norm with their distinctive illuminated green logo on the front of their kit. Secondly, they demonstrated to us a product that I thought was rather interesting in the form of their InteliClamp and Precision Speed Controller. These latter products aren't what I'm going to be batting on about during this review, but I thought they were worth mentioning in passing as they form a product that is both innovative and interesting. Long story short is that the InteliClamp fits on the spindle of your record player when a record is playing and feeds back information to the controller to ensure that your belt-drive turntable is spinning at a constant 33 or 45 RPM. Muarah, had my attention and I approached them to get one of their products for review, but given I've moved on from my Origin Live and SME belt drive turntables to the perfectly speed-constant Technics 1200G, the InteliClamp would have been a bit redundant and so I opted to take a look at their MU2 phonostage. I should also add at this point that the brand also make a series of splendid-looking turntables, arms, and electronics...which makes sense.

Packaging on the MU02 is good and you get a power cable rather than the bog-standard cable that comes with pretty much every other bit of kit we get sent. This cable has a little locking device at the IEC end and you do need to ensure that it is properly engaged! The cable looks like something like Lapp Olflex or similar. I like this touch.

Instructions are accessed via a QR Code and I get that this is easier for the company and potentially better for the environment, but I'd prefer to have a basic printed sheet or booklet.

BUILD AND FEATURES

This 4Kg box is a narrow shoebox kind of design that measures (WHD) $210 \times 350 \times 110$ mm and looks to be well put together and has the

Stuart takes a listen to this interesting tube phono preamplifier from Poland.

> Reviewed by Stuart Smith







company's thick polished glass faceplate with the green illuminated logo placed in the central position. I actually quite like it and it's a nice change from the blue or red LEDs that seem to be ubiquitous on kit these days, though this box of tricks also does have the red LED to indicate it's on and when it's warming up (not that you could miss that it's switched on if you have the green logo activated). More visual loveliness is on show with the two 6922EH (you can use 6DJ8, ECC88, or E88CC if you prefer) emitting their soft tubey glow through cut-outs on either side of the logo. The glow is enhanced by dimmable underlighting of the tubes. You can also turn the logo and valve illumination completely off. From the front, the unit looks cool, compact, and a little more exciting than the usual black or silver boxes that are used to house most phono-preamplifiers.

The MU-2 uses 6922 input stage valve in parallel with J-FETs and a with a 6922 second tube and MOSFET follower to give 56dB amplification. The company says that this will suffice for all MC cartridges with an output above 0.2mV.

Th MU-2 sits on four vibration-absorbing (and pleasingly squishy) footers.

My only comment that could be even slightly negative about the whole fit and finish of the MU-2 is that the bottom of the bent steel casework is slightly sharp, though it's not going to cut you or anything.

Around the back of the rather nice and shiny steel casework (it's polished acid-resistant stainless steel) things look a little more interesting than the standard RCA ins, outs, and ground, though these are obviously present and correct, as is the power inlet via IEC and a fuse holder. I'd have preferred the power switch to have been on the back panel as this is where I'd expect to find it, but having it underneath does actually make a lot more sense when you think about it. The obvious change from the norm here is a large red knob with a pointer that is used to set the correct loading for whatever cartridge you are using. In the red position the knob points towards MM for when you are using a Moving Magnet cartridge and this sets the load at the standard 47 kOhms. The remaining five positions are for when you are using a Moving Coil cartridge and have values of 1K, 500, 200, 100, and 50 Ohms. The knob has a rather satisfying click to it when it locks

into place. The Muarah doesn't allow for the different EQ curves that our LAB 12 melto 2 does but the five MC loads and the MM loading should be adequate for most people most of the time. As already touched upon, the supplied specifications for the MU-2 tell me that gain is set at 56dB for MC and 43 dB for MM which should work out fine for any of the cartridges that I have to hand.

SOUND QUALITY

For the duration of this review, I used the MU-2 into the our Music First Baby Reference MK2 TVC preamplifier, which itself feeds into our TotalDAC AMP1 and then our Audiovector R6 Arreté loudspeakers. The turntable used was the Technics 1200G (watch my video review here) with our HANA Umami cartridge for MC duties and Vertere Sabre for MM. Both cartridges were housed in the excellent Naso-Tec Swingheadshells which I use for all my cartridges.

Set up of the MU-2 is pretty obvious and simple to anyone that's previously installed a phonosatage.

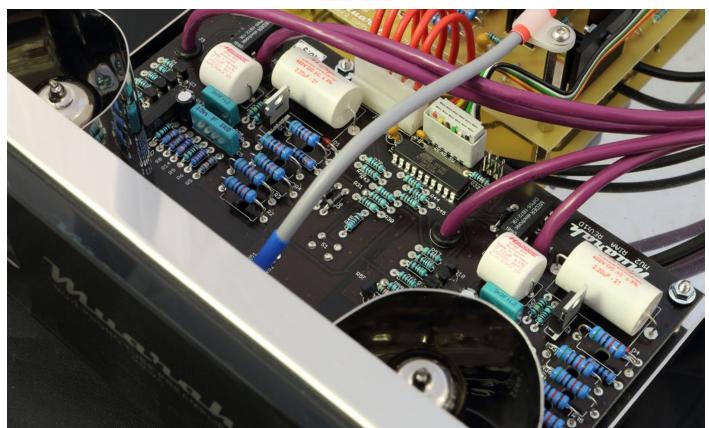
WITH THE HANA UMAMI

Jon Hopkins' Music For Psychedelic Therapy album is a beautifully organic and nuanced piece of electronic music that benefits greatly in its effectiveness if played through a quality system and the Muahah and Umami combination worked very well indeed in digging down and pulling the small details of the recording through to the amp and speakers. I'd say that the overall effect is slightly softer than our exceptionally incisive Music First phonostage and SUT, but it's also rather pleasing to listen to with the detail, rather than buried, being just slightly gentler on the ear. This latter point may well be to the liking of some and I certainly found myself falling into this record's detail and enjoying the performance that was laid out before me and I actually think the UM-AMI and MU-2 to be a really nice-sounding pairing. On quieter passages on this double album there is still a detail that you can fall into with the MU-2 in place. Surface noise was pretty much non-existent on this record, but then I do try to keep my records clean and overall I'd say this area of the MU-2's performance is pretty much the same as the Music First pairing. The MU-2 is very quiet to silent in operation.









It was a similarly pleasing story listening to Avicii's Stories record; a presentation that was softer, but, by turn, also insightful and thoroughly enjoyable. The pace and dynamic changes on this record weren't lost with this phonostage. This is an odd one to describe as I usually like a presentation that is harder-edged than this, but I found this pairing to be a joy to listen to for long periods and, as I said, I don't actually think there was anything missing in the frequency range, it was just more gently spoken, if that makes sense. I assume that this softening of the presentation is a factor of the valves in the circuit and I actually think it will appeal to many people who are searching for a non-fatiguing and less "in your face" presentation from their records. With that said, the MU-2 is also softer (I've used this word a few times as I think it fits very well, but I don't really want to attach negative connotations to it) than our valve-based LAB 12 melto II.

Lin and I were sat listening to the system with the MU-2 and UMAMI in it and discussing its sound. Both of us agreed on its qualities and as I stood up to grab our Original Masters copy of Miles Davis' Kind Of Blue, she said (without prompting) "It will suit some jazz!". And it does! This phonostage could have been made for listening to this kind of music and my guess is that the folk behind its design and voicing are into their jazz. Horns sound wonderful and there is a relaxed and soothing feel to the music

whilst still maintaining the detail. Double bass is deep and easy to follow in the recording and piano sounds natural and clear. The horn I mentioned is superbly reproduced and the barely perceptible hats on Blue in Green are there...just. As I said before, this is a lovely, organic, and relaxed sound that does conjure images of a smoky jazz club vibe that I kind of really like.

WITH THE VERTERE SABRE

The Robotiks' My Computer is Acting Strange is a record I've played a great deal going back to the days I had a radio show on Wear FM back in the early and mid-90s and I reckon I know it pretty much inside out. Reaching around the back of the MU-2 to click the switch to the MM position was a bit of a faff and I would prefer to have this available on the front of the unit – the top of it also gets quite warm and I'd suggest it needs good ventilation.

Now, the first thing that grabbed me was that this was somewhat different in presentation to the presentation of the UMAMI, despite both being set up perfectly correctly and dialed in properly. The difference is not night and day and likely has much to do with the cartridges, but overall I found this to be a little brasher in the bass department and less





of a feeling of things being slightly "muted" (I can't think of a better word).

Soundstaging with this and other records I used whilst taking my notes was excellent and stable and I thought the data retrieval and detail was very good. The top end of The Robotiks record was still not as incisive as our reference (much more expensive) phonostage but it was still an enjoyable and satisfying listen. Reverbs and effects are presented very naturally and I want use the word organically, which I think is an effect of the laidback character of this phonostage.

NIGGLES

The chromed top is a bit of a finger magnet but then you don't really see it on a rack unless it's on the top and it does need space to dissipate heat.

The button for the illuminated logo is a bit difficult to get at.

Would have liked the MM/MC loading knob to have been on the front of the unit, but then that would have spoiled the aesthetic.

The power cable needs care in ensuring it is properly engaged.

There is a softness to the sound overall which some may enjoy and others not so much.

CONCLUSION

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with this phonostage, but some may find it a little soft-sounding overall. On the flip side, others will really love how it sounds in a system, and with the jazz (particularly horns) I listened to with it, I really enjoyed it. This is the beauty of the audio world having so many options available to folk and all I can do is try to explain my experiences with the product and what I thought about it in this system and with the music I have experience of. One man's softer sound is another's organic and natural sound.

