It's 102 – I got a fever and the only cure is more music!

Announcing a new contributor: Wayne Robins. Wayne is a veteran music critic and journalist, former editor of *Creem* and writer at *Newsday/New York Newsday*, book author and adjunct professor at St. John's University.

Time passages: It’s hard to believe that it’s been five years since high-end audio legend Harry Pearson passed away. Dan Schwartz and I both worked for Harry and the five-year anniversary seems like a timely occasion to tell our stories of what it was like to work for a man unlike any other before or since.

In this issue: J.I. Agnew concludes his *ode to cassette tape*. Professor Larry Schenbeck interviews musicologist *Steve Waksman*, who has unique insights into the career of legendary soundman Bill Hanley. Dan Schwartz tells us how he got into high-end audio, and he and I reminisce about Harry Pearson of *The Absolute Sound*. Bob Wood reminisces about radio station CHAM in the the Great White North. Roy Hall contributes a wonderful story about his *zaida* (grandfather).

Time for some country in these pages as Anne E. Johnson looks at the too-short life of Patsy Cline, and also examines Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Tom Gibbs covers Miles Davis and Harry Styles and tries to stay awake for Moby. Wayne Robins tells us why year-end best of lists ain’t what they used to be. John Seetoo looks at BandLab, a company you might not have heard of - but will. Finally, cartoonist James Whitworth finds that breaking up is hard to do, *Audio Anthropology* uncovers the untruth and other relics, and our *Parting Shot* captures an American musical master.
I worked for Harry Pearson full-time for many years in the late 1980s through early 1990s as technical director, managing editor and pop music reviewer and wrote for The Absolute Sound from 1984 to around 2000. I think it’s safe to say I got to know him as well as anyone.

Forgive me for being lengthy (and violating Copper’s semi-informal word-count rule)...believe me, I could go on and on. Harry was complex, and maybe I can impart a small if rambling glimpse here of what it was like to know the guy.

Like most I first became aware of Harry through reading The Absolute Sound, in the late 1970s when I was in my early twenties. When an issue arrived, time stopped. I would sneak the magazine into work and read it under the table, like a kid in elementary school with a comic book, and devour the reviews of the mythical equipment I thought I’d never hear or afford.

But especially I’d be amused, entertained, outraged, sometimes shocked and yes, even a little scared at what people would say to each other, which was often nasty, condescending, opinionated, egotistical and impassioned...with HP as the agent provocateur behind it all, who seemed to revel in the maelstrom. It only added to the mystique of The Great HP, who really was a mythical figure to us back then.

Over and over again I would read something and think, “Man, I’d never want to be in the middle of all this. These people are crazy!” Yet as a music lover and musician who wanted to hear my favorite music at its best, TAS was a compelling portal into a world of sound I dreamed of hearing.

In the early 1980s my friend and fellow audiophile Robert J. Reina (RIP), who I had gone to high school with and who was then writing for TAS, told me they were looking for a pop music reviewer. To make a long story short (maybe someday I’ll tell the long version if anyone cares and if I can remember all the details), Harry hired me. I was thrilled. Good lord, I was a TAS reviewer! I would be known by my initials! I had actually spoken to The Great HP (in conversations that already had ranged from the inspiring to the humorous to the snarky to the incomprehensible). I’m not worthy!

But I still hadn’t met him. That would come nine months later when I was invited to one of his now-legendary friendship parties at Sea Cliff (even the name of the town sounded exotic). I had to rent a white tuxedo. I was so nervous I was worried about not peeing in those white tux pants, and wouldn’t drive. (Bob Reina drove us.)

I got to the party, a whirlwind of people on the porch. Someone introduced us. The details are now a
blur. My first impression of Harry was a man of presence, a good-looking, confident guy, and when he spoke I felt somehow intimidated and put at ease at the same time. Lord knows what his first impression of me was.

I can’t remember what he first said to me. (I was having trouble processing the fact that here I was, a few years out of college and had somehow found myself in the center of the high-end audio world.) It was something humorous and complimentary. He then insisted he show me around the house. I was touched...here’s this big party going on with all these big shots and you’re taking the time to break away and show me around? And then for the first time I saw all that mythical equipment, now manifest—the Goldmund Reference turntable. The Infinity IRS V speaker system. The Audio Research SP-11 preamp.

I was awed. I had a wonderful time at the party and met so many of the great, great people who have been friends since.

And of course, I wanted to hear The System. Harry clearly knew what I was thinking and invited me to come back for a listen. I wasn’t holding my breath, as he had stood me up a few times before. But I wound up coming back a week later. We went to an excellent dinner (Harry always did have good, and expensive, taste in dining out; ask anyone who picked up the bill).

Finally, time to hear the fabled Sea Cliff system. I was about to enter the listening room when Harry stopped me, looked at me with frightening intensity and said:

“I want you to really think about this before you enter that room. Because if you do, your life will never be the same.”

(Holy sh*t, what am I getting myself into?) I hesitated.

For a second.

He was right. The sound...orders of magnitude beyond what I had ever heard. Soundstaging, imaging and a sense of weight and scale that truly did make you feel like you were in the presence of the performers and the orchestra. Incredible low end, midrange and highs that were more detailed than anything I thought possible. Clarity, transparency...mind-boggling. *Fiesta In Hi-Fi, Dafos*, that Propaganda record, *Lt. Kije*...record after record...astounding. But these words are a pale shell of the totality, the experience, the magnitude, the sheer beauty and majesty of the system. I knew my life had been irrevocably changed.

To the point where, a few months later at the prodding of Reina (hey, what are friends for?) I refinanced my condo so I could buy an SP-11, Mark Levinson No. 23, Goldmund Studio...seemed crazy but sometimes you just have to go for it.

When, a couple of years later, Harry asked me to work full-time for him, I had to think about it for more than just a second as I knew that if I did, my life was really going to change. Especially since, as a now-TAS insider, I knew how hard Harry could be to work for, alternately charming, temperament, always demanding the best when it came to the writing you handed in (he made me re-write an intro to a piece I did on Les Paul four times before he signed off on it), sometimes pissing manufacturers and staffers off, on occasion refusing to see manufacturers when they had come all the way to visit Sea Cliff, postponing appointments... Yes, Harry could piss people off, including me at times (to nuclear-force proportions on occasion, and I know there are people who view him less warmly than I do), but what friend, family member or lover do you know who doesn’t have foibles?
I took the job. I saw it as the opportunity of a lifetime. It was.

I essentially became Harry’s right-hand man for more than five years.

Harry and I were fundamentally different personalities, but maybe because of that I think we were perfectly suited to work with each other. We were opposites in many ways—he loved controversy while I was pained by it; he would stand people up (including me) while I would struggle to return everyone’s phone calls; he would push handing in copy to the limit and I was always on time (but man could Harry type fast!); I would love going to trade shows, meeting my friends in the industry and hearing new gear while he was mortified at the prospect (until later in his life, and even then he would go grudgingly).

Yet we shared so much. Above all, we loved music. I know that sounds like a cliché, a vacuous platitude, but it’s true. Music was joy, solace, excitement, emotional release. Music was it for us. (That never changed, did it?) When we would first hook up a revelatory component, and there were many, we would sit down, look at each other and laugh, literally shout, sometimes just shake our heads in awe at what we were now hearing from favorite recordings that we had never heard before from those cherished discs—and how astonishing the performance of the components was and how the music sounded. When we got our hands on a new record, whether something I found at a used-record convention or a Classic Records, Chesky, Reference Recordings, Wilson Audio or other audiophile recording, we would very often drop everything and run and put it on. And be thrilled at what we heard and have to hear it again and again.

We saw manufacturers constantly, sometimes three times a week or more and I can’t count the great times we had with, essentially, a who’s who of the high-end manufacturing community.

Since we were both single at the time we hung out after hours a lot. Between that and the fact that I was working at TAS full-time, I got to see quite a bit of Harry, from his charming best, welcoming a visitor with Southern hospitality, to just after waking up in the morning, grumpy, unshaven, barefoot in a bathrobe and not all that happy to see me and start the day. I witnessed HP the legend and Harry the guy, Harry the center of attention to Harry lonely and looking for a friend to share a drink with on a Friday night.

I knew him when he was conducting brilliant interviews and listening sessions with people like Wilma Cozart Fine, and coming out of his writing tower with reviews I knew were landmark pieces the moment after I finished reading them, to when he yelled at me to drop everything one day because he had to have Velveeta cheese on his sandwich and there was none in the house.

Yet as so many others will tell you, he truly was an inspiration. He was incredibly passionate about music and about the gear. (Though not a tweakaholic gearhead; he left that stuff to me.) I, and anyone who worked with him closely in those listening rooms can tell you that Harry could hear the essence of what a component was doing in five minutes.

He was remarkably talented. Anyone who reviews equipment knows how difficult it can be to put what you’re hearing into words—as Frank Zappa said, “writing about music is like dancing about architecture,” but Harry at his best had a way of conveying what we were hearing in his writing which made you feel like you were in the room with the gear and knew what it sounded like. Harry I think almost single-handedly defined high-end audio writing (well, along with J. Gordon Holt of Stereophile) and as others have noted gave us much of the terminology we still use (and sometimes abuse and misuse) today, and especially, defined many of the concepts of high-end audio writing. Not that great audio writing hadn’t been done before, but Harry made high-end audio writing a reality in the same way that, while Leo Fender didn’t invent the first solid body electric guitar,
Fender was the one who put it on the map.

I’ll say it again—he inspired people. In his reviews he would pick out a component’s flaws, often at the not-inconsiderable wrath of the manufacturers—who would then go back and improve their creations. He was a voracious and fast reader, loved movies, doted upon his Maine Coon cats (I was never sure whether cleaning the cat box was actually part of my job description) and could talk at length about any number of topics. When he was in a good mood he’d be a charming person to talk on the phone and have dinner and drinks with. He could meet someone and get to the essence of that person’s inner core in moments and strike up a lifelong bond. (OK, sometimes when he met someone it was more like oil and water mixing, on both sides.) There are dozens, probably hundreds of people in the audio industry and legions of readers who have felt his influence.