Certainly, I'd give it shelf space and people listening predominantly to acoustic music should seriously consider it.

This is a well-featured product for the money. It has a cool and different look and a sonic character that many will really enjoy...others, perhaps, less so. This is definitely a "you need to try it" kind of product.

AT A GLANCE



Build Quality and Features:

Nice finish overall and a different aesthetic

Well featured and will accommodate MM and pretty much all MC cartridges

Sound Quality:

Overall this is a laidback and relaxed phonostage that still manages to present detail from top to bottom

Soundstaging is natural and not over-emphasised

Bass is softer than I'm used to with our reference stages and is best suited to less bass-heavy music

Value For Money:

It's about right for this kind of product and you could certainly spend more and get a less pleasant sounding product

We Loved:

Cool aesthetics that dares to be a little different from the norm

A relaxed and easy-to-get-on listen and yet didn't lose the dynamics and detail – an odd one to describe

Certainly capable of pairing with pretty expensive cartridges without being embarrassed

We Didn't Love So Much:

The loading switch being around the back

The softer sound may be an issue for some, but others will love it

Elevator Pitch Review: The Muarah MU-2 phonostage comes from Poland and has a shoebox aesthetic that is all of its own. It will accommodate moving magnet and most moving coil cartridges. Sonically speaking, the MU-2 is a pleasant and non-fatiguing stage to listen to but, in my opinion, it is best suited to acoustic music. There is detail and there is nuance to instruments and recordings and this is presented in a somewhat unique manner that you need to hear to find out if you love it or not. Personally, I actually really enjoyed my time with it.

Price: €1920



TAGA HARMONY TCD 50 CD PLAYER

AGA Harmony is a Polish brand that we have been following for a number of years now. They have always impressed at shows with their professional outlook to the production of no-nonsense, good-value products. The TCD 50 CD player continues this theme and costs just \$444 plus VAT. Currently, there are several EU distributors but none for the United Kingdom and those looking to buy this unit will currently have to buy in, for example, France and pay for import and shipping.

BUILD AND SPECIFICATIONS OF THE TAGA HARMONY TCD 50

The DAC inside this CD player from Poland is the ESS SABRE ES9018 Reference 32-bit DAC with what TAGA call Hyperstream™ II architecture and Time Domain Jitter Eliminator. There is also a 2-pole Fully Differential Linear Phase Bessel filter and I'm not going to pretend I understand what that does, despite having looked it up. All the RCAs are gold plated, as are the XLR pins and OFC copper is used to wire all the analogue outputs.

I do like the fact that this has an onboard headphone amp (which is fine) with its own volume control so that, at a push, you could actually just have this unit if all you did was listen to CDs through headphones.

The TCD 50 is available in either silver or black and that front panel is excellent, adding a touch of class to the unit.

Everything works as it should. The tray opens buttery smooth and the CDs play pretty much immediately. The finish is very good, particularly for this kind of money...it's what I would call "proper" HiFi in that it's the right size and the right shape. Personally, I think it looks very sleek and stylish in this black colour. It's got XLR and RCA outs so that's all covered, and it has optical and RCA digital outputs should you want to whack it in to an external DAC. It doesn't have any inputs to allow you to use the onboard DAC. The buttons all work as they should and feel nice to the touch. Really, there's nothing you can moan about with re-

The TAGA HARMONY
TCD 50 CD player costs
\$444 plus taxes and is
a fully-fledged, full-size
CD player that whilst
being budget-friendly,
certainly seems to be
well specified. Stuart
takes a listen.

Reviewed by Stuart Smith







gard to finish and build at this kind of price. Yep, the remote is a bit workaday but it's as good as I've seen on some units costing a lot more than this.

SOUND QUALITY

The huge majority of people are going to buy this CD player and, as I did for the most part, put it straight into an amp or pre via the RCA or XLR line outputs. You know you are listening to a lesser machine when compared to a digital source through our Lampizator DAC but like most things, there's not thousands of pounds worth of difference in real terms...ie the TAGA is not 20 or thirty times worse sounding. Nowhere near!

Yes, in comparison to our LAB 12 DAC or Lampizator DAC there is a clearly "softer" and less incisive element to the sound of the TAGA, but in the real world you don't sit switching between sources and I'd be well pleased to sit in front of this CD player and enjoy my tunes...very much so!

Overall and looking really critically at the TAGA I'd say that it doesn't have the low-end balls and slam that I'm used to and, again, I want to say that the sound is slightly rolled off at the bottom end and as well as the mentioned tops.

Through the mid-band there's not the same level of detail that I'm used to either, but at this price I think the TAGA behaves itself impeccably (it never skips a beat) and that it certainly punches above what you will have to fork out for it I actually think it's a little bit of a bargain and I would say it is on a par with the little Leema Elements player we have here...and it is faster to load once the CD is inserted.

The TAGA is certainly sure-footed and whilst a little softer than I'm used to, bass is solid and deep with a good impression of what drum machine and what effects are being added on electronic music. There's slightly less shimmer on hats and but, again, this is nothing to write home and complain to Mother about.

Speed and timing are excellent and I found the TAGA to be rhythmic enough to allow me to get really into the music I was listening to – whatever the genre – though it's not as dynamic a performer as the LAB 12 DAC or the Lampi. Apples and oranges, I know. To be less critical against the machine, I certainly found

myself tapping my foot along to the music on more than one occasion.

I did play a load of different music ranging from Luke Slater to Kasia Mos and Aukso (a great record that was gifted to me at the Warsaw Show if I remember correctly). On this latter CD, I found that the feeling of the live performance was excellent with the vocalist sitting bang centre and a little forward in the mix and with strings and piano being present and correct, though the separation of elements in the mix were not as great as I would be used to. Whatever, I could clearly see musicians laid out before me and I would say I was sat a little way up in the circle during this recording. Perhaps my only criticism would be that the midband may be being pushed a little with regard to absolute balance, but this is no bad thing given what this CD player is likely to be partnered with.

I'm not going to go into this recording and that recording as I think I've said about the character of this machine to suggest that I think it is very good sounding and represents very good value for money.

NIGGLES

There's no inputs to use the onboard DAC.

Critically speaking the TAGA isn't the most accurate player I have experienced, but it's nowhere near bad so don't read into that something that is certainly not implied!

CONCLUSION

Some might say that the days of the CD are over, but I would heartily disagree and it would seem that it's not just TAGA and I that think this given the number of high-end CD players we have seen coming out. There is certainly a whole load of product out there, both new and used.

Is this CD player the last word in Fidelity? Of course it isn't, it's a five hundred euro or so machine! However, for that five hundred or so Euros I think it performs excellently and I think it demands that you take a look at it should you be in the market for an excellently priced CD player. Even for those with higher-end systems but for those who CD is not a main source, I still think this is an excellent buy – buy it and use it for the odd time you play an old













CD. If you are looking for a main source then I also think this machine offers a very good solution — it's not groundbreaking and it's not the best sounding CD player in the world, but it is honest sounding and honestly priced.

I really liked it!

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality:

For the relatively modest asking price, this is very well put together and specced

Analogue outputs are on RCA and XLR

Optical and Coaxial digital outputs but no digital inputs

Onboard headphone amp is a nice touch

OK remote included in the price

Sound Quality:

For the asking price the TCD 50 is an excellent sounding product

Slightly lacking in top end shimmer and detail and lacking slam and bass when compared to better and

more expensive players

Excellent timing but not as dynamic as our reference

Value For Money:

Brilliant value for money!

We Loved:

At this price there is a lot to love about the TCD 50

It is well-specified and sounds more than acceptable for the asking price

We Didn't Love So Much:

No digital inputs

Slightly rolled off at the top and bottom when compared to our reference

Elevator Pitch Review: From Polish brand TAGA Harmony comes the relatively budget CD player TCD 50 costing \$444 plus taxes. It comes with a remote and a headphone output and is very well-specified. Spend more and it can be bettered sonically, but at this price I'd suggest it will be hard to beat.

Price: \$444 Plus VAT





STACK AUDIO AUVA 70 SPEAKER ISOLATORS

'm old enough to remember when putting spikes under audio equipment became a thing. One day there were no spikes then suddenly it seemed like all the reviewers in all the HiFi magazines were putting spikes under everything that moved and then raving about the improvements in sound quality.

Without getting into detail, the argument ran that putting spikes under speaker stands (or in the case of floorstanders, the speakers themselves) made the speakers more stable which produced a clearer sound image. Secondly, coupling the speakers to the floor via the spikes dispersed excess energy from the speaker cabinets and/or stands, reducing distortion which could colour the sound. Thirdly, the spikes helped to isolate the speakers from other vibrations in the room, again resulting in improved sound quality.

And so spikes became an accepted part and parcel of the HiFi world; it's hard now to imagine life without them. That wasn't the end of things though, spikes were just the (often very sharp) tip of the iceberg. Coupling was all well and good, but many people argued that isolation was where the real gains were to be had, and before long it seemed as if no HIFi journey was complete until every component in your system sat upon a chopping board purchased from a Scandinavian home furnishing superstore (he means IKEA- Ed) and half a dozen sawn-in-half squash balls. And for some reason, people think HiFi enthusiasts are a bit odd. While small-scale wars have continued to wage between couplers and isolationists, that may be about to change as Stack Audio has incorporated both approaches into their AUVA Isolators.

Stack Audio manufacture two AUVA (AUdio Vibration Absorber) products, the AUVA 70 and the AUVA 100. Both products will support speakers up to 275kg. M6, M8 and M10 threadings are supported. If you are unsure what thread your existing spikes are, Stack Audio will be happy to advise. The AUVA are normally supplied as a set of eight (four per speaker) but can also be purchased as a set of six if appropriate to your speakers. The AUVA 100 is a larger version of the 70 with twice the surface area and a five-cell internal structure rather than the 70's three cells (see below) for improved performance. I was supplied with a set of the AUVA 70s for this review.

They say you only get one chance to make a first impression. John Scott reviews the AUVA 70 speaker isolators from Stack Audio and finds that first impressions can sometimes be misleading.

Reviewed by John Scott





UNBOXING AND BUILD

The AUVA 70s arrived in two presentation boxes (4 per box). The boxes are of good-quality card construction; black with the Stack Audio logo inlaid in silver on the lid. Internally, the individual isolators and associated threaded inserts and bolts are cosseted by a foam insert. It's an elegant package that reflects the price of the product; opening the box to reveal the contents was like opening the box on an expensive piece of jewellery. Attractive packaging is a nice touch; you may never look at the box again after you have fitted the isolators to your speakers but it undoubtedly adds an element of perceived value to the product. Incidentally, the larger AUVA 100s come in a wooden presentation box.

I have previously reviewed Stack Audio's Linn LP12 modifications and also the company's Link 2 streamer. First-class engineering and build quality run across all of these products and the AUVA 70s are no exception. The isolators are machined from aluminium and are black anodised. As with the packaging, the build quality exudes a sense of quality that reflects the product's price point.

Internally, the technology within the isolators is patent pending. Within each isolator, three cells contain particles of material including tungsten that dissipate vibrations and convert them to heat. I gave the isolators a shake and could hear what I would describe as "metallic sand" moving within them. I don't know how accurate this description is but Stack Audio itself describes the absorption of the vibrations as being like throwing a ball into the sand pit – the sand absorbs the energy from the ball and it is stopped dead in its tracks. Three spikes screw into the base of each isolator for use on carpeted surfaces. Alternatively, for wooden floors, an adhesive felt pad can be attached to the base of the isolators to prevent the damage that spikes might cause. If you fit the pads, the spikes can still be added later should your flooring type change. The top of each isolator houses a threaded insert that accepts an attachment bolt that connects the isolator to your speaker. Stack Audio will provide the appropriately-sized bolt for your speaker.

SET UP

Set Up took a matter of minutes. I disconnected my

speakers, laid them flat on the floor and unscrewed the existing spikes. I then screwed three AUVA spikes into the base of each isolator and the connecting bolt into the top of each isolator. The isolators were then simply screwed into the holes where the original spikes had been. Job done. Stack Audio also supplies a set of nuts for each connector in case the isolators need to be individually adjusted to ensure leveling, but I found that these were not required. With a total of twelve spikes gripping the carpet under each speaker, the Sincerus 80s were noticeably more stable than they had been previously.

Shortly after I had installed the isolators, I received a text from Theo Stack at Stack Audio inviting me to give him a call if I was having any problems with the installation. The installation had been so straightforward that I felt sure that there must have been some tricky, vitally important bit that I had missed so I gave Theo a call just in case. Nope – all good, phew! Helpfully, Stack Audio provide some advice on speaker placement as part of their installation instructions and also a couple of Deoxit wipes to clean up your speaker terminals and help you get the most from your upgrade.

SOUND QUALITY

Before we get to sound quality, there is a bit of a back story that seems relevant to mention. At the time the AUVA 70s arrived I was having a new bathroom installed. While the bathroom installation was reasonably straightforward, it was a period of time characterised by banging, drilling, sawing, dust and debris. The front door was almost permanently open so that workmen could come and go, it was often -5C outside and there was no point in having the central heating on as the heat all just rushed out of the door. Hardly the ideal conditions in which to review audio equipment.

Obviously, I couldn't resist trying the AUVA 70s out so after the workmen had finished for the day, and before I popped over to visit my son so that I could get a shower, I played a couple of tracks. Did the AUVAs make a difference? Yes, I felt sure that I could hear more detail from my Audio GE Sincerus 80 speakers and the soundstage seemed a bit better, but was it a night and day difference? No, I didn't think so. Recognizing that conditions were not right, I delayed further listening until work on the bath-















room was complete.

Fortunately, it was only a week or so before the work on the bathroom was finished (it's lovely, thanks for asking). As we needed to give the whole house a thorough clean, I moved my speakers to wipe down the skirting boards behind them and then replaced them more or less where they had been before. Later the next day, with all cleaning done, it was finally time to relax with some music.

From the very first seconds of the radio chatter on Jennifer Warnes' version of First We Take Manhattan from her Famous Blue Raincoat album I couldn't believe the difference in what I was hearing; it was the audio equivalent of seeing an image in a camera viewfinder snap into focus when the lens adjusts. Not only was there more detail in what I was hearing but the positioning of voices and instruments, between and around the speakers was completely transformed.

Yes, I know, you're thinking: "He hasn't been listening to his HiFi properly for a few weeks, it's bound to sound better now". But it wasn't that; I know how my system sounds and there was now an unmistakable improvement. I was hearing previously-unheard texture in vocals, nuances in production, and, time after time, that extended, hugely-improved soundstage. On Jah Wobble's Redux album, there is a live version of the reggae classic, Liquidator. At one point a synth line bubbles across from the left speaker, beyond the right speaker and ends up hovering about a foot in front of my right ear. I played it half a dozen times. It did it every time and it had never done it before.

As well as the Audio GE Sincerus 80s in my main system, I have a pair of Linn Keilidhs in another room. Theo had also provided me with a set of connector bolts sized for the Keilidhs and I was keen to discover if the AUVA 70s would provide similar benefits with the Keilidhs as I had heard with the Sincerus 80s. Speakers in my second sitting room tend to suffer from a bit of bass "bloom" and the Keilidhs are no exception to this. With the AUVA 70s fitted, the bass was noticeably tighter and the detail and soundstage were once again improved. First Time Ever (a version of Ewan MacColl's The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face) from Christy Moore's Live At Vicar Street album is a track that can easily go spectacularly wrong with the bass overwhelming everything else, sending the chandeliers [yeah, right - Ed.] rattling. This time around, the bass was tamed; weighty but not boomy. The AUVA 70s were clearly doing something right.

So do I think you should spend nearly £850 improving the sound of a pair of speakers that you can pick up these days for around £250 to £300? Absolutely not. If I had £850 to spend on improving the speakers in my second system I'd sell the Keilidhs and use the money from the sale along with the £850 to buy a better pair of speakers. Then, in the fullness of time, I'd give serious consideration to upgrading those with some AUVAs.

Having established that the AUVA 70s made a positive difference to the Keilidhs, I couldn't wait to get them back into my main system as restoring the Sincerus 80s original spikes had also robbed me of the AUVAs benefits – sometimes the absence of a product speaks as loudly as its presence.

I have been living with the AUVA 70 for a few months now and consider them to be an indispensable part of my system, although I have the itch to discover if the AUVA 100s would be even better. If you are considering a speaker upgrade, or have a pair of speakers that you really love, and are curious as to whether you can get more out of them, then I would strongly recommend giving either the AUVA 70s or 100s a try. Stack Audio offers a 30-day money-back guarantee so if you think they might be worth giving a go, don't take my word for it, find out for yourself.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of spikes under speakers or speaker stands are well-established and it is rare now to find speakers and stands that don't come with spikes as an option. I suspect many of us, myself included, have been happy to accept that our speakers sound as they do without investigating the benefits of isolation. Alternatively, we may have tinkered with a homemade tweak, perhaps involving paving slabs and Sorbothane. Stack Audio's AUVA 70 isolators offer a superbly engineered, easy-to-fit isolation solution with clear audio benefits and come highly recommended.

AT A GLANCE







Build Quality:

In common with Stack Audio's other products, the AUVA 70s are engineered and finished to an exceptionally high standard in line with their price point

Sound Quality:

The AUVA 70s brought clear improvements to both sets of speakers that I paired them with. My experience suggested that the better the speaker, the greater the overall improvement is likely to be although results will no doubt be variable depending on individual factors such as flooring type

Value for Money:

Value for money is a matter of perspective. £840 is a lot of money to pay for a set of feet for your speakers but as an alternative to a speaker upgrade could offer something of a saving. As a physical product, you don't see a lot for your money but the audio

benefits are clear to hear

We Loved:

The AUVA 70s lifted the sound of my system to another level

We Didn't Love So Much:

Bit pricy but no quibbles at all with the actual product

Elevator Pitch Review: The Stack Audio AUVA 70s provided a substantial improvement to a system that I was already very happy with. As an alternative to a speaker upgrade, the AUVA 70s are very much worth considering, particularly if you have not investigated isolation products before.

Price: AUVA 70s - £840 for 8. AUVA 100s - £1240 for 8



WELLBEING STRATEGIST

Kasia R is the CEO of WellBeing Strategist whose stated aim is to inspire freedom-loving entrepreneurs to live and work better. We first caught up with Kasia at the Audio Show Deluxe event in March where we experienced a rather relaxing and invigorating "gong bath".

As part of our "Slow Down" "campaign", Not Boring by HiFi PiG caught up with her to find out more.

NB: The modern workplace is a stressful environment; how do you believe modern work practices are contributing to negative mental health in workers?

KR: Modern workplaces are part of a hustle culture, which creates a sense of relentless pursuit, where individuals feel pressured to constantly push themselves to the limits. Modern workplaces are driven by generating profit, glorification of entrepreneurship, embracing the fast lane of life powered by ever changing and developing technology and adherence to the norms of society and environment. All those factors create tremendous pressure on people, not only to perform, but outperform, to be better than others, to have more power, status measured in material goods and number of followers. The result of functioning in such an environment is burnout and stress, neglected self-care, comparison and lowered sense of self-worth, overall lack of balance. NB: Is stress in the workplace inevitable?