In the early 1990s I moved from TAS and kept writing for it until around 2000 but always kept in touch with Harry. (Or tried—making an appointment or dinner date with him never did get any easier.) He wasn’t happy that I left, but understood. (I’ll leave the details for some other time.) We saw each other intermittently and kept in touch by e-mail and phone.

Around mid-2014 I heard the news that he had slipped on a patch of ice, broke his hip and was in a rehabilitation center. I quickly went to visit him. He was clearly dealt a blow by having such a serious injury at such a not-so-young age, and it was a shock to see him in a hospital bed looking frail. Still, my heart leapt to see him. We reminisced about the times we had spent together and I felt wonderful, and also scared that this had happened to someone I always regarded as something of a larger-than-life figure. Here was The Great HP, the man behind the curtain, founder of the mythical French University of Canadian Kings (check the acronym), Corvette enthusiast, subject of a New York magazine cover story, one of the creators of an entire industry, now lying in a hospital bed looking so weak and fragile.

Yet when we started talking and joking around it was like we were transported back in time, sitting on the porch at Sea Cliff again and not in some depressing, medicinal-smelling rehab center. The world became just the two of us reminiscing about the past and looking forward to more good times ahead.

I saw him a couple of more times in the rehab center and was thrilled when I heard that he had been released and was back at Sea Cliff. I went to see him there. Again we had a wonderful time, laughing about some of the outrageous times and crazy things that happened at TAS and elsewhere, gossiping, talking about friends, carrying on. Although he looked weakened and needed a walker, and the house was more than a little bit of a mess, I thought he was on the mend and we talked about going out to dinner again soon.

When I got the e-mail the morning of Wednesday, November 5, 2014 saying that he had passed I was stunned. I could not believe it and it took a very long time for it to sink in that I would never be seeing Harry again. I should wax more eloquently here. I can’t.

The last few times we met, Harry told me he considered me to be one of his greatest friends. It meant a lot to me then. It means a lot more to me now.

This was originally posted as a comment on the TAS Blog. It’s published for the first time here (with a few slight updates) by permission of The Absolute Sound.
Amplifier Breakup

THE RUN-OUT GROOVE

Written by James Whitworth
"I’VE JUST DROPPED MY AMP AND NOW IT’S IN 24 BITS."
"I'VE JUST DROPPED MY AMP AND NOW IT'S IN 24 BITS."
CHAM, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

My next radio station move was a big one – to another country! A program director I had worked for at WAMS in Wilmington, Delaware was now in Canada as general manager at CHAM 1280 AM. We’d kept in touch and he offered me a job at CHAM. But – first you had to prove that no Canadian was displaced in taking the job, and there was an interview with immigration, x-rays, blood tests...it was no simple matter, but I did get in, though without my studded snow tires.

Hamilton is at the left end of Lake Ontario, sort of like a nipple on a baby bottle. A steel town of days gone largely by today, though the mills still operated back then in the early 1970s. Stelco and Dofasco, I remember, even 40 years later.

I was hired as program director. That means the one who is responsible for whatever you hear on air.

I felt I "owned" what was broadcast, had high standards, and couldn’t settle. I also felt that if you told your staff the right thing to do, they’d do it. WRONG! In fact the on-air staff almost walked out on me once. Lesson learned. Management involves more finesse then just being an on-air jock.

I’ve come to believe there are three types of talent. Some are naturals. They are great communicators. Some are growing, and want to learn. Some are egos who simply want to be "themselves," and will balk – or worse – if you try to interfere. I’ve also now seen my weaknesses from the perspective of time.

We were getting clobbered by the competition. Under my tenure our ratings did improve though, and I got to work with several folks who justifiably went on to fame in Toronto at our sister station CFTR. But from my narrow point of view, they kept stealing my best people.
One DJ would scream on an inhale to “lower his voice” before he turned on the microphone. Except one time he turned the mic on first and made an awful-sounding gasping noise.

I made the morning newsman do the weather from outside the station every morning, and the weather in the winter in Canada was raw as you can imagine. You could tell he hated it, which I thought made great radio.

The CRTC, then the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, wanted broadcasting to “preserve the social fabric” of the country. I heard this from the commissioners directly. This means they did not want a copycat of a US station. They also force a certain percentage of Canadian music onto the air, and have other rules. There are fewer stations per population in Canada than the US.

After a year and a half, the general manager was fired. The new GM (former sales manager) was promoted and took me to Toronto to our national sales team to show me off and declare a great new day. Several days later, the corporate bosses came to town and fired me. There was some resentment about me being American. The man who replaced me put up billboards that said "CHAM – Where All the Good Music Has Gone." Huh? (You can read this both ways. A bad billboard.)

I was out of work for nine months. There was a postal strike in Canada during that stretch so I could only apply for jobs in the US by driving to Niagara Falls and mailing my packages of taped samples of my on-air work, my resume and so on. One day I took my girlfriend along and as we were just about to go through customs she had taped her mouth shut with my mailing tape supply and was going “mmmmmm mmmmumph” as if kidnapped. VERY funny. She did remove the tape, and I didn't go to jail.

Canada is enough like the US that it all seemed familiar but different. Like living in a movie. I have great respect for and love of Canada.

One night of many in my nine months of unemployment I heard something hit the patio a floor below my window. Something heavy. I looked outside but the lights from the driveway obscured my view of the patio. My flashlight revealed a young woman, face down. My brain immediately went in two directions at once. One half was logical – call the police! - the other half was in denial. That couldn’t actually be a...

I ran to the body after calling the police, rousing the building manager as I passed that apartment. There was not a mark showing on the body that we could see. It was a swan dive off the 13th floor. Word was she had mental issues but was out from treatment on a pass. So sad.

I got into Transcendental Meditation in Hamilton, and when fired, spent many a day in meditation. It helped.
Steve Waksman, Rock Musicologist

TOO MUCH TCHAIKOVSKY

Written by Lawrence Schenbeck
Author’s note: Last November at a meeting of the American Musicological Society, Professor Steve Waksman, who holds joint appointments in American Studies and Music at Smith College, gave a fascinating keynote paper, “A Soundman’s Journey,” about pioneering live sound engineer Bill Hanley. Waksman’s talk opened new perceptual doors for many in the room, including me. I asked him if he’d share more about his work.

Larry Schenbeck: You have written extensively about the electric guitar, while your most recent book, This Ain’t the Summer of Love, chronicled “conflict and crossover” in heavy metal and punk. It won the 2010 Woody Guthrie Award. How did you come up as a musician? And what led you to become an academic historian?

Steve Waksman: I was born in 1967 in Simi Valley and started playing guitar when I was nine. I took lessons for a couple years but then started to learn by ear and mostly taught myself by playing along with records. At first, I was playing acoustic but I got an electric guitar when I was 13. It was a cheap Sears Les Paul knock-off that I bought from an older kid who lived down the street from me. I think I paid him $90 for it (or rather, my parents did). He had modified it with an added pickup so it looked very cool, three humbuckers in a row. It wasn’t a very good guitar, but it was my gateway drug, so to speak. At the time I was very much a fan of rock—Kiss was a big band for me as a kid, and so were Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith, Jimi Hendrix. Basically, my music fandom began with 1970s hard rock and metal and evolved from there to include progressive rock, jazz/rock fusion, punk and hardcore. Being a guitarist was a really important part of my fandom, but I was never in bands growing up. My experience as a musician at the time was very solitary. I started going to shows in L.A. with friends of mine in high school. First show was the Police in 1983, followed by David Bowie. But most of the shows I went to at the time were big arena shows featuring metal artists: Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Deep Purple, Dio, and many others.

LS: And the academic part?
SW: I was always a voracious reader as a kid. Almost as soon as I started getting more involved with music, I realized I enjoyed reading about it. The stimulus, as far as I can remember, was the entertainment section of the *Los Angeles Times*, which had Leonard Feather writing jazz reviews and Robert Hilburn as the main pop critic, with other contributors who reported on national trends and the local scene. I started subscribing to *Rolling Stone* when I was 13 or 14, and then a big acquisition was the *Rolling Stone Record Guide*. It had thousands of reviews and led me to all sorts of music I would never have discovered otherwise. I also became a regular reader of *Guitar Player*, and that was very influential because it was so inclusive with regard to genre—it didn’t matter if it was country or jazz or rock or blues. All of that fed my interest in popular music history long before I dreamed of writing some of that history myself.

LS: Your first book, *Instruments of Desire*, explored the ways in which Americans used this new device—the electric guitar—to tell different cultural stories. Can you talk a little about that?

SW: In a sense, *Instruments of Desire* was the byproduct of my reading *Guitar Player* for all those years. I knew some of the guitar histories out at the time like Tom Wheeler’s *American Guitars*—which is a great book—but there were all these coffee table books about guitars, and I thought a different sort of history could be written. Also, as a grad student in history at the time—this is in 1992/93—I wanted to find a dissertation topic that would hold my interest. What better than a history of the electric guitar!

LS: You wanted to bring something new to that.

SW: I think my innovation was putting together the technical history of the instrument, how it was designed and invented, with the musical history and then with the social history. It was the social history that was really lacking in most books. I also wanted to understand on a more fundamental
level why the electric guitar became such a phenomenally important invention. Why do we like it loud? So I was thinking about volume and distortion and the impact they have on us as listeners and players. This led me to the insight that the electric guitar’s importance wasn’t just that it allowed players to be louder, it gave them a new level of control over their sound.

LS: Control seems important to everyone, yet for different reasons.

SW: There’s a world of difference between how Les Paul sounds and how Jimi Hendrix sounds, but both of them recognized that amplification and other technologies had creative implications no one had tapped. Looking deep into that history you see that the sound of the guitar has connotations that aren’t just musical. Sometimes it’s also political, as with Hendrix’s version of the “Star-Spangled Banner” at Woodstock. Or Bob Dylan’s performance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965. “Going electric” in that place, at that time, was a major statement.