KR: Yes, just like existence of stress in life is inevitable. Stress is a natural element of life, it plays a very important role in adaptation. Our bodies are designed to respond to stressors by activating a physiological response known as the "fight-or-flight" response. This response is a mechanism that prepares us to deal with potential threats or challenges in our environment.

When we experience stress, our body releases

stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol which increase heart rate, blood pressure, and energy levels. This physiological response helps us become more alert, focused, and responsive to the situation at hand. It can enhance our performance and enable us to cope with difficult or demanding circumstances. Stress also acts as a motivational factor. It can provide a sense of urgency and push us to overcome obstacles, achieve goals, and adapt to new situations. When faced with stress, we often mobilize our resources, both physical and mental, to find solutions and grow from the experience.

NB: We have all heard a colleague at some point or other use the phrase "I work best under pressure". Do you believe that some people do perform more effectively with a degree of pressure, or do you think that this is a short-term effect that will eventually lead to burn out.

KR: Definitely. Just like I mentioned before, we need stress to push ourselves, to think, perform, come up with solutions, these are the modern equivalents of "fight-or-fight" which basically determines our survival. Occasional events when we experience stress are helpful, as they push us to get things done, overcome fear and gather up the courage, just like in a situation of public speaking. The average person who is not doing it regularly will experience tremendous stage fright and will be stressed, for a minute or two and then when he or she realises that going out on stage doesn't kill them, then they relax. The



NOT BORING CHATS

problem starts when people continuously function under pressure, then it turns into chronic stress, which has negative impact on our bodies and minds.

NB: What are the tell tales signs of an individual becoming stressed?

KR: Stress can have physical, emotional and behavioural signs. Physical signs include faster heartbeat, shallow breathing, sweating, redness around neck and face, tunnel vision, muscle tension. Emotional signs: irritability, changes of mood, increased sensitivity, even low self-esteem. On the behavioural front the signs of stress include: social isolation, avoiding eye contact, changes in appetite and sleep patterns, procrastination, sense of overwhelm which leads to reduced productivity and inaction.

NB: Many individuals "cope" with stress with unhealthy and often self-damaging behaviours (I'm thinking drink, drugs and other short-term fixes), how do you address a person who is in this cycle of behaviour and get them to change to more healthy strategies?

KR: The fastest way is through reprogramming the mind. To free yourself from the causes of stress and frustration at the core level. Self-damaging behaviours such as binge drinking are simply an attempt to reduce the pain we experience inside. The pain is caused by an emotion such as sadness, resentment, frustration. Drinking is a socially accepted way of attempting to resolve the problem. It doesn't work in the long run, what is worse it contributes to chances of developing addiction.

NB: What healthy strategies do you think should people have in their daily lives to help?

KR: Run towards your problems, not away from them. If you are feeling triggered when comparing yourself to others for example, stop for one minute and think about it. You may feel worthless because you are not as slim, rich or popular as others. We all have these unsupportive beliefs, such as "I am not good enough", which are created in early childhood and we carry them like a luggage through our lives. Instead of stopping, unpacking and releasing the unnecessary baggage, which can be done when working with a mental health specialist, most people drink to momentarily feel better, even though they know and dislike the physical consequences such as a hangover. The healthy strategies I would recommend, aside from raising the awareness and collaborating with a trusted mental health specialist are finding healthy ways of coping with daily stress such as physical ac-tivity, could be running, swimming, practicing yoga etc.

Other ones are embracing mindfulness and meditation practices. They will help you feel grounded and present in the moment and avoid

overthinking and worry.

NB: Do you think workplaces should be doing more to create spaces that are less detrimental to mental health? If so, how can they do this without affect-ing productivity and the bottom line?

KR: The obvious answer is yes and it has to be done in a right way. Often, the practices that are implemented by workplaces or HR departments are inadequate for the needs of people or disjointed from reality. Personally, I am a big believer in resolving issues at the root level, instead of treating symptoms. Frequently the root of the problems which cause stress and overwhelm and lead to burnout are unrealistic expectations. Employees are not honest in how much they can take on or how skilled they are to complete required tasks and employers are assuming that things will magically get done without supervision, clearly stated expectations or tools required for the tasks.

Everything starts from having a clear idea of what needs to get done in order to achieve the desired goal, the next step is bringing the right people in, providing good onboarding and training, maintaining a good flow of communication, clearly stating requirements and providing necessary tools to get things done. What I often see is a mismatch in expectations and input from the employer.

Decision makers who employ people without the required skills or experience, who are put into jobs without proper training or support and are left to themselves and are expected to perform at their best and be productive. Another mistake of employers is not involving employees in the decision making process, which makes them feel isolated and disregarded, instead of engaged and motivated.

NB: What triggers cause you personally to become stressed?

KR: I don't think I differ from others, as what causes my stress is being overloaded with work, juggling multiple projects, family relationships, expectations that derive from comparisons, especially in the are- as I don't feel so secure in. Let's say I attend a meeting of female entrepreneurs and I am the one that did not meet her financial goals for the year, that can surely trigger me.

NB: How do you personally recognise you are becoming stressed? What are your "symptoms" and how do you address them?

KR: My body gets tense and I become snappy. If I get triggered, I notice negative self-talk creeping in.

NB: What personal strategies do you use to alleviate stress in the workplace?

KR: Over the years I developed self-care routines that work wonders in preventing stress in the work-place and in my life. The routines include yoga practice, meditation, breathwork, body and facial



massages, hydration of my body, sound therapy and working on my mindset, in which I incorporate different techniques such as hypnotherapy.

NB: Do you think that the modern pace of life is sustainable or so you think that collectively (and on a global scale) we need to slow down?

KR: In my professional opinion as a psychologist and wellbeing strategist, it is crucial to recognize the potential negative mental health consequences that can arise if we fail to slow down. The impact of a fast-paced lifestyle can lead to conditions such as burnout and depression. It is alarming to note that in the UK, a significant portion of the population, approximately 8 million people, which accounts for 12% of the population, rely on antidepressants for support.

According to the Labor Force Survey, when examining work-related ill health in 2021/22, it becomes evident that stress, depression, anxiety, and musculoskeletal disorders are the primary contributors. These conditions accounted for a significant number of lost workdays, with 17.0 million days lost due to stress, depression, or anxiety, and 7.3 million days lost due to musculoskeletal disorders.

On average, individuals suffering from these conditions took approximately 16.5 days off work. Howver, the duration varied depending on the specific health concern, with injuries resulting in an average

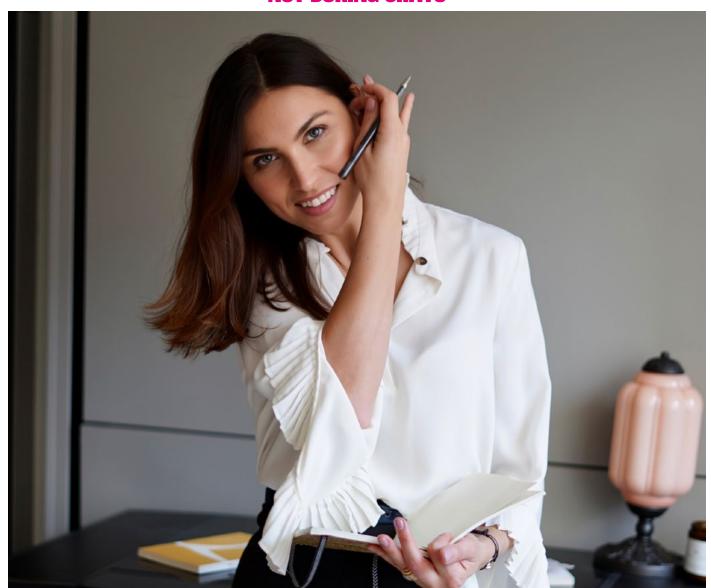
of 10.6 days off work, ill health cases at 17.2 days, stress, depression, or anxiety at 18.6 days, and musculoskeletal disorders at 15.2 days.

NB: Does the pursuit of wealth intrinsically bring with it a degree of stress?

KR: Generally yes, just like the pursuit of any other important goal. Typically pursuit of wealth is associated with perseverance and sacrifices, which often includes sacrificing health. Even people like Elon Musk, Arianna Huffington or Grace Beverly (founder of Tala, who bulid an empire before the age of 30) publicly admit having experienced burnout.

However, people differ in their approach to pursuing goals and in their values. For example Warren Buffet, one of the world's most successful investors, is known for his calm and patient approach to investing. He advocated long-term value investing and avoiding unnecessary stress. Also the founder of IKEA, Ingvar Kamprad built a global retail brand while advocating maintaining a simple and frugal lifestyle, which helped him avoid excessive stress. Sara Blakely, the founder of Spanx, a popular shapewear brand, built her business empire from scratch. She has been open about her approach to maintaining a positive and low-stress mindset, incorporating practices like meditation and gratitude practice.

NB: Conversely, and following on from that last question, can increased wealth in itself alleviate



stress?

KR: Monetary wealth doesn't mean much if you dont have knowledge or motivation to create a low-stress lifestyle. Obviously, on one hand monetary wealth can make your life comfortable, yet if you have unresolved issues, such as traumas that trigger you and cause you stress, the money will not make much of a difference in the long run.

NB: How important do you feel that diet and exercise are in promoting mental wellbeing?

KR: They go hand in hand. Diet and exercise are massive factors impacting mental wellbeing. Take something as simple as hydration of the body, it makes a massive difference in how you feel, how your brain operates and how productive you are.