LS: Ever since, people have argued about what that “major statement” actually meant. In Boston, you opened your talk by examining multiple interpretations that became attached to Newport-‘65-Dylan.

SW: A lot of people already think they know what happened: Dylan plugged in and caused a shockwave that coursed through the rock and folk scenes alike. But why should using an electric guitar or bass create such drama? Was the electric guitar so controversial because it was perceived as untraditional, out of keeping with the values of the folk revival? Or perhaps because it was too associated with pop, which, to a lot of diehards, was the antithesis of folk? Both assumptions are correct to a point, but it’s a mistake to draw too strict a line between “folk” and “pop” or “rock.” Change was already in the air, but Dylan gave it stronger momentum because many folk fans had invested in him as a beacon of “authentic” values.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8yU8wk67gY&authuser=0

LS: That is the standard story.

SW: There’s a whole other way to look at that performance. What does it mean to “go electric,” to “plug in”? It’s not like electric guitars were new in 1965. But the evidence suggests that Dylan’s band was louder than expected, louder even than most live rock bands (let alone folk bands) at the time. If so, that was because a sound system was in place—at Newport, in 1965—that was louder than most. The question then becomes, who put that system together? And the answer is Bill Hanley, whose importance to the history of live production is well-known among audio engineers but largely unrecognized by others.

LS: Here we are, back at why do we like it loud? What can the story of Bill Hanley tell us about that?

SW: A lot, I think. I began to understand his role in the Dylan-at-Newport saga differently after coming across a wonderfully detailed interview with him in the archive of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, where I was researching my current book. Hanley did the sound at Jazz Fest for a few years in the 1970s, but well before then he had figured out how to produce sound more effectively at outdoor music festivals, getting his big start at the Newport Jazz and Folk Fests of the ’50s and early ’60s. In the interview, Hanley talks about his role doing Dylan’s sound at Newport. I was struck by his remarks, in part because other sources differ: British record producer Joe Boyd, for example, claims he was working the sound for Dylan’s set and makes no mention of Hanley at all.
LS: So why believe Hanley?

SW: His account was so vivid! He had a technician’s way of explaining why Dylan’s set that day might have provoked a strong reaction. According to Hanley, Dylan was playing at a volume that really pushed the limits of the system Hanley was using for the festival as a whole, and it caused the system to distort—though he couldn’t say whether the distortion was due to Dylan and his band way overdriving their own amps or due to the P.A. system working at capacity. Either way, Hanley’s account stresses that what the crowd was hearing that day was much more complicated than Dylan “going electric.” Not everyone liked it loud. Some people loved it, and others thought the world was going to end. So, who gets credit for that performance? The artist can be praised for boldly going against the grain of his audience’s expectations. Without Hanley’s contribution, though, what Dylan played that night would not have had the same impact. Bill Hanley—the soundman—made Dylan’s choice to “plug in” a choice that would reverberate at the time, and forever after.

LS: Let’s touch on Hanley’s career after Newport ’65.

SW: This is where it seemed like Hanley was everywhere that mattered. His first big venture outside the orbit of the Newport festivals was doing sound for the Beatles at Shea Stadium. This was in 1966, the second Shea Stadium concert for the band. When they had played there in 1965, it was a milestone in the history of rock concert production, but the sound was famously bad. Shea was a newly built venue at the time. They just used the house P.A., which was not really designed for amplifying music. So when the Beatles returned, the promoter Sid Bernstein brought in Hanley, known by then as the go-to guy if you wanted quality sound production for a live event of a certain scale. Hanley had developed a strong system with four RCA 600-watt amps he got off a battleship, but that still wasn’t enough to overpower the screaming fans. He built a custom system for that concert including a specially designed mixing console. Around that time Hanley was using Langevin AM-16 mic preamps as the basis for his consoles, and he ran each line with its own EQ. He called it a turning point not just in his own career but in the general evolution of concert sound. From that point forward, levels would just keep getting louder.

A couple years later, he was brought in by Bill Graham to design the system for the Fillmore East. That was another groundbreaking move, because most venues at the time did not have sound systems tailored to the music. Bands had their own sound people who would set up the touring P.A. equipment, so it took longer to prepare for gigs. Also, the sound in a given venue wouldn’t be standard. Graham wanted to have something more reliable and predictable in place, and that’s what Hanley gave him. For the Fillmore East Hanley used twenty-six speakers distributed around the hall, with total power of 35,000 watts. He also built a set of speakers hanging over the stage that used a unique system of weighted supports. It was very much state-of-the-art, one of the reasons so many bands would record their live albums at the venue, most famously the Allman Brothers.

LS: And after that, Woodstock?

SW: Right, Woodstock. Almost certainly the thing for which Hanley will be best remembered.

(We’ll pick this up in Copper #103, in which Steve describes Hanley’s work at Woodstock and offers thoughts about the Hanley legacy.)
(Photos of Steve Waksman by Julian Parker-Burns.)
I discovered high-end audio in 1978. But I always seemed to have a natural inclination towards high quality experience. My father was a largely self-trained EE, who was hired at RCA Camden for his first job in the US in 1951. He built our hi-fi systems at home including what I recall as the first stereo system in the neighborhood. He had a shop in our basement where he built analog computers in the 1960s for his employer in Philadelphia. Everyone in our family except me was an expert at soldering—I only knew how to draw and paint, and by the beginning of the 1970s, that had evolved (or, if you were as disappointed as some of my family members were, devolved) into me being a musician.

Next to my dad's tool benches, the basement was filled with walls of amps and drums - our house was the hang for incipient rockers.

My first real encounter with the possible came at age 16 when I wandered into Alembic, then a small custom instrument and sound-system shop in San Francisco, in 1973. Alembic was an outgrowth of the search for [sonic] purity and control on the part of Owsley Stanley and the Grateful Dead. I spent a day with company head Rick Turner, who helped me discover what was possible with bass sound and who showed me what he had been doing for my heroes Jack Casady and Phil Lesh. I had gone in seeking knowledge and was amazed at how much there was to find.

Rick would be guru number one.

Three years later I began my recording career at a small studio in San Diego. My first experience of hearing the playback after our initial take was jarring—where was the magic? We sounded like...ourselves. So disappointing. I expected tape to perform miracles and make us sound like a record, not like a direct feed off the mics.

The engineer who brought us into this studio was Doug Sclar, and the 24-track tape recorder [at the studio] was a Stephens. Doug would be guru number two. He was,
at the time, helping build Seals and Crofts' Dawnbreaker Studios in LA (which used a Helios console). It never occurred to me to say what I was thinking about the fidelity of the sound at the time—it was simply something I noted—that tape is basically inaudible. In following years I'd find that was anything but true; and that the exception was the Stephens machine.

But this was my first blush [with the recording studio] and I found it really disorienting. A couple years later I lived briefly at Doug's house in Orange County, transiting from San Diego to LA. Doug knew his stuff: he had a Technics SP-10, an Infinity Black Widow arm and Micro-Acoustics cartridge, Levinson ML2 amplifiers, Threshold (heavily, personally modified) and Quatre Gain-cell amps driving Dahlquist DQ-10 loudspeakers which he had [made into] mirror-imaged [pairs] and changed the caps on. This was news—records could sound like this; that in fact records did sound like this. Doug called it depth—I didn't know what to call it.

Up to this point I had noticed two things. My first [stereo] system had a Garrard changer built into the top of a Realistic receiver and Sony tape recorder speakers. I noticed that if the speakers were set right, that Jorma Kaukonen's acoustic guitar on the first Hot Tuna album sounded surprisingly real, but only in one of the rooms of our house, and no other instrument did. And when I went to buy my first pair of real speakers, I ended up with AR-16s because the percussion on Weather Report's "Birdland" leapt out of the mass of speakers on the wall and hovered in the air.

But Doug's system was something else—like looking deep into space. I asked Doug how I could learn more, and he handed me a pile of magazines including The Audio Critic. I started reading them, was appalled by the snobbery of the content, and lost interest in the topic.

In 1981 I was working for a sound-effects guy, doing his books, some engineering and ghostwriting technical articles. He had some thoughts for modernizing the sound-effects craft (which had been defined five decades earlier) and I spent some time interviewing a number of people around Hollywood, figuring out how the concept would work, and a few audio-engineering magazines published these pieces. Shortly after, he was hired [to work on the movie] Tron—this is when I met Michael Fremer. [Fremer is the editor of Analog Planet and a reviewer for Stereophile - Ed.]

I worked for a while directly with Michael, who was in charge of the postproduction sound on the film, music and sound effects. Disney sent over a 2-inch multi-track tape, which is what the initial layer of effects were laid onto (like the "harmonized" motorcycle engine revs for the light-cycle sequence). I had to wire up the tape machine to interface with the studio's less-than-pro recording console. [During the time] the work accelerated, I left the company.

The following spring I was playing my first show as the bassist in Terry Reid's band and heard someone down in front shouting my name. The next day my phone rang—it was Fremer. We hung out, I listened to his system, asked the same questions of him I'd asked of Doug, and he sent me home with a few issues of The Absolute Sound. Now I was interested. These people made sense to me—yeah, some snotty tone here and there, but mostly a group of curious and serious enthusiasts, trying to figure out what was going on and how to get closer to the source [of the music]. Even without knowing them or anything about them, it felt collegial, not preachy.

A couple of months after this, I was hired to score a film: I put together a studio in the director's house (formerly director Preston Sturges' house), around yet again a Stephens tape deck. Suddenly, I found myself with more money in the bank than a guy living an early-80s avant-gardist punk-rocker life could use in a year. So...of course—spend it! Michael and I went out and found me the beginnings of a good system, and off I went, ensnared in the search. But, not alone. I had the whole [printed] world of The Absolute Sound with me.
Not long after Michael went east to become pop music editor at TAS, I called him up to berate him for what I felt was a very poorly written survey on the records of someone I cared about (not written by him personally, but he was editor). His riposte was to taunt me into doing better, and so I was handed my first assignment, which led to [then managing editor] Sallie Reynolds inviting me to participate more regularly. Later that year I was visiting back east and spent a day in Sea Cliff with Sallie at the office and Harry Pearson in Music Room 3, [the main listening room].

Anyone who has been there never forgets their first time. HP is good at the socks-blown-off thing.

Writing for TAS was, for me, writing to Sallie and HP. It was easy to "speak" to them, to conduct my side of an imaginary dialogue with two people I came to like very much and with whom I had plenty to really talk about on many topics—on every topic. We struggled a while, with me pushing to be allowed to find and then write as I thought rather than in the style of the magazine, but we got there and the more we got there the less I disliked reading my own writing; the more truthful it felt. I can't give higher praise than to say they went along with this. There wasn't a set message being pushed, there was more a sense of, "We're all moving to a wide-open place together." In my opinion, that brought some journalistic responsibility along with it. We owed it to ourselves and to each other to remember that we were doing something for a community, not for our own self-gratification.

A lot has changed since those days—in the high end, in the magazines, and obviously, in the world. At this point, it's hard to even know if a journal that was so blatantly amateur has any place. When I say amateur, I mean it in the best sense—from the heart. [Back then,] TAS was published erratically, writers were never sure when a check would come or for how much it would be, and there were lots of complaints about that. I don't care to dispute the complaints.

Certainly in the years after the re-organization, the trains ran on time. You could count on a check, you'd know how much it would be for, and readers could rely on a professional delivery schedule. None of this, ultimately, triggered my departure, but it went a long way towards creating a sense—and I acknowledge that I wouldn't expect anyone else to share this sentiment with me—that the "mom and pop" (i.e., HP and SR) quality of the journal that I so loved had given way to agendas that, while not necessarily bad in any way, were simply something I had no interest in. The world had really changed. The world has really changed.

_Courtesy of Positive Feedback (www.positivefeedback.com), where it originally ran in 2014. Reprinted in edited form here with permission. Header photo courtesy of Positive Feedback._
The headline in the local Jewish newspaper read, “Orthodox Man Accuses Delicatessen Owner of Cutting Meat With a Knife Used for Cheese.”

This heresy of mixing meat with milk was exposed by my zaida (grandfather), Harry Cohen, a fanatically religious man who ultimately became the shammes (beadle) of Garnethill Synagogue, an orthodox congregation in Glasgow.

He wasn’t always this way.

Born Herzl Katzenelenbogen in western Ukraine, he experienced a pogrom at the age of eight when saber-carrying Cossacks came charging through his mainly Jewish town. Hiding under a cart he witnessed the mayhem and death inflicted on his community.
His mother owned a grocery store and this gave him access, at an early age, to tobacco, and from then on was rarely seen without a cigarette in his mouth. When he was a teenager he was apprenticed to a woodworker where he became an expert carver of walking sticks. In those days, the early 1900s, respectable gentlemen always carried a walking stick.

A mixture of poverty and anti-Semitism forced him to move to London. On arrival in the UK, the customs agent, unable to pronounce his name, changed it to a common name for Jews. Harry Cohen was born.

He lived in Mile End in the East End, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, where he met and subsequently married my grandmother, an active communist and former Bolshevik. My mother and her three siblings were all born there.

When the Great War broke out, he claimed he was a conscientious objector and deserted the army. He hid out in an attic until the war ended. My aunt told me stories of visiting her father as a young girl and being sworn to silence by her mother. During the Depression they were very poor so on the urging of a relative, the family moved to Glasgow, where Harry found work as a woodworker. A moment of distraction caused him to amputate a finger. Even though he rushed to the hospital, finger in hand, they were unable to re-attach it. This curtailed his job and the family lapsed into poverty once again.

Sometime after this he returned to London in search of work. A few weeks later he sent a letter home, saying that he had become a religious Jew. No one would be allowed to ask him why or make fun of him. He would cook his own food and use his own pots and pans. He demanded a corner of the table on which to put his own tablecloth.

On hearing this my grandmother called him “Harry the Meshugenah” (Harry the crazy person). From then on, she always called him that. He never did tell anyone what happened in London to convert this most secular of Jews to orthodoxy.

During World War II he became an air raid warden and patrolled the streets of the Gorbals in
Glasgow, making sure lights were out and people were in the shelters during the many air raids on this industrial city. One night while on duty on the banks of the river Clyde, some soldiers mistook him for Field Marshal Montgomery and stood to attention while saluting him. Bemused by this, he saluted back and dismissed them.

He actually looked a lot like “Monty,” the commander of the British Eighth Army who defeated Rommel at the battle of El-Alamein, which led to the rout of the German army in North Africa.

He was great forager, a skill he learned in Ukraine where hunger was never far away. He would take my sister out for very long walks and knew where to find wild berries, mushrooms, and herbs. He had an allotment by the side of the river Clyde, close to where he lived. On it he grew vegetables and, in used large pickle cans, tomatoes. Around the corner was a stable for Clydesdale horses used to haul coal and other goods through the streets. After they passed, my sister and I would often walk down the street with a bucket and spade and collect horse manure which he liberally fed to his garden.

His involvement with Judaism grew and he became more and more religious. Every Friday night and Saturday morning, irrespective of the often-foul weather that Glasgow is famous for, he walked the four miles to the Synagogue never missing a day. At one point his son Sam bought a beautiful house in Shawlands, an up-market area in Glasgow. In the front was a rose garden with paving stones that were in the shape of a cross. Outraged by this, he came over when the house was empty and without permission, dug up the garden, saying Jews shouldn’t have a cross in their home. Interestingly, he never tried to covert any of us fallen Jews to orthodoxy. But his fanaticism grew over the years, leading to the denouncement of the delicatessen in the paper.

In his early seventies he suffered a stroke and slowly faded away. I was fifteen and would visit him and talk while squeezing his hand. Often, he would squeeze back. But every day his squeeze grew weaker until it finally stopped. Many orthodox Jews came to his funeral and it was only then that I realized just how much he was loved and respected.
Country music groundbreaker Patsy Cline was born in Winchester, Virginia, in 1932. In fact, her first name was Virginia; family and friends called her Ginny. She was not, however, born with her famous voice. That was a medical quirk. A throat infection that turned into rheumatic fever nearly killed her at age 13. When she recovered, her voice had completely changed to the powerful instrument America would come to love.

The most amazing thing about Patsy Cline is that we’re still talking about her despite how short her career was. That’s the sign of true originality and impact.

Because so many of her songs have become famous, it’s surprising to realize that the only single released from her debut album on Decca, *Patsy Cline* (1957), was “Walkin’ After Midnight.” The record is generally more pop than the country sound of her later efforts. You can hear from the first track, “That Wonderful Someone,” that she could have been a great success in more mainstream pop fare. The backup voices, known as the Anita Kerr Singers, would go on to feature on many country albums.

This song, by the way, is by one Gertrude Burg. Discogs conflates her with the much more famous actress/author Gertrude Berg, but that seems unlikely, since Berg had no other particular connection to music.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ouq0HB12XKw

A contrasting track from the same album is “Ain’t No Wheels on This Ship,” by Wayland Chandler,
with co-credit given to Chandler’s boss, 4 Star Records owner W.S. Stevenson, who liked to put his name on songs he’d bought. The album *Patsy Cline* had actually been recorded by 4 Star but leased to Decca for distribution. The larger company was willing to take on the risk because Cline had started to get some major TV appearances, not to mention a slot at the Grand Ole Opry.

“*Ain’t No Wheels on This Ship*” is a great early example of Cline’s feisty energy and her ease with a rockabilly beat.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fim3v_uOBrs

After a few years off from recording to tour and have a baby, Cline signed with Decca and a new manager in 1960; she also became an official member of the Opry that year. Her second album, *Showcase*, came out in 1961, ushered in by the single “*I Fall to Pieces,*” which became Cline’s first No. 1 hit. That was followed up by another chart-breaker, “*Crazy,*” written by a young man named Willie Nelson. Whatever happened to him?

“A Poor Man’s Roses (Or a Rich Man’s Gold)” combines the fast-repeating guitar chords of early rock ‘n’ roll with a bluegrass fiddle, a mixture that fans would soon come to expect in country music. The melody, by Milton DeLugg, sets Bob Hilliard’s lyrics with jumping and meandering lines that would challenge any singer’s ear. This is Cline’s second recording of the song, the first having served as a B-side for her 1957 single, “Walking After Midnight.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpIpwg8y8ff

“*Crazy*” was rereleased in 1962 as one of four songs on an EP. Sharing side A was Cline’s cover version of the Buck Owens hit “*Foolin’ ‘Round*” (co-written by Harlan Howard), which had also appeared on the *Showcase* album.

One fun fact about this Latin-influenced heartbreaker – only early country music can put such sad lyrics to such an upbeat tune – is that it was recorded without percussion instruments beyond drum kit. If you listen carefully, you’ll notice that the conga-like sounds are played by session guitarists! The Jordanaires provided backing vocals for the whole album.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTPsk1qIdXU

Not long after she recorded *Showcase*, Cline’s life took a grim turn. She and her brother were in a serious car accident that killed several passengers in the other car. Cline flew through the windshield and required surgery and a month in the hospital to recover.

Despite chronic pain and the need to wear wigs and heavy make-up, she soldiered on with her performing career only two weeks after coming home from the hospital. Her popularity soared, bringing with it major industry accolades and her debuts at Carnegie Hall and in London, plus a 35-night stint in Vegas.

When *Sentimentally Yours* came out in 1962, critics loved it as much as fans and colleagues did. The album consisted mostly of covers of other artists’ hits. Among the two original songs was “*Strange,*” more in the rockabilly ballad genre than country. But it’s also one of the finest examples of the
timbral richness and emotional range of Cline’s voice.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAVLz8hKYGk

Cline was on target to become the biggest country artist of all time. But fate had other plans. Flying back to Nashville after a benefit gig in New York, Cline’s plane went down in a storm. She died on March 5, 1963, a mere 90 miles from home. Incredibly, this short career that yielded only three studio albums has been rewarded by generations of fans to the tune of 14 million in record sales.