NB: The number of people who are stressed out and taking prescribed medications is increasing all the time, what are your personal thoughts on the prescription of pharmaceuticals to alleviate the effects of stress?

KR: Referring to the data which I have mentioned before that 8 million people in the UK are cur-rently on antidepressants, 2 million patients have been

on antidepressants for 5 years and the number of prescribed antidepressants has been rising rapid-ly since 2016 (source: NHS). These numbers indicate that there is a problem related to stress, and a good percentage of society stays on antidepressants, even though they have side effects and do not always solve the problem.

Antidepressants are the go-to solution for depressive disorder, which is a complex disease and can be caused by various factors. I strongly believe that in some of the cases, particularly the mild and moderate ones, prescribed medications could be avoided if people had better awareness, better wellbeing, and willingness to eradicate stress at its source, such as dealing with their own unresolved traumas. Because we live in a culture that advocates quick solutions, instead of having a healthy lifestyle and building mental resilience with psychotherapy or hypnotherapy, people pop a pill. Personally, I believe that good percentage of cases of chronic stress and depression can be avoided, all it takes is willingness to invest in prevention.

NB: Do you think that (in some cases) prescribing (or even self-prescribing) pharmaceuticals is counter-productive in that it targets the effect and not the cause of stress?

KR: Yes, even though it is a generalisation, as every case should be looked with care and attention, to diagnose it correctly and apply the best treatment, in the cases of chronic stress, burnout and mild depression pharmaceuticals can be counterproduct tive as they do not treat the cause of the problem, simply help you to function better.

NB: We experienced one of your gong Baths at Audio Show Deluxe. Can you explain to readers what the idea behind this is and how it can help people?

KR: A Gong Bath is a deeply relaxing and therapeutic practice that offers a unique and immersive sound experience. During the gong bath concert, or session, participants lie down in a comfortable position, close their eyes, and allow themselves to be embraced by a symphony of resonant sounds.

Sound baths are conducted using several instruments apart from gongs, like crystal bowls, chimes, hang pans, harps, and drums. Together, they produce a mesmerizing cascade of tones and vibrations that reverberate throughout the space.

The therapeutic effects of gong vibrations during a gong bath are thought to stem from a combination of factors, including the principles of sound therapy and the physiological and psychological responses to the vibrations.

Gong vibrations during a gong bath are believed to have therapeutic effects due to how sound therapy works and how our bodies respond to the vibrations. When a gong is played, it produces various tones and harmonics that can resonate with our cells, tissues, and organs, helping to restore balance and harmony. Additionally, the principle of entrainment comes into play, where our brainwaves, heart rate, and breathing may sync with the rhythmic patterns of the gong, inducing deep relaxation and coherence within our bodies.

NB: Do you think that "rituals" such as the Gong Bath are simply structures within which we as individuals give ourselves a period of time where our sole focus is wholly away from the rigours of daily life, or do you think that there is sonically something going on with (specifically) the sounds of gongs that help promote relaxation and alleviate stress?

KR: Its both. It is a ritual, it can be relaxation, meditative practice, an opportunity to slow down and exercise a bit of mental self-care. Gong baths definitely bring relaxation and stress reduction as they induce a deep state of relaxation. The vibrations created by the gongs have a calming effect on the nervous system, helping to reduce stress, anxiety, and tension. Sounds created by gongs can influence

brainwave activity. Typically, participants' brainwaves shift from a beta state (active thinking) to an

alpha or theta state (relaxed or dream-like states).

NB: Gongs have been used for centuries during meditation in Eastern cultures, and from personal experience their effect is obvious, but have there been any scientific studies carried out to explain their effects? I suppose the use of the OM sound is linked to this too?

KR: Yes, indeed. There are several studies that report the positive impact of gong baths on our mental and physical health.

Complementary Therapies in Medicine (2016) reported reduction in self-reported stress and anxiety levels after using gong baths.

Musicological Annual describes a study conducted in Slovenia in 2015 which has shown that all users define the effect of sound vibrations as healing and/or relaxing. They testified on achieving durable inner peace, on better physical and mental wellbeing, fresh impetus for work, desire for personal growth and other positive effects. (Pesek, A., & Bratina, T. (2016). Gong and Its Therapeutic Meaning. Musicological Annual, 52(2), 137–161. https://doi.org/10.4312/mz.52.2.137-161)

One study by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Library of Medicine (NLM) looked at people with fibromyalgia (a long-term condition that causes pain all over the body). It discovered that: "ten treatments (twice per week for five weeks) of low-frequency sound stimulation decreased pain, allowing nearly three-quarters of participants to reduce pain medication".

NB: Gong Baths are a sonic experience and as a species we have used music to aid relaxation, do you think that there is something going on with brain activity when we listen to certain kinds of music that promotes mental wellbeing?

KR: Certainly, the sound has an impact on our brain. Interestingly, the brain's electrical activity is measured in Hertz just as it is the case for sound. The human brain produces electrical activity in the form of brainwaves, which can be categorized into different frequency bands. These frequency bands are associated with different states of consciousness and mental activity. The most common brainwave frequencies include:

Delta Waves (0.5-4 Hz): These are slow brainwaves associated with deep sleep, relaxation, and unconsciousness.

Theta Waves (4-8 Hz): Theta waves are related to deep relaxation, creativity, meditation, and light sleep. They are also associated with the dream state and the unconscious mind.

Alpha Waves (8-12 Hz): Alpha waves are present during relaxed and calm states of wakefulness. They

are associated with a relaxed and alert mind.

Beta Waves (12-30 Hz): Beta waves are linked to active thinking, concentration, and alertness. They are dominant during normal waking consciousness and cognitive tasks.

Gamma Waves (30-100 Hz): Gamma waves are the fastest brainwaves and are associated with heightened perception, focus, and cognitive processing. They are often linked to states of deep concentration and heightened awareness.

When exposed to the sounds of gong baths, the brain tends to synchronize with the rhythm and frequency of the sound waves. This phenomenon is known as brainwave entrainment. The gong sounds typically have a wide range of frequencies, including low-frequency components that resonate with the slower brainwave frequencies, such as delta and theta waves.

During a gong bath, the rhythmic and repetitive sounds of the gongs can induce a state of deep relaxation and help calm the mind. This can lead to a shift in brainwave activity towards slower frequencies like theta waves. When the brain synchronizes with the lower-frequency sounds, it causes the brain, heart and respiratory rates to slow down and increase the release of melatonin, endorphin and dopamine chemicals that are linked to feelings of relaxation and expanded mental clarity.

NB: Are there certain frequencies that aid relaxation more than others? We have all heard of the alleged benefits of 432 HZ, and some lower frequencies (8-13 and 14-30) have been linked to decreased anxiety and increased concentration, what do you think is going on in the brain with these frequencies?

KR: I can't comment on the 432Hz frequency as the data is conflicting and my experience limited. As per the lower frequencies, just like I mentioned earlier, both scientific data and my own experience indicate that Alpha and Theta frequencies not only relax us, but also have thera-peutic benefits. As a Theta Healing Practitioner I can assure you that entering this frequency allows you to improve focus and creativity as well as access early childhood memories and heal traumas. Entering Theta brainwaves, which is a dream-like state, which everyone experiences daily when we wake up and fall asleep, allows to access our subconscious mind. Thanks to that it is possible to have profound thera-peutic effects in a timespan of a session or two.

NB: If I'm a stressed-out individual, have recognised that fact and realised I need to act in some way, what should I do first?

KR: Create and implement your wellbeing strategy. Wellbeing is a balance between stressors, challenges and daily life problems and the recourses we

have to balance the stressors out. A good strategy will be like a tailor-made suit, highly suited for you, making you feel at your best. I avoid giving generic advice, which is widely available anyway, as I believe that the best and fastest results are obtained when we look into two factors: the root of the problem that is causing your stress, and your lifestyle.

NB: If we agree that listening to music can help with relaxation and stress management, do you think that better quality playback and increased fidelity give better results? I ask this as I have an associate who has worked in China with people in catatonic states and believes that music played through high-end systems has a better effect that music played on lower quality systems. Can this be translated to more workday situations?

KR: I couldn't agree more. There is much research data indicating that lower quality audio systems have a negative effect on human function. For example a recent research done by EPOS in Denmark indicated that poor audio systems impacts productivity of workers in a negative way, as their brains have to work 35% harder in order to process information. "Poor audio causes our brains to work harder to interpret information and experience 35% more effort listening. The brain can become much slower to respond to sound as it finds it trickier to switch between stimuli."

NB: Is music in the workplace a good thing or a distraction?

KR: It depends on several factors. People differ in their preference to having music while they are working, not to mention the level of sound and type of music. Some people will find music relaxing and helps them to focus, others terribly distracting. In order to look after wellbeing of workers and reduce stress levels in the workplace I would recommend creating a chill out room with relaxation music playing, preferably through a good quality audio system.

NB: Without a doubt there are going to be people reading this interview that will level Gong Baths and the like as hippy-dippy nonsense. How would you address these people?

KR: Dear skeptic, congratulations on reading the entire interview. The fact that you reached this far indi-cates that you are intrigued by the topic. You will be pleased to know that I have been there as well. As much as I enjoyed the relaxing vibes of gong baths, I was skeptical about the healing properties of gongs. There is enough science based evidence to convince any skeptic, that gong baths have a profound positive effect on our health, besides that the best way is to simply have a first hand experience and feel it in your bones.

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Geology Studio's Open 45 Credenza is a locally crafted, all-in-one listening credenza designed for vinyl record enthusiasts, allowing you to dock iPads, iPhones, and headphones alongside your digital gear. It encourages you to showcase and enjoy your vinyl collection by keeping your records in sight and ready to play. The credenza features a slotted interior for movable divider panels, customizable shelves, and a hidden cord channel, providing a seamless and personalized setup. With meticulous craftsmanship and the flexibility to accommodate custom requests, Geology Studio, run by Adam and Vanessa Friedman, creates objects that adapt to changing home needs and bring new inspiration to everyday life..





great meal at St. John in London followed by a Patti Smith show upon my return home to Malmö got me thinking about covers and remakes

Before going further, it may be best to establish just what is meant by a cover and remake.

In popular music the first recorded version of a song is considered the 'original' recording. A cover or cover version is a recording by a performer other than the performer of the original recording. Interestingly, originally a cover referred to a version of a song released around the same time as the original to compete with it or expand its market reach (more on that later). What distinguishes a cover from a remake, is that with a cover the artist duplicates or reinterprets a song in their own style, while in an arrangement that remains essentially true to the original. A remake, on the other hand, the artist changes the style of the original, effectively reworking it into a version all their own.

The meal at St. John began with a Fergroni, essentially a version of a classic Negroni created by Fergus Henderson, founder of this ground-breaking noseto-tail restaurant just around the corner from the historic Smithfield Market in London. Fergus plus Negroni begets a Fergroni and it was delicious! But was it a cover or a remake?

Shortly after returning from London, and with the memory of the meal and Fergroni still in my mind, I attended the last of two sold out Patti Smith shows in Malmö. Midway through her set, Smith covered "All Along the Watchtower," which was originally recorded by its composer, Bob Dylan. But this night it sounded as if Patti was covering Jimi Hendrix's remake of the song before launching into "Gloria," a remake of the Van Morrison's classic composition, originally recorded by Them. "Gloria" was released in 1961 as the B-side of the single "Baby Please" Don't Go," which was itself a cover of a blues standard. In 1966, it became a hit when covered by the seminal punk band The Shadows of Knight. In 1975, the Patti Smith Group recorded their first album, "Horses." The album fused punk rock and spoken poetry. "Gloria" is the lead off song, with Smith's opening words: "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine", added from her poem "Oath."

In the strange way my mind works, this got me wondering if Fergus's Fergroni was a cover or a remake, which in turn inspired an all-consuming consideration of those terms and my relationship to much beloved music and cocktail versions and variations.

This is a topic that is endless, so some boundaries for our purposes here are needed, and for that reason, jazz, songbook, classical, and folk revival recordings will not be considered, with the focus being on pop music, while further ignoring the aspect of sampling (no matter how much I love P.M. Dawn's "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss," based heavily and effectively on Spandau Ballet's "True").

Christmas albums, which seem to be a requirement for any recording artist of a certain stature to release, will also be excluded as we quietly back out of the room as David Bowie and Bing Crosby uncomfortably begin their cover of "The Little Drummer Boy."

Additionally, in the age of YouTube, video covers will be excluded, as that is also an equally endless topic of its own, with careers of current superstars like Justin Bieber beginning with bedroom covers going viral, combined with professional and amateur concert footage flooding social media in all forms, including television talent show contests and contestants.

However, it must be said that voiding this topic is a bit painful, as one of joys of this social media age is the multitude of truly remarkable video recordings that can be found online, such as Maggie Rogers "Light On" in a truly joyous La Blogothèque live acoustic version, with a choir of fans and friends, filmed in a single sinuous take that goes from an apartment to the streets of Paris, with a wonderful visual play on the phrase "If you leave the light on / Then I'll leave the light on." For those who might want to see it and the many other remarkable clips available on the highly recommended La Blogothèque site, click this link.

In fact, this is particularly painful in that I believe, along with my dear friend Ernesto, who runs the Barcelona branch of his family's Supersonido audio video stores in Spain, in using video clips, often in lo-res, to demo hi-res systems to great effect, and in some cases bringing the audience to tears, reinforcing my belief that any system, whether two or multi-channel, should be able to play anything to a level that is ultimately satisfying, and for the entire household.

Ironically some covers of Beiber's songs can find greater emotional depth and nuance than his original recordings of his songs might provide, suggesting that the most important aspect or nature of a cover may not be that the interpretation may be better or more interesting than the original, providing new insight into the song or recording, but rather the very act of curation, of selecting that specific song for consideration by a contemporary audience or differing demographic.

For example, currently country artist Luke Combs' cover of Tracy Chapman's Fast Car is rocketing up the Billboard country music charts. And while I am pleased to think that this will mean that Tracy Chapman will become the first black woman to score a number one country song as sole writer, and possibly introducing to a new audience what in my opinion is a seminal recording artist of the late 80's,

Luke's version really adds only a country accent and slide steel guitar, bringing no real added dimension or musical insight to the song, although it has been suggested that his maintaining the female gender of the protagonist is "brave" amidst current tensions surrounding gender and pronouns.

Jonas Blue with Dakota and Tobtok with Rivers recorded club-style covered "Fast Car" in the midteens, and like Luke speaking to a country audience expressing conventional lyrical concerns of the desperation of small-town existence without an avenue of escape, these covers may speak to an EDM audience in a similar way, but more celebratory fashion, that the original may not.

In Luke, Jonas Blue, and Tobtok's defence, it is hard to imagine anyone improving upon a recording that so successfully combines composition, performance, and production as Tracy's and producer David Kershembaum's original recording of "Fast Car." But all their covers do two things, in providing a cross-over moment that may allow them to broaden their respective audiences and simply bring this astounding song to the attention of a new generation. This latter role seems more frequently these days to be the purview of movies and television series that trade in nostalgia of a recent vintage. The best example being Kate Bush "Running Up That Hill" phenomenon of last summer, in that both songs, Kate's and Tracey's, have proven durable enough to transcend their time periods, introduce themselves to unfamiliar young listeners, and reintroduce themselves to older listeners who had been missing their respective powers.

On the flip side is the convention in the recording industry of the 1950's, coinciding with the rise of teenage culture and buying power, of covers being recorded and released nearly simultaneously with the original to effectively increase broader market penetration. Troublingly, this all too often falls into the arena of cultural appropriation, with white artists recording pale, pun intended, versions of music originally recorded by artists of colour, done in part to make the recordings more palpable to a "particular" audience to increase sales.

This usually meant recordings of what would have been called "race" records by "boy or girl next door " white artists such as the incredibly popular in his day Pat Boone (who would attempt to recharge his career and nice guy image in 1997 by recording an album of hard rock and heavy metal standards In a "Metal Mood: No More Mr. Nice Guy" in 1997, forty years after the height of his fame).

Recently, Wes Anderson's latest movie features the sweet Chas McDevitt and Nancy Whiskey UK cover of Freight Train written by Elizabeth Cotton when she was 11 or 12, inspired by the train that stopped in Carrboro, North Carolina, which she could watch and hear from her home, and originally recorded by The Seegers, with a US cover version done by the

Michael Stewart Quartet in the US, all in 1957.

Cracking this mould most famously would be Elvis Presley with his version of "Hound Dog," and while he did present a more dangerous public persona that might corrupt the youth of the day, including hips not fit for the television cameras, his somewhat up-tempo, "slap-happy" cover of Big Mama Thornton's tune does not really capture the slow burn rage and frustration of her bluesy original.

Similarly, The Beatles, probably the most covered artists in history (with "Yesterday" alone being at the top of most recorded songs of all time), began their career covering rhythm and blues recordings in live shows and most notably with "Twist and Shout," the closing song of their 1963 debut studio album "Please, Please Me." "Twist and Shout" was originally recorded by the Top Notes, but it did not become a hit in the record charts until it was reworked by The Isley Brothers in 1962, with even greater chart success with The Beatles' version featuring John Lennon's ferocious vocals.

And speaking of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones first hit was

"I Wanna Be Your Man," a Beatles penned tune, and like The Beatles, The Sones started out, and continued throughout their career, covering US rhythm and blues records.

The Talking Heads are another good example of a band inspiring covers that seem never to fail to get everyone up and dancing, including the king of Sweden at the close of the most recent Polar Prize concert where "Once in a Lifetime" was performed by Joshua Idehen, honouring award recipient Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, as well as Anjelique Kidjo, who did her own cover of the song in 2012, and who was dancing with the king.

Shawn Colvin transformed "Naïve Melody" into a remake that never fails to move me. In an interview Shawn described the process of its creation: "When I saw the Talking Heads film, "Stop Making Sense", I was bowled over. I wanted to cover something of theirs but was stumped. I knew "Psycho Killer" wouldn't fly. "Naive Melody" was a love song, but maybe too cute. Hmmmm.... I decided to take a close look at the lyrics just for the hell of it. Well! Talk about depth! The coolest, sweetest love song I'd ever heard. I decided to try it. I slowed it down (as I tend to do). It turned into a kind of lullaby. I just call it "Home", and it fills me up every time I sing it. Who knew?" Home was included in an extraordinary album of covers, called "Cover Girl," in which Shawn pulls similar subtle nuances from each of the songs she covers that simply do not exist in the original recordings, whether by the Police, Tom Waits, or The Talking Heads.

And this brings up the topic of cover albums, which can fall into several categories, such as a single artist covering a variety of songs from a variety of artists,

like Shawn's "Cover Girl," or the tribute variety, in which multiple artists provide their interpretation of a song from the catalogue of a single artist. Examples of the latter include various artists contributing to "A Tribute to Joni Mitchell," or keeping with Joni, "River: The Joni Letters," a jazz inflected studio album by Herbie Hancock and various vocalist.