Decca did release some vault material in the years after her death. Among those songs, on a 1964 compilation called That’s How the Heartache Begins, is a surprisingly sorrowful version of the 1902 standard “Bill Bailey Won’t You Please Come Home.” But stick with it, and the tempo and groove really get cookin’.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8bAd2bXkJw

If you’re a fan, you’ll be pleased to hear that a Patsy Cline Museum recently opened within the Johnny Cash Museum in Nashville. It’s appropriate for Cline’s artistry and impact to be permanently memorialized.
When thinking of the ultimate cassette deck, many people think of Nakamichi. The company made some of the most impressive cassette decks ever. They were used by audiophiles and professionals, but were rarely found in professional recording studios for capturing audio. The Nakamichi 1000 was popular with not only audiophiles but also with computer programmers in the late 1970s. It was used as a deck for recording computer data to cassette tape, for use by the Commodores, Ataris, Amstrads and other computers of that era. While these computers had their own cassette decks, they were often cheaply made and not considered reliable for recording data for critical uses.

The industry standard for professional recording studios became the Tascam 122. This is a real workhorse of a cassette deck, reliable and easy to use. Many recordings throughout history first left the studio as copies dubbed from the master tape onto cassette tape, made for the producer and musicians to listen to at home, and for radio stations to be able to play on the air before the album made it to store shelves.

In the pre-digital era there were only three formats you could conceivably take home after a studio session: A reference acetate disk, a reel of 1/4-inch tape, or a cassette tape. The reference acetate was cut on a disk recording lathe and could be played back on any record player. Being softer than a vinyl record, it would withstand only a few plays before the sound quality would degrade unacceptably through wear. However, while it was a simple task to play an acetate disk back, not many recording studios after the 1950s had disk recording lathes. Reference acetates would therefore mainly be cut at specialist disk mastering facilities from the 1960s onwards.
While 1/4-inch tape was a popular studio format, the tape was expensive and the machines were even more expensive; very few people had a 1/4-inch tape machine at home that was capable of playing 10.5-inch reels at 15 inches per second (ips).

On the other hand, cassette tape was cheap, most people had cassette decks at home and in the car, most recording studios had a professional deck to record on and even radio stations could play it! Yet for many years, other than being a consumer format, in the professional world cassette tape was nothing more than a temporary copy of the “reel thing,” used for convenience. Professional recording facilities were not keen on using cassette as the primary recording medium at first, although it was used as such in home studios.

However, the demand for low-cost demo recordings saw many recording studios eventually putting their cassette decks to use, for recording unknown bands on cassette tape. These demo recordings were not intended for commercial release. They were just copied and passed around to friends, family and record label A&R people in hope of the band being discovered and offered a “proper” recording on reel-to-reel tape.

All this was based on the assumption that cassette decks could not compete with reel-to-reel tape machines in terms of performance. But, what if I was to tell you of a cassette deck that had a flat frequency response all the way to 27 kHz, ran at 3.75 ips and could put to shame even some professional reel-to-reel machines? No, it is not a Nakamichi. It is actually a heavily modified version of the Tascam 122! It was not modified by Tascam or any other large corporation, but by an individual: Alex Nikitin.

He took a Tascam 122mkIII, made it run at 3.75 ips, removed the Dolby noise reduction circuitry, replaced a lot of the audio circuitry and components, set the EQ to 50 µs and developed what is, in effect, the world’s best-performing cassette deck.

I would love to tell you that this deck was immediately adopted by recording enthusiasts the world over, but it wasn’t. It could only record around 15 minutes per side of a C60 cassette and with the non-standard EQ, it is incompatible with anything else. Cassettes recorded on this machine can only be played back on this machine. Nevertheless, as soon as I found out it existed, I ordered one. I took delivery of it in 2014 and got to work recording the impoverished artists of Southeastern Europe on cassette tape.

One of the bands that found their way to my studio, Magnetic Fidelity, at the time was rather unusual. They had almost no money and just wanted to “hear how they sound.” This band I’m referring to had no intention of making a professional recording! This was their first time in a studio. However, they were unusually serious and determined despite their young age. As soon as they started playing, I knew the album would become a hit, and was glad the cassette deck I used for the recording was the best there is, because it would have to be up to the task!

Not only did that demo recording become a commercial release, on multiple formats, it also became a commercial success, establishing the band Naxatras internationally. The cassette tapes have yielded lacquer masters for a double LP release, a cassette tape release, a CD release, high-res 192/24 digital downloads and even DSD-format versions at 2.8 MHz and 5.6 MHz.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNjyvtjAmUo

https://www.nativedsd.com/albums/NXTRS01-naxatras-lp
Few people realize that this album was recorded on cassette tape, in the space of only a few hours!

As for many of my cassette recordings, I used Maxell XLII-S tape stock, loaded in custom high performance shells. The cassette shell mechanism forms part of the tape transport system, so its performance is an important consideration.

To eliminate any problems with the cassette shell, commercially available prerecorded cassettes were usually created by bulk high-speed duplication. The tape would be recorded in large “pancakes,” both sides recorded in one pass as 4 channels of audio (two playing in reverse) at high speed, without being in the shells. Each pancake would contain multiple cassettes worth of tape, recorded sequentially, usually with an ultrasonic blip at the end of each cassette to mark where the pancake should be split. If you look carefully, you can sometimes even see the meters on some cassette decks reacting to something inaudible at the end of a prerecorded cassette. (It’s the blip, Frank, it’s the blip!)

The duplication master was a loop of 1/2-inch or 1-inch tape, containing an entire album as 4 tracks, playing in a loop, over and over again, on a special high speed tape machine called an analog loop bin system.

The audio from the loop bin went to the high speed duplicator, which recorded the audio on pancakes of 1/8-inch tape. The recorded pancakes, along with empty cassette shells, were then placed in a cassette loader, which loads the tape in cassette shells.

The more advanced loaders had a system which detected the ultrasonic blip at the end of each cassette, stopped the loading, cut the tape, and started over again with a new shell, with the process completely automated.

Eventually, analog loop bin systems were replaced by digital loop bin systems, where the loop was no longer on tape but in the digital domain, as a digital file played back on repeat.

Are the high speed industrial tape duplication systems superior, in terms of sound quality, to what can be achieved by recording on a cassette deck? Probably not, especially if high-quality cassette decks such as the Tascam 122, Nakamichi 1000, or any other selection from a wide range of high-quality machines by different manufacturers are used, along with high-quality tape stock loaded in high-quality shells. With a 1/4-inch reel-to-reel master tape as the source, excellent sound quality can be achieved. The productivity, however, is dramatically lower (it takes much more time to produce fewer tapes), causing the costs to skyrocket. The affordability of prerecorded cassette tape was made possible by the productivity of industrial high-speed duplication systems, even if the resulting sound quality was often less than spectacular.

Cassette tape is capable of very high-quality sound if used carefully and with the right equipment. And although cassette tape manufacturing had completely ceased for some years, with the remaining global demand served exclusively from remaining blank cassette tape stocks, cassettes have made enough of a comeback that ATR Magnetics has recently announced they have started manufacturing their own cassette tape! At present, they are offering ferric oxide (Type I) tape, based
on their excellent reel-to-reel tape formulation, as C60 and C90 cassettes! ATR Magnetics, located in York, PA, is one of the only two remaining manufacturers of professional reel-to-reel tape for the recording industry. Although they have been manufacturing 1/4-inch, 1/2-inch, 1-inch and 2-inch tape for several years, with multiple award-winning albums recorded on their tape, these are their first-ever cassette tape products.

I would strongly encourage anyone interested in learning the art and science of sound recording to start with cassette tape, even nowadays.

It is great fun, offers a value for your money that is hard to beat and can reward you with excellent recordings. From a toddler-friendly format to a portable format for the Walkman or the car; from mixtapes, to demo recordings all the way to commercial releases, the cassette tape is versatile enough to do the trick.

As with reel-to-reel tape, in terms of longevity, the tape itself can last incredibly long. The weakness of the cassette tape, however, is that it carries with it a part of the mechanical transport system (the shell), which is what would probably break long before anything happens to the tape itself. I have successfully transplanted tape to new shells, giving it a new life, but it can be a fiddly task.

The other enemy of cassette tape is cheap cassette decks that tend to wear out or go out of adjustment and start chewing up perfectly good tape. Use good decks, keep them in good shape, and your tape collection will live much longer.

But, is it really making a comeback?

Well, a rather shy one, considering that cassettes were once the most popular format (surpassing LP and CD sales), but yes, it is certainly experiencing a resurgence. However, the technical expertise in all aspects of magnetic tape recording technology from servicing and maintaining existing equipment to designing new machines, from making calibration tapes to offering specialized measurement instruments, from manufacturing tape and shells to even actually using cassette decks properly, is hard to come by nowadays.

In my opinion, this is what will make or break the format in the long run. If we succeed in passing on this knowledge to the younger generations, cassette tape and other formats will survive. If not, cassette tape will die out along with the few remaining experts in the field.

Header Image: Nakamichi 1000 cassette deck. Photo courtesy of Thomasz Gaca.
Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787), today a largely under-appreciated composer, was an important influence on Mozart, primarily because of his approach to writing operas. Happily, some of his works do get the attention they deserve, including his opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Orpheus and Eurydice), premiered in 1762, which is the subject of some recent recordings.

In the mid-18th century, the genre of opera had grown complex and turgid, with the likes of Nicola Porpora and Antonio Caldara composing highly wrought settings of libretti on historical subjects. The wordy and angstful poet Pietro Metastasio was everybody’s favorite.

Gluck had had enough of the bombast. Harking back to the first generation of opera 150 years before, he chose a mythological rather than historical theme for *Orfeo*, considered the earliest of his “reform” operas. In keeping with the spirit of reform and simplification, the plot is fairly straightforward, the emotions bare, and the melody lines sweet and plaintive. If you enjoy heartstring-plucking arias in Mozart such as “Dove sono” from *The Marriage of Figaro*, give some credit to Gluck.