And as I am writing in Sweden, Erasure's "ABBA-esque" EP must be mentioned, if for no other reason than it is ABBA, but also because it provided Erasure with their first and only number one in the UK singles chart and became a number-one hit in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, and, of course, in Sweden.

Elvis Costello released "Almost Blue," an underappreciated album of country covers recorded in Nashville, which only now is being reassessed and appreciated as it should. And then there is Todd Rundgren's Faithful, in which Todd does not really cover, but rather reproduces, in a manner "faithful" to the original, to what purpose is possibly the most important question. While possibly an example of the most devotional extreme of this tendency is Ryan Adams' "1982," replicating in its entirety Taylor Swift's album of the same name.

Cover albums recorded by those artists who are most covered by other artists add yet another twist. I think of Dylan's recently released "Shadow Kingdom," revisiting earlier recordings of his to great effect. However, in my mind the greatest results have come from Joni Mitchell's cover albums, "Both Sides Now" and its follow-up "Travelogue." Her rendition of "Both Sides Now" from the album of the same name provides for me a far richer experience than Judy Collins' cover or even Joni's original recording, with her voice having shifted into a deep alto providing gravitas that is further supported by the swirling strings of the accompanying orchestra.

And don't get me started on orchestral versions, either with the band being supported by a symphony or simply a symphony orchestra playing instrumental arrangements. Efterklang's performance of their Piramida album with the Copenhagen Philharmonic, resulting in the "Piramida Concert "album, comes immediately to mind, transcending an already remarkable album. Similarly, Noordpool Orchestra's "Radiohead: A Jazz Symphony" offers an intriguing set of remakes, with a standout track being their version of "Weird Fishes, a song covered by many others. This is in addition to the myriad of other equally satisfying Radiohead cover recordings that are available. Or maybe Nirvana, themselves providers of great covers, on cellos might appeal. Well then, take a listen to Redi Hasa's "My Nirvana," a demonstration quality disc brought to my attention by Mark Alcock, of UK distributor Karma AV.

An offshoot of this orchestral tree are the recent recordings reworking classical works, the best example being Max Richter's reinterpretation of Vivaldi's Four Seasons as part of the Deutsche Gramophone's "Recomposed" series, with the opening "Spring 1" being simply sublime. But I said we would not be considering classical, so will move on.

Translation of a song into another language yields an additional wrinkle to the cover story, with an example of "Gloria" by Laura Branigan being originally an Italian song by Umberto Tozzi. Branigan's version isn't a straight cover, though; her Gloria is lonely and promiscuous, with lyrics that are sarcastic and contemptuous, while Tozzi's original gushes almost worshipfully about a woman who is well out of his league.

More recently, Metallica's 'The Unforgiven' has been transformed by Inuk musician Elisapie, who sings in indigenous Inuktitut, on her 'Inuktitut' album, which features similar interpretations of songs by Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Queen, Cyndi Lauper, and others, each with a personal story behind them. The album represents Elisapie personal journey, tied to specific times in her life, and as a result the songs are informed by a more introverted and meditative interpretation.

Some covers and remakes fall painfully flat and uninspired, such as Tom Jones partnering with The Cardigans to cover Burnin' Down the House, while others may be overly inspired, such as William Shatner's more than cringe worthy spoken word versions of Tambourine Man and Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds from the cover album The Transformed Man.

Ultimately a pattern can be seen in that the most effective original or cover, tend to be the slower, more thoughtful and considered, more emotional versions. Significantly, it is when the cover becomes a remake, reworked by the artist so successfully that they effectively own the song, making it their own.

The best example of this may be Joe Cocker's transformation of The Beatles "With a Little Help from My Friends," bringing a level of desperate despair simply not found in the jaunty original "mop-top" version.

Similarly, "Hey Joe," the Billy Roberts' song that gained fans in the Los Angeles music scene of the mid-1960s, led to fast-paced recordings in 1965 and 1966 by The Leaves, the Standells, the Surfaris, Love, The Music Machine, and The Byrds, to be transformed into a slowed down and more contemplative rock classic of brilliance and power by Jimi Hendrix.

The original recording of "Highway 61 Revisited," as so often with Dylan, is a court jester's satirical burlesque where Dave Alvin's remake deftly mines the menace that lies within the song.

"Such Great Heights," originally recorded by The Postal Service, was covered by Iron and Wine, prominently featured on the Garden State soundtrack,



and to my mind is infinitely superior to the original, finding a level of emotional engagement and depth in its intimate folk rendition absent from the synth-pop original (although my friend Fritz would argue for the original's superiority, and passionately).

This raises the spectre of the "first heard version is most often best liked" effect, in that I became aware of "Such Great Hights" in the cover version, falling in love with it at the same time I was completely devoted to the Iron and Wine's album out at the same time, which seems to dwell on the melancholy, if not gently macabre, in a way that resonated deeply with me, reflected in the album's title, "Our Endless Numbered Days." While Fritz knew and loved first both the song and the album from which it comes, "Give Up."

Other great examples of covers that effectively are remakes and the artist who recorded them taking ownership of a song include (and in no order, because how could you... with original recording artist / cover artist):

- "All Along the Watchtower" Bob Dylan / Jimi Hendrix
- "Tambourine Man" Bob Dylan / The Byrds
- "Baltimore" Randy Newman / Nina Simone
- "I Will Always Love You" Dolly Parton / Whitney Houston
- "Respect" Otis Redding / Aretha Franklin
- "Take Me to the River" Al Green / Talking Heads
- "Valerie" The Zutons / Mark Ronson & Amy Winehouse
- "Crazy" Willie Nelson/Patsy Cline
- "Hurt" Nine Inch Nails / Johnny Cash
- "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" Rolling Stone
 / Devo
- "Me and Bobby McGee" Kris Kristofferson / Janis Joplin
- "Stop Your Sobbing" The Kinks/Pretenders
- "Tainted Love" Gloria Jones / Soft Cell
- "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" Judy Garland / Israel "Iz" Kamakawiko'ole
- "Woodstock" Joni Mitchell / Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young
- "You've Got a Friend" Carole King / James Taylor

The above is certainly not exhaustive and I am sure I have forgotten some of my and certainly many of your favourites, but also anticipate that many of you did not know the original, so powerful a presence are their respective remakes.

Finally, there are those that profess to not being fond of covers.

Prince complained quite a bit in interviews about covers and the applicable law that deprived him and other songwriters and original recording artists the revenue and recognition he felt were being denied, going so far as to state that there should be only one recognised recorded version. Ironically, this is from an artist who achieved great success by others

covering his songs. Most notably Sinead O'Connor' version "Nothing Compares 2U," a song written and composed by Prince for his side project the Family; the song featured on their 1985 debut album, "The Family," which only became a world-wide hit in the cover version. Prince himself was known to record covers, like Hendrix's "Red House" on "Power of Soul: A Tribute to Jimi Hendrix," resulting in, and appropriately enough for the artist known as Prince, "Purple House."

And then there is the case of "Scarborough Fair," famously covered by Simon and Garfunkel. The original recording in this case, as there were previous recordings of the song, was made by Martin Carthy in an arrangement of the traditional ballad "Scarborough Fair." This was adapted, without acknowledgement, by Paul Simon on the Simon and Garfunkel album recording "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme" in 1966. This caused a rift between the pair which was not resolved until Simon invited Carthy to sing the song with him on-stage at the Hammersmith Apollo in 2000.

While there are more who may not appreciate covers, I am not the first nor alone in this fascination with them, with many more than one website dedicated solely to the art of covers, with commentary and lists galore to be found at such sites as:

- Cover Me Songs at https://www.coverme-songs.com/2022/12/best-cover-albums-2022.html
- Digital Dream Door at https://digitaldream-door.com/pages/best coversongs.html>

The Cocktail Covers and Remakes

Now to the cocktail covers. The Negroni is in effect a remake of the classic Americano, in which sparkling water is added to sweet vermouth and bitters, in equal portions. As the legend has it, in 1919 the Italian Count Emilio Negroni asked a bartender to strengthen his favourite cocktail, the Americano, by swapping the usual sparkling water for gin. This has led to countless different versions, or covers and remakes, of which Fergus Henderson's Fergroni is but one variation:

"When I was younger, I lived in Florence,' says Henderson, 'in a vain attempt to learn Italian. After appalling results, I was called home. On my final evening it seemed right to head to my favourite bar (sadly no longer there), and that night the barman seemed to understand and capture my mood in his execution of the Negroni. Something mystical happened, a magic of sorts, and that evening I learnt a little more about what a Negroni should be.'

The recipe, should you require it, runs thus... 50% gin, 30% Punt e Mes and 20% Campari. Combine all the spirits in a glass with ice and stir thoroughly.

Garnish with strips of lemon - strictly no orange.

It has all the best parts of the popular cocktail, but the quantities of gin are subtly increased, and the vermouth is a Punt e Mes, specifically."

The quote and recipe above are taken from a simply lovely article about Fergus and the Fergroni published online by Drakes at this link: https://us.drakes.com/blogs/news/drakes-st-john-fergroni-recipe-story

There is a bite within the richness of the Fergroni, made with the darker, more powerful, and deeper, flavours of Punte e Mes, and greater proportion of gin, that is an interesting contrast with the seemingly more nuanced, mellow, and rich sweetness of the traditional Negroni, made with a more conventional sweet vermouth, like my favoured Antica Formula.

This results in my cover of the Fergroni, which I call the 1-2-3 (or more accurately the 2-4-6) Negroni:

- 2 cl Punte Mes
- 4 cl Campari
- 6 cl Gin

For the gin, given the greater proportion, I find it best to use a London Dry as opposed to the higher alcohol Tom Cat or Navy Strength Gin styles for better balance and integration.

The classic Negroni is generally equal parts of gin, Campari, and sweet vermouth, which allows for a greater variety of styles, both in flavour and alcohol percentage, than the Fergroni, though some pros, not unlike Fergus, prefer one-and-a-half parts gin or even two parts gin.

Component selection is key, as there many bitters beyond my rock and foundation that is Campari (after all, there is much more that can be with Aperol than to spritz it;-), vermouths beyond my favoured Formul Antica and Fergus's Punt e Mes, with the number of gins in every possible version, especially more locally produced samples worth exploring, bewildering, and growing. But don't be deterred by the overwhelming embarrassment of riches that might be available and put you off, the beauty of any three-part cocktail is the ease of mixing and matching your personal preferences.

Ultimately my preference is as a hybrid, the Americano Negroni – a more traditional even proportioned Negroni of Campari bitter, Antic Formula sweet red vermouth, and a balanced London Dry Gin, with a splash of sparkling water, as I am finding that a splash of sparkling water in almost any cocktail or plain spirit, either on the rocks or neat, benefits from the blending effects this addition can provide.

Negroni remakes, or as my friends at a favourite pizza place in town serving great cocktails, Opopoppa, calls them "mutant negronis" are many, and while not nearly as many as pop song covers, there are still a surprising number of variations of the Negroni, with the basic three elements being variously

substituted.

- Negroni Sbagliato sbagliato translates to "mistaken", resulting in "mistaken negroni," substituting gin for sparkling wine, providing a slightly softer and lighter drink not unlike my preferred Americano Negroni.
- White Negroni consists of gin, Suze, a bittersweet liqueur and Lillet Blanc, a wine-based aperitif. The former plays the role of Campari, while the latter the vermouth in a way that is surprising light and refreshing (particularly surprising for Linette and Stu, the publishers of this not boring rag, who have a strong dislike for Suze, but don't be misled by their limited palettes and give it a try for yourself).
- Mezcal Negroni substituting gin for smoky mezcal pairs surprising well with the Campari and sweet vermouth, red or white, for a complex expression of the Negroni.
- Kingston Negroni swaps high proof rum for gin, demanding a powerful sweet vermouth, like Punt e Mes, and benefitting from a charred wedge of pineapple.
- Quill a classic Negroni with an absinthe rinse, adding brightness and depth along with a hint of anise or liquorice. I cannot recommend this cover or remake enough, as there is a transformation that goes beyond expectations (but then that could be expected from the all too often magical addition of the green fairy that is the much beloved absinthe).
- Boulevardier created just a few years after the original, this Negroni cover has become a classic. In his 1927 book "Barflies and Cocktails," Harry MacElhone credits Erskine Gwynne, the publisher of Paris expat magazine "Boulevardier," with the drink, swapping gin in favor of bourbon or rye, adding richness and warmth to the classic Negroni. Adding a wash of absinthe, as above in the Quill take this to the next level!
- The Old Pal an offshoot of the Boulevardier that was also created by MacElhone around the same time. As the story goes, MacElhone named the cocktail for William "Sparrow" Robinson, the sports editor for The New York Herald in Paris, and effectively substitutes the sweet vermouth for dry vermouth.

Another favourite bar in town, regrettably recently closed, was Cuccurucucù, where the wizards behind the bar, Bea and Malin, created, among many great and entirely unique cocktails based on their home-made ingredients, the "Yet Another Negroni," consisting of house made plum and lilac liqueur, Alfred Maestro la Cosa (the Thing) sweet wine, Claus Preisnger Limestone red wine, and a juice made from rescued grapefruit, blackberry, black currant, and thyme. I will miss it, as I know will never be able to duplicate it.



For the non-alcoholic

There are the non-alcoholic substitutes for gin, bitters, and vermouth, as well as pre-mixed bottled non-alcoholic negronis (NA-gronis or no-gronis, as it were), but I find it more interesting to turn to versatile shrub-based recipes, and in this case a blackberry and black currant shrub made with malt vinegar that is a cover or remake that gives a nice sense of the negroni without the alcohol.

Note: for a quick shrub, simply blend one part each fruit and water in a blender, then bring to boil that liquid with one part sugar, and when that liquid has cooled add, in this case, one half part malt vinegar.

Covers of my own making

The thing about a cover of a basic drink recipe is that it makes you think "I could do that!" and you can! For example, with the Old Pal as the original, the following covers came to be made with the spirits I had at hand, essentially pairing Campari and dry vermouth with

• Bourbon, using Michter's Bourbon (a favourite)

- Whisky, using Mackmyra Birch Sap Swedish Single Malt Whiskey (of course)
- Akvavit, using Malmö Akvavit (naturally)
 With each of them offering subtle and enjoyable differences in flavour from the cocktail that inspired them.

And a final flourish, or garnish as it were, to close... The traditional garnish for a Negroni is either a slice or twist of orange. Fergus however adamantly prefers a lemon twist for the Fergroni, and I have found that I prefer using amarena cherries, my absolute favourites being Fabbri Amarena or Luxardo Maraschino (but definitely not any of the American maraschino cherry perversions that are the unnatural by-product of a food culture too much based on processed foods of all kinds). And as you might be able to see from the images, even ghurka (salty or sweet cucumber pickles) can work with aromatics like akvavit or snaps in a very surprising way.

A garnish, as with any cocktail or cover, it is up to the creator, so enjoy them all!

PLEASE DRINK RESPONSIBLY

YOUR HIFI HOROSCOPE

Gasp in wonder as OUP audiophile astrologer in residence foretells your Hifi future



Aries (March 21 - April 19): Prepare for a dynamic audio adventure, Aries! This month, your favourite tunes will serve as your personal soundtrack. Whether you're at work or play, don't be surprised if

you find yourself conducting imaginary orchestras in your head. Just be careful not to get too carried away and start humming loudly during important meetings!

YOUR HIFI HOROSCOPE

Taurus (April 20 - May **20)**: Taurus, you've got a serious case of music addiction this month. You're on a quest for the perfect sound, meticulously fine-tuning your playlists and adjusting the bass just right. Remember to take breaks from your sonic exploration and indulge in some live music. But be warned: your dance moves may attract more attention than you bargained for!

Gemini (May 21 - June 20): Gemini, your music taste is as versatile as your personality this month. From classical symphonies to head-banging rock anthems, you're on a sonic rollercoaster ride. Embrace this diversity and let your musical interests flourish. Just be cautious not to become a one-person band trying to play all the instruments simultaneously. Remember, less is more!

Cancer (June 21 - July 22): This month, Cancer, your inner audiophile is in full bloom. You're like a human sound system, emitting soothing melodies and harmonies wherever you go. Your favourite music becomes your emotional anchor, providing a soundtrack for your daily life. But don't be surprised if you find yourself shedding a tear or two when a particularly moving song comes on. Let the music

heal your soul!

Leo (July 23 - August 22): Leo, prepare to step into the limelight with your newfound musical prowess. You're chaneling your inner rock star this month, belting out tunes in the shower and strutting like Mick Jagger down the street. Remember, though, not everyone appreciates impromptu performances at the grocery store. So, save your grand acts for the stage, and let your inner diva shine!

Virgo (August 23 - September 22): Attention to detail is your middle name this month, Virgo. You've become a discerning music critic, analysing every note and lyric with precision. Your playlists are meticulously organized, and you may even consider alphabetizing your vinyl collection. Just remember to take a break from your sonic perfectionism and let loose every once in a while. Dance like nobody's watching!

Libra (September 23 - October 22): Ah, Libra, you're a maestro of harmony this month. Your sense of balance extends to your musical taste, and you find joy in blending different genres and artists together. You have an uncanny ability to create the perfect playlist for any occasion. Just be careful not to get lost in the pur-

suit of musical equilibrium. It's okay to let the occasional dissonant chord surprise you!

Scorpio (October 23

- November 21): Scorpio, you're diving deep into the world of underground music this month. You're the connoisseur of hidden gems, unearthing obscure bands and rare recordings. Your commitment to the art is commendable, but don't get too carried away with your secret stash. Remember to resurface and share your musical discoveries with others. Spread the joy like a mixtape!

Sagittarius (November 22 - December 21): Sagittarius, you're embracing musical wanderlust this month. From tribal beats to folk melodies, you're on a global sonic expedition. Your headphones are your passport to different cultures and traditions. Just be cautious not to accidentally join a local band without understanding the language. Your enthusiastic tambourine playing might not always be appreciated!

Capricorn (December 22 - January 19): Capricorn, this month, your inner DJ is ready to take the stage. You're mixing beats like a pro, and your sense of rhythm is spot-on. You have the power to turn any gathering into an unforget-

table dance party. But don't let your newfound skills go to your head. Remember, nobody likes a DJ who plays "YMCA" on repeat. Keep the crowd grooving with fresh tunes!

Aquarius (January 20 - February 18): Aquarius, your affinity for music takes a rebellious turn this month. You're breaking free from the mainstream and seeking out the unconventional and avant-garde. You're the ultimate trendsetter, introducing your friends to artists they've never heard of. Just be cautious not to get too lost in the realm of experimental sounds. Remember, melody can be your friend too!

Pisces (February 19 -March 20): Pisces, your love for music knows no bounds this month. You're diving into the ocean of melodies, riding waves of sound. You're easily moved by music, and your emotions soar with each note. But be cautious not to become a walking musical cliché. Not every problem can be solved by singing Kumbaya. Sometimes, you just need a good pair of noise-cancelling headphones!

DISCLAIMER: Horoscopes are a load of old bollocks and should not be taken seriously in any way!