*Orfeo ed Euridice* is the ancient Greek story of a musician of magical ability who travels to the underworld to retrieve his wife after she is fatally bitten by a snake. The earliest surviving opera, by Jacopo Peri from 1601, also tells this story, as does Monteverdi's first opera, so it’s a meaningful choice by Gluck.

The luminescent voice of British countertenor Iestyn Davies graces the role of Orfeo in a new live recording on Pentatone. Sophie Bevan plays Euridice, and David Bates conducts early-music ensemble La Nuova Musica, which comfortably stretches beyond its usual Baroque element into the gallant world of the pre-classical.

Bates crafts elegant support for Gluck’s exquisite melody lines in arias such as “Che farò senza Euridice!” (“What Shall I Do Without Eurydice?”), from Act III. The purity and simplicity of Davies' delivery can’t help but touch the soul of anyone who has suffered the loss of love:
As Euridice, Bevan acts exceptionally well with her voice, but often she exhibits a distracting tremolo-type vibrato that disrupts her otherwise floating vocal production. Here she sings “Senza addio” (Without Farewell). The ensemble is led by Bates through a range of phrasing styles, from rhythmically hesitant to fluid and lustrous.

One of the distinguishing features of Gluck’s operas, influenced by traditions he encountered in France, is the inclusion of dance movements throughout. (The Metropolitan Opera’s current production features choreography by no less than Mark Morris, a sign of how integral these dances are to the work overall.) Therefore, an orchestra’s ability to hold the dramatic tension without singers is essential, and La Nuova Musica is more than up for the challenge. Bates and his instrumentalists bask in the shimmer of Gluck’s jewel-like writing here:

Another recent recording of Orfeo from Warner Music has the mythical musician played by French countertenor Philippe Jaroussky with soprano Amanda Forsythe as his wife and Diego Fasolis leading I Barrochisti.

Although Jaroussky’s sound tends to be less pure and more pinched than Davies’, his sense of drama is consistently mesmerizing. Here, once again, is “Che farò senza Euridice!” In his version, the pain of loss seems even deeper than in the previous recording, particularly in the weightlessness of the high-register notes. Fasolis’ sensitive hand with the orchestra contributes greatly to the emotional journey.

Perhaps the best thing about this recording is the musical chemistry between Jaroussky and Forsythe. Their voices suit each other perfectly, intertwining like immortal lovers, as you can hear in the duet “Viene, appaga il tuo consorte” (“Come, Do Your Spouse’s Bidding”), an elegantly furious marital spat:
Gluck’s writing for chorus (in Orfeo representing the spirits of the underworld) is some of the finest in music history. He didn’t go in for the complicated polyphony of Handel (or even Mozart in his stile antico mode) but favored more homorhythmic singing that works closely with the orchestra to grand dramatic effect. The accuracy and power of the chorus is one of the defining factors of any production of Orfeo. This short example shows that the Coro della Radiotelevisione Svizzera, well matched by I Barrochisti, has the necessary skills:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHkQoMsR4hI

Now that the terms “early music” and “historically informed performance” commonly apply to music all the way into the 18th century, it’s fun to be reminded of how we once expected Gluck’s music to sound. Contrast the two recordings discussed above to this 1951 performance conducted by the great Wilhelm Furtwängler. For easy comparison, here’s the now-familiar Orfeo aria “Che farò senza Euridice!”

https://open.spotify.com/track/0d6o5L9OjlihP8dC9YN8k9

The first obvious difference is the size of the orchestra, in particular the number of violins, presumably the same group of La Scala pit musicians who would have played for Tosca or La Bohème. The overall instrumental sound is thicker and less detailed than the more recent performances. And then there’s the fact that Orfeo is sung by a woman, mezzo-soprano Fedora Barbieri. Back in 1951, countertenors were quite a rarity.

Barbieri’s luscious voice offers a level of vibrato that these days is considered acceptable only for Romantic-era works. And her phrasing feels grounded, for lack of a better term – almost macho in its cadence. It’s beautiful singing that seems much too heavy-handed for the ethereal melody, like everything else about this (admittedly groundbreaking) recording. We’ve come a long way.

It’s worth noting here that Gluck wrote both Italian and French versions of his opera. The latter, premiered in 1774 at Paris Opera, was called Orphée et Euridice. (Later, Berlioz rewrote the French version for a mezzo-soprano in the role of Orphée, but Gluck was the first to use the French libretto.) Gluck’s commitment to setting vocal music in several languages was another inspiration for Mozart, who risked his reputation by daring to take German-language opera seriously. So, if you love The Magic Flute, tip your hat to C.W. Gluck.
Some Winners, and a Complete Snooze

TO BE DETERMINED

Written by Tom Gibbs
Miles Davis had been laboring for a number of years in the early fifties, hamstrung under an exclusive contract to Prestige Records. Who were paying him next to nothing for his efforts—even though his albums were among the label’s best selling recordings. After the Newport Jazz Festival of 1955, Miles was approached by George Avakian of Columbia Records; he offered him a much more lucrative contract. And he also offered to help get him out of the bad deal with Prestige, where he was still on the hook for five more albums. Bob Weinstock of Prestige agreed to release Miles and allow him to record for Columbia, with the stipulation that none of the Columbia sessions could be released until Miles had fulfilled the five-album deal with Prestige. Eager to get on with his career, Miles assembled a crack group of (at the time) relatively unknown musicians that included Sonny Rollins on sax, Red Garland on piano, Philly Joe Jones on drums, and Paul Chambers on bass. Sonny soon exited and was replaced by John Coltrane.

Miles took his new quintet and convened in Rudy Van Gelder’s Hackensack studio with Weinstock beginning in mid ‘55. Three marathon sessions scattered over the next year produced enough material for five classic albums, *Miles*, *Cookin’*, *Relaxin’*, *Workin’*, and *Steamin’*, which form the core of Miles’ Prestige quintet output. And are, debatably, five of the finest albums in Miles lengthy discography, if not in the entirety of recorded jazz. Miles was finally released from his contract, free to form his first great Columbia quintet, and the rest—as they say—is history!
This new box set has been presented here in a couple of iterations that distinguishes it from any previous releases of the material. First of all, this represents the first time it’s been made available for high-res streaming, and here it’s presented on both Tidal and Qobuz in high resolution 24/96 and 24/192 sound (the Tidal, of course, is MQA encoded). And it’s also being released as a six LP, 180 gram set on the high-end Craft Recordings label. All my listening sessions were done via the 24/192 Qobuz and Tidal streams on my home system.

First of all, I just want to say, WOW! I own most of this material on either CD or LP, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard it sound quite so good as the 24/192 streams via Qobuz and Tidal. These are mono recordings, but they’re in exceptionally well-recorded Rudy Van Gelder mono, which has a seemingly much wider sweet spot than other mono recordings of the era. I love the sound of the OJC Prestige LPs I own, but the 24/192 transfers here are pretty much the equal of the LPs. Through my Magnepan LRS loudspeakers, the digital files showed great warmth, with deep and well-defined bass and a very liquid upper register. I’ve heard these classic sessions countless times, but they sounded so very fresh here, it was almost like hearing the material for the very first time.

The tracks are all presented here in the order in which they were recorded; they were later assembled by Bob Weinstock in varying order for the five albums they ultimately came to represent. There’s nothing in terms of extra material here; the original sessions involved virtually no alternate takes, which is amazing considering Miles had only put this group together so relatively recently. This is a truly excellent set of classic, timeless jazz, and the availability of the streaming option makes checking it out a complete no-brainer for those with Qobuz or Tidal accounts. Very highly recommended!

Concord/Prestige/Craft Recordings, 5 CDs/6 LPs (download/streaming from Amazon, Tidal, Qobuz, Google Play Music, Apple Music, Spotify, Deezer)
Moby - *Long Ambients Two*

I guess this is a thing, maybe with millennials and hipsters, but there really is a subculture of music designed for enhanced sleeping. I actually reviewed a disc from Sigur Ros a few issues back that fell into that category; I thought it was probably a rarity, but this album definitely proves that’s not the case. Actually, *Long Ambients Two* is preceded by *Long Ambients 1: calm. sleep.* —is this really serious?

The Sigur Ros album totaled about three hours in length, as I recall. This one, in combination with the first one, is over *seven hours* long. Which Moby says is long enough for someone to get a decent night’s sleep. He also says that “this is not music for listening to.” Each track is a constant, virtually non-variable drone—he’s totally right. *Long Ambients Two* is not music for listening to. YMMV.

Little Idiot Records, (download/streaming from Soundcloud, Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Spotify, Deezer, iTunes, Apple Music)
I know next to nothing about Harry Styles; I know he’s the former focal singer of the boy-band One Direction. And I also caught a Saturday Night Live episode where he was the musical guest, and contributed a couple of bits in a really funny sketch with host Jimmy Fallon that was a future/past mixup where Styles did a really spot-on take on a young Mick Jagger. Which surprisingly impressed the hell out of me—I didn’t think he had any kind of range outside the boy-band thing, and would easily fall flat on his face once the One Direction money dried up.

All of which makes the following seem nearly impossible to me. I would never in a million years ever have expected myself to be making the following statement: I’m listening to Harry Styles new album, Fine Line, and I don’t hate it. Actually, I’m kind of grooving to it; it’s a mixture of vocals from Styles that exhibit a surprisingly soulful range of styles (pun intended!). And the album is a quirky mixture of alternately danceable pop tunes, sparsely instrumented, folk-influenced rock, and entertainingly cerebral electro-pop. And Styles’ voice is recorded pretty much straight-up and without any kind of studio trickery, à la Britney Spears and the like. He can actually sing—which is a complete shock in the current world of pop music. And he taps into a surprising range of stylistic influences.

Styles wrote or co-wrote all the songs on the album—another shocker—is there anything this kid can’t do? Fine Line is his sophomore effort, and while he may not have all the pieces to the puzzle
yet, he’s making all the right moves. And there’s never a moment here where his singing and the instrumentation aren’t incredibly entertaining. There’s not really a bad song on the disc, and how often can you say that about many mainstream recording artists out there? I could definitely hear several of these songs turning up in the soundtrack of a really hip, entertainingly millennial film soundtrack.

All my listening was done through the CD-quality version streamed on Qobuz, and the sound quality was exceptionally superb. Columbia Records did well in signing Styles to a contract—I’m certain we’ll be hearing from him for years to come—let the girls start screaming. Recommended.

Columbia Records, CD/LP (download/streaming Qobuz, Amazon, Google Play Music, Spotify, Pandora, YouTube, Apple Music, iTunes, Deezer)
Missing the Pazz and Jop Critics Poll

FEATURED
Written by Wayne Robins

What’s Happening to Best Album of the Year Lists

For many pop music critics, December was once the most joyous month, and it had nothing to do with holidays. Immediately after Thanksgiving, when new releases were all but suspended until the following January, we began to compile our ten best albums lists. The habit had been a seasonal journalistic enterprise for books and movies for many years, but for the first generation of rock critics, the endeavor became formalized with the first of a consecutive series of Robert Christgau’s 1974 Pazz & Jop Critics Poll in New York’s The Village Voice.

Christgau began a test run in 1971, contriving the name “Pazz & Jop,” inspired by the feature in the short-lived Jazz & Pop magazine in the late 1960s. Jazz & Pop created the mathematical formula for which the Voice’s poll was based, and even rock critics who scorned math in school obsessed over the arithmetic: a list of 10 albums, highest grade 30, lowest grade 5, with a cumulative total of 100 points. Those of us who contributed from that 1974 start slaved happily over our homework, fine-tuning our numerical awards and redoing the math as if a NASA mission depended on it.

The top ten in 1974, that year, from the aggregated 28 critics, including me. (Numbers are total points, followed parenthetically by number of ballots mentioning the record.)

1. Joni Mitchell: Court and Spark (Asylum) 186 (14)
2. Steely Dan: Pretzel Logic (ABC) 157 (13)
3. Randy Newman: Good Old Boys (Reprise) 154 (13)
4. Stevie Wonder: Fulfillingness’ First Finale (Tamla) 153 (15)
5. Rolling Stones: It’s Only Rock ‘n Roll (Rolling Stones) 150 (12)
6. Bob Dylan and the Band: Before the Flood (Asylum) 139 (10)
7. Roxy Music: Stranded (Atco) 106 (7)
8. Jackson Browne: Late for the Sky (Asylum) 85 (6)
9. Eric Clapton: 461 Ocean Boulevard (RSO) 83 (7)
10. New York Dolls: In Too Much Too Soon (Mercury) 76 (8)
No jazz, not enough women (Linda Ronstadt’s *Heart Like a Wheel* was No. 11, but look who is No. 1) or people of color to satisfy the socially aware Christgau, but plenty of what was becoming formatted as “album rock”: many contained hit singles, some were rock critic specialties, but all but the Dolls were universally recognized by fans, readers, and the critics as good or great important albums by good or great important artists. There was just not that much distance between what was thought to be the cult of critics and the popular choices of radio listeners and record buyers.

Now, we live in an era of perpetual lists, so numerous in social media that they’ve spawned a cute name: listicles, as in, “here’s a listicle of my favorite cat videos of the year.” Lists and rankings permeate so many facets of our digital lives (daily lists, from one to ten, of most influential albums from high school, for example, from my graying Facebook cohort) that they’ve become a nuisance, a waste of fonts and bytes.

But when it comes to the ten best albums of our current year, a different problem arises: albums don’t really matter in contemporary popular music (pop, rock, rap, R&B) anymore. Rare is the artist (Adele, Taylor Swift) whose fans buy hard CDs in any measurable quantity, and even fully thought-out, album-length collections of songs are infrequently reviewed by a dwindling mainstream music press. The old gatekeepers—mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, legacy rock media such as *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, and the once abundant alternative weeklies (from *The Village Voice* to *New Times* in various cities) have disappeared or have drastically cut down on album review coverage.

There are exceptions: *Pitchfork* pays serious, often too serious, attention to a wide swath of contemporary rock music. The online *Guardian* in the U.K., read worldwide, has top-notch pop coverage, and the U.K.-based print magazines *Mojo* and *Uncut* continue to publish more than a hundred reviews of new and archival albums every month. *Relix*, the magazine for Deadheads in a post-Grateful Dead world, covers albums with wide bandwidth but not much depth.

*Pitchfork* also provides exhaustive year-end lists, but we’re here to talk about albums. *Pitchfork’s* 50 Best Albums of 2019 (promising, in the subhead, “FKA twigs, Bon Iver, Kim Gordon, Da Baby and more”) starts in reverse order—Floating Points at 50, Faye Webster (49), Danny Brown (48), Barker (47). Counting down the top five: Solange, Angel Olson, Big Thief, FKA twigs, and finally, at No. 1, Lana Del Rey’s *Norman F*ucking *Rockwell*. Christgau would have been pleased with both the female representation and persons of color in this hugely diffuse list, but its very variety is the best argument about the absence of purpose in today’s albums. A deeper look at the list (six to 10: Bad Bunny, Helado Negro, Fennesz, Weyes Blood, and Purple Mountains) suggests the possibility that not many of these recordings as albums meant that much to too many people. Or each of them meant a lot to very few people.

*Rolling Stone* takes a contrarian position for a magazine that once identified as “counter” and as the first redoubt of the male rock star. The top four of its Best Albums of 2019 might be those of any typical teenage white girl: Number four: Taylor Swift, *Lover*; three, Del Rey’s *Rockwell*; two, 17-year-old phenom Billie Eilish’s *Where Do We Go When We All For Asleep?*; and number one, *Thank U, Next* by Ariana Grande, now an undeniable talent at a stage of quickening development, but come on: Ariana Grande, *Rolling Stone*? Did any of the board of critics who chose this listen to this album as an album at all? Did anyone give it more than three-and-a-half stars (a recurring joke for decades among those who find the *RS* star ratings a might overcautious and 3-1/2 star album reviews ubiquitous)?

Gone are the days when you walk through a college dorm, hear fascinating music coming from a
turntable, or even a boombox or Bluetooth speaker in another room, knock on the door and make a lifelong friendship with either the person or the artist. Each individual enjoys their noise in silence: in their rooms, while walking, in cafeterias, while on public transportation, almost from waking to sleep, everyone with their own earbuds listening to their solitary playlists. Those who’ve decided on genre preference: hip-hop, whatever’s left of alternative rock, classic rock, or pop (now a mostly R&B/hip-hop hybrid), metal or something called post-metal, listen to music on devices (by that I mean phones) that seem to be equipped with warning signals if the listener strays from their musical lane. Speaking of such common safety features in new automobiles, it is not insignificant that many new cars are no longer equipped with compact disc players. I can stream effortlessly from my phone, or copy albums I own to a USB drive, but the impulse to grab a CD or 10 for a trip of any duration is to be resisted.

In other words, the album may be over, a fear articulated by The New York Times when it published the top ten lists of pop writers Jon Pareles and Jon Caramanica: “Our critics chose the best albums of the year, a format that is in an increasingly fragile state in pop music.” Eilish was number one on the list by Pareles, whose tastes run global: his top five is rounded out by Brittany Howard (formerly of Alabama Shakes); Africa Speaks by Santana and Spanish/African singer Buika; Athena, by Sudan Archives, the name of the project by multi-instrumentalist Brittney Parks; and Almadura by Puerto Rican songwriter iLe. Del Rey is number seven on the Pareles list.

Caramanica, whose specialties are both hip-hop and country, lists 14 albums. He places Del Rey at No. 6, with the first slot for the artist known as 100 gecs (“the sound of internet splatter,”). The eclectic-in-a-more-orderly way Bad Bunny, “the definitive global pop star of the last two years,” is No. 2. Kanye West’s Jesus is King is No. 9, Grande is 11, and Swift No. 14.

Del Rey seems to be as much of a consensus selection as one might find in 2019. She is the clear number one on ten best list aggregator Album of the Year https://www.albumoftheyear.org/list/summary/2019/, getting 408 drawn from 117 sources. A distant second was one album that might have done well in a classic critics poll: Ghosteen by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds (273), just two points ahead of FKA twigs' Magdalene, with Eilish and Angel Olsen clustered close behind. The new album by now-mainstream Vampire Weekend (Father of the Bride) was No. 11, which makes sense, because it was just inside or outside the top ten in every relevant list I surveyed.

But here’s the rub. Even Del Rey appeared at No. 1 in only 12 of the 117 lists AOTY surveyed. Conspicuous for its low ranking was Bruce Springsteen’s Western Skies, in an exact tie with Taylor Swift’s Lover and alt-country-rock firebrand Jenny Lewis's On the Line, ranked 33-35 with 62 points each.

Still, the future of ten best album lists remains bleak, especially for veteran critics who long for the formality and stature of the Pazz & Jop poll. Two established critics in my social media circle published such lists on Facebook out of habit, need, nostalgia, or desperation. And one told me in an email that the 10 albums he posted on social media were pretty much the only ones he could think of that he listened to from beginning to end more than once. American Songwriter listed its top 25 alphabetically, which seems a sane choice, though indecisiveness and nuance get lost in the compromise.

The problem, of course, is that listeners, labels, and the streaming companies that rule the music business don’t fetishize albums as we once did. In 2019, most music appeared to be made, beat by catchy beat, to go in one ear pod and out the other, as deeply considered as turning on the
streaming faucet from which music pours, one solitary listener per song at a time, setting set to Shuffle.

Wayne Robins is a veteran music critic and journalist. He is a former editor of Creem, was pop music writer at Newsday/New York Newsday, and has contributed to dozens of publications and web sites around the world. Author of three books and a contributor to many anthologies, he is an adjunct professor at St. John's University in Queens, NY.
When Gibson Guitars was descending into its eventual Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing of October, 2017, one of the most demoralizing warning shots was the announcement months earlier that technical support for its Sonar DAW software would be effectively eliminated. As the only pro level DAW platform designed specifically for Windows PC, Sonar and its original parent, Cakewalk, had a long history of providing MIDI sequencing and digital recording software that would compete in audio quality with Avid’s Pro Tools, Cubase, Performer, Logic, Ableton Live, and the other Mac-preferred platforms. Musicians around the world with hundreds of thousands, if not millions of music files created on various Cakewalk and Sonar platforms were shaken and reluctantly preparing to transfer their files for future work to Pro Tools or Cubase, which also have PC versions, or one of the newer, less popular platforms.

Several months later, it was announced that all of the Sonar and affiliated Cakewalk IP had been purchased by a Singaporean company called BandLab Technologies. BandLab subsequently issued a press release that it would continue service for Sonar, now being relaunched under the name “Cakewalk by BandLab.” Unlike Pro Tools, Cubase, or other DAW companies, BandLab’s free Cakewalk would not be a limited function version or a trial basis sample. BandLab essentially was offering Sonar Platinum, the Cakewalk brand’s premier product, for free.
Incredible – how could they do that and why? It turns out there is a larger strategy in the works, and the concept lies in lessons learned from the agriculture and shipping industries.

In a strategic and stealthy manner, BandLab CEO Kuok Meng Ru, a grand nephew of palm oil agribusiness tycoon Robert Kuok, has been acquiring historically adored and established musical instrument, technology, and publishing companies into a vertically integrated conglomerate structure. Heritage Guitars, Harmony Guitars, UK’s The Guitar Magazine, MusicTech magazine, New Musical Express, Teisco, MONO gig bags and cases, and Southeast Asian music retail institution Swee Lee are all part of Kuok’s burgeoning music empire.

A passionate guitarist and music enthusiast himself, Kuok has big plans for BandLab and its rebranded Cakewalk subsidiary. As a combination DAW (digital audio workstation, used for music production) and social media network for musicians around the globe, BandLab, in conjunction with sister company MusicTech, is leading the cutting edge vision of music making, with some elements that Thomas Dolby referenced in his speech presentation at AES 2018 in New York about the integration of music, social media, and digital technology.

Entrepreneurial Roots

The Kuok Family is one of the most prominent overseas Chinese families in Southeast Asia. Meng Ru’s grand uncle is Robert Kuok, whose estimated $12 billion net worth makes him the richest man in Malaysia. His father, Kuok Khoon Hong, is the billionaire founder of Wilmar, which controls the bulk of palm oil production and distribution in the world and was merged into Kuok Group in 2007.

Guitars and Gear

An ardent music fan and musician, young 15 year old Meng obtained his first guitar, a Fender Stratocaster, from the venerable Swee Lee music shop (founded in 1946) in Singapore. A family owned retailer and distributor of musical instruments and equipment with 13 outlets throughout Asia, it bears little resemblance to the mega store lifestyle retailer that Meng Ru would transform Swee Lee into when he would take it over a decade later.

In a November 2019 issue of Financial Times, Kuok Meng Ru mentioned that growing up and observing how his family palm oil business was vertically integrated from food, plantation and trees to harvesting, processing, distribution and branding would influence his concepts of business.

Swee Lee’s flagship store at the Singapore Star Vista has since tripled in size and not only includes musical instrument and equipment selections that rival, if not surpass Guitar Center, but also includes teaching rooms, a vinyl record department reminiscent of Tower Records, an apparel and merchandise department, and a Swee Lee Social Club with baristas serving fresh brewed coffee. The flagship Kuala Lumpur store evokes a coffee house and recording studio ambiance, as well as showcasing their primary musical retail offerings.

An admitted admirer of Bob Taylor and Kurt Listug of Taylor Guitars, Kuok Meng Ru has folded some iconic guitar brands into the BandLab portfolio. Among these are:

- Heritage Guitars - A high quality boutique guitar company ironically founded by former Gibson Kalamazoo craftsmen, Heritage makes old school archtop jazz guitars, semi hollow and solid body electric guitars that equal or surpass those of Gibson during the 1960s and 1970s. Heritage inked a worldwide sales and marketing agreement with BandLab in 2017.
- MONO gig bags and cases – One of the first companies offering superb travel protection for transporting guitars and basses in practical gig bag configurations for urban musicians
requiring public transportation, MONO cases set a niche industry standard that competitors are still attempting to match. Used by Metallica, The Roots and Red Hot Chili Peppers as well as countless musicians around the world, MONO was acquired in 2016 from founder Daniel Kushner. Kuok Meng Ru was a MONO fan for his own instruments purchased at Swee Lee and remains so to this day.

- Harmony and Teisco – Popular guitar brands from the 1950s and 1960s, Teisco and Harmony instruments have been used on stage and in the studio by artists like Jimmy Page (“Stairway to Heaven”) and John Sebastian (in the film Woodstock) among others. The company eventually stopped American production while its brand name continued through the 1990s and 2000s being associated with cheap, mass produced, imported starter instruments. Founded in post World War II Japan in 1948, Teisco’s funky kitsch designs and unique gold foil pickups are crucial to the tones of consummate session musicians and ethnomusicologists David Lindley and Ry Cooder, as well as Glen Campbell during his days as a member of studio musicians “The Wrecking Crew.”

BandLab Technologies’ revival of these iconic brands includes new designs, such as Harmony’s Silhouette, Rebel, and Jupiter, that have impressed musicians with their sound, playability and appearance. They have also reissued the Harmony 8418 tube amp combo, which early guitar lore cites as similar to the model first used by Keith Richards and Brian Jones during the genesis of the Rolling Stones. For Teisco, no instruments have been released so far, but a series of a Boost, Delay and Fuzz pedal, each hearkening back to the sounds of the psychedelic 1960s, is a first step towards redefining the brand with a nod to the Teisco pedigree.

**Publishing**

One of the first instances where BandLab Technologies made its presence felt on the international music scene was in 2016, when it bought founder Jann Wenner’s 49% stake in Rolling Stone Magazine. BandLab has also acquired periodicals Guitar and MusicTech from the UK.

With both physical print and digital versions now consolidated, BandLab's communications to musicians, musical equipment manufacturers and the music industry is a unique hub for making it a "go to" as both an information source and an influencer through the BandLab social media platform.

Unable to acquire majority control over Rolling Stone from Penske Media, BandLab subsequently sold its stake earlier in 2019.

Turning back to England, BandLab Technologies' latest acquisitions have been Uncut and NME (aka New Musical Express), a publication rivaling Rolling Stone. NME had been published in the UK since 1952 but had ceased printing earlier in 2018. As of late 2018, NME now reaches the widest readership in its history with over 16 million people a month through its digital platform.

**Social Media and Putting It All Together**

Kuok Meng Ru is one of millions of musicians in the Pacific Rim and Asia. Apart from K-Pop and Bollywood, original music from that region (aside from Australia) has yet to become as ubiquitous around the world as music from the US, UK and Europe. One of the driving imperatives for the founding of BandLab Technologies was for establishing a social media platform for artists worldwide to showcase their work, connect with each other, and exchange ideas internationally.

With the publishing pieces in place to connect musicians with gear, trends, and international music industry news, BandLab’s GarageBand-styled recording platform was adequate for hobbyists, semi-
pro musicians, and EDM or sample-based hip-hop artists who relied more on loops and digital cut and paste to assemble tracks than on professional-level recording. With the acquisition of Cakewalk, BandLab essentially is offering a revamped version of the $499 street price Sonar Platinum, the top DAW choice for PC-based musicians, for free.

In addition to BandLab’s ability to offer a pro level DAW established brand that was capable of 96 kHz high-resolution and 5.1 surround sound mixing, they also accessed the millions of loyal Sonar and Cakewalk users around the globe to add to the millions already subscribed to BandLab. Making a premium version of Cakewalk available for free is a canny way to cement the past loyal users and gives BandLab a pro level credibility cachet in its subscription expansion overseas.

Putting the vertical integration structure palm oil industry lessons of his father into practice, Meng has completed the circle for his own music business empire:

- The ground level tool elements to offer musicians for the creation of music (Cakewalk, guitar companies).
- The marketing and promotion elements to establish his brand, via the periodicals (NME, Uncut), and websites, which includes education (MusicTech), training, and social media connections.
- The Swee Lee retail outlets to promote the lifestyle image and access to the instruments, in person networking, and concert events.

BandLab is the hub around which all of these elements, seamlessly connected and smoothly coordinated along multiple avenues, revolve.

**First Singapore, Next, the World**

The Kuok Family could easily be a reference model for the fictional Young family from the hit movie Crazy Rich Asians. Kuok Meng Ru, 31, has already forged a separate path and is building a self-contained music industry conglomerate with BandLab that is successfully growing.

Ironically, the downfall of Gibson was due to Henry Juszkiewicz failing in his attempts to construct a similar model, which was the rationale for Gibson’s mismatched acquisitions of such disparate companies as hi fi audio company Onkyo, KRK Monitors, Cerwin Vega, Stanton, and Teac – along with Sonar. Juszkiewicz’s acquisition plan lacked a cohesive way to connect these standalone manufacturers’ offerings together for the end-customer musician in the digital age.

BandLab may not yet be a household name, but its achievements have not gone unnoticed by its rivals. Hamamatsu, Japan-headquartered Roland has recently launched its own take on the BandLab model with Zenbeats. They are already adding subscribers via the acquisition of Stagelight, a smaller social media and GarageBand model music website catering to EDM and Hip-Hop artists. Roland synthesizers, keyboards, sound processing, and amplification are firmly established products at all levels in the music industry. Roland is using Zenbeats to connect its loyal user base of musicians in a similar manner to BandLab.

At 31, Kuok Meng Ru still has a long career ahead of himself. He has not ruled out joining the family’s multi-billion dollar business in the future, but has not felt any pressure to do so. Thus, for the time being, he is clearly a man having fun in a field he loves while reviving brands that millions of musicians feared would become extinct. Music fans around the world may not know BandLab or Kuok yet, but one suspects that anonymity will be waning very soon.
James McMurtry: Master at Work

PARTING SHOT
Taken by James Schrimpf