I've been thinking about this lately and seeing Paul McGowan's recent related post on the subject made it hit home: no two audio systems are alike.

Think about all the source components, speakers, cables and accessories available – what are the odds of any of us having the exact same system? And even if, say, a dealer sold the identical gear to more than one customer, their rooms are different, and the room has a major influence on a system's sound. Of course there are commonalities – I think those who’ve heard a Quad ESL could agree on its sonic personality, for example – but consider all the above and throw in the fact that every listener is different and it’s apparent that each of us enjoys a unique experience from our audio systems. For now, just an observation – and a subject that asks for further exploration.

In this issue: Anne E. Johnson looks at the rise, fall and rise of Rod Stewart, and gives us eight great tracks from jazz singer Nancy Wilson. WL Woodward begins a series on the outrageous life of Grateful Dead sonic mastermind Owsley “Bear” Stanley. John Seetoo examines Berlin, Lou Reed’s revered and reviled masterpiece, and talks with Ohm Acoustics' president John Strohbeen, who has some very different ideas about loudspeaker design. Tom Gibbs goes crate digging!

Professor Larry Schenbeck concludes his interview with musicologist Steve Waksman, who takes us further into the career of Woodstock sound man Bill Hanley. J.I. Agnew has a warm look at the history of vacuum tubes. Rich Isaacs concludes his series on progressive rock titans Gentle Giant. Dan Schwartz continues his quest for audio system perfection, this time via AC power regenerators. B. Jan Montana contributes an incisive show report on NAMM from the perspective of an audiophile. Wrapping up the issue, cartoonist James Whitworth illustrates that some audiophiles have pointed opinions. Audio Anthropology looks at 1960s DIY audio furniture and our Parting Shot takes us to
the beach at Puerto Vallarta.
A Pointed Opinion

THE RUN-OUT GROOVE

Written by James Whitworth
"IT SOUNDS BETTER WITH HORNS."
"IT SOUND Better WITH HORNS."
In 1962 Allied Radio and Masonite partnered to offer this "hi-fi wall" kit. Audio components not included! From *Radio-TV Experimenter*, fall 1962.
Steve Waksman, Rock Musicologist: Part Two

TOO MUCH TCHAIKOVSKY

Written by Lawrence Schenbeck
Larry Schenbeck: Please tell us about Bill Hanley at Woodstock.

Steve Waksman: Right, Woodstock, almost certainly the thing for which Hanley will be best remembered. Michael Lang, the one of the four Woodstock producers who exerted the most creative control, picked a bunch of folks who worked for Graham at the Fillmore East to pull the festival together, and Hanley was one of them. Given his Newport experience he was clearly the best person for the job, but this was on a scale beyond what he had done before. Fortunately, the state of audio equipment had improved dramatically. When Hanley did sound for the Newport festivals in the early 1960s, he was relying on McIntosh MC75 power amps, which put out 75 watts. Now McIntosh had a 350-watt amplifier, and Crown had issued a 300-watt amp that was smaller and more portable because of the solid-state circuitry. Hanley used a mix of McIntosh and Crown units for Woodstock. The system had a total output of around 10,000 watts. Even that wound up being insufficient when the crowd far exceeded the expected turnout of about 100,000, so Hanley had to adjust the compressors he had hooked up to boost the levels further.

LS: Those “compressors”—what did they compress, exactly?

SW: Compression is a fundamental aspect of audio production. It’s talked about more often with studio recording than with live sound. In recent years a kind of hyper-compressed sound has become the norm on lots of commercial recordings. But Hanley used compression because it could limit the dynamic range of an audio output signal by reducing the levels of the peak (i.e., loudest) frequencies. Compression tends to flatten the overall output, which in turn actually allows the sound engineer to further boost the overall signal. By reducing the peaks, he or she can drive the system harder with less fear of blowing a speaker or having the sound distort like in Dylan’s Newport 1965 set. That’s why compression was a key strategy for Hanley in getting the system he built for Woodstock to project maximum volume.

LS: In your Boston talk, you also described the tower speakers at Woodstock in detail. Was this another Hanley innovation?

SW: Yes, very much so. The physical geography of Woodstock was challenging because of the size of the crowd and the open-air nature of the event. Woodstock’s producers all said Max Yasgur’s land was perfect because it was like a natural amphitheater, with the stage area set up at the bottom of a long rolling incline. Hanley realized that a standard speaker setup would not distribute the sound well, because the crowd continued so far up the hill and away from the stage. So he and his crew built two 70-foot-tall speaker towers. But his real stroke of genius was to install two levels of speakers on each tower—one on the top, directed back toward the highest part of the hill, for people furthest away from the stage, and one several feet lower, directed at the audience on the ground right in front of the towers.

This kind of creative engineering really shows why Hanley was such a groundbreaking live sound producer. While he was very much a self-proclaimed technocrat, caught up in equipment design, he also had that rare ability to think about sound from the perspective of the audience, about what would create the best listening experience.
LS: Was Woodstock the climax of Hanley’s career? It’s hard to imagine how he could have topped that.

SW: Yes and no. It was definitely the biggest event he did, and the one that got the most notice. But Hanley himself always seemed ambivalent about Woodstock. For one thing, he wasn’t a hippie. He was a bit older, and his sensibilities were more suited to the Newport festivals than to a scene like that. More to the point, he came to view Woodstock as the beginning of the end of a certain line of development. It became harder after that to produce big festivals, because, well, a lot of communities didn’t want a Woodstock in their backyard. So the situation for producing festivals became much more restrictive, even before Altamont, usually seen as the moment when the phenomenon started to fall apart. Hanley had a particularly hard time with an effort to put on a festival at the Powder Ridge ski resort in Connecticut, which was stopped in its tracks by local resistance.

Hanley’s career didn’t come to a standstill after Woodstock. He worked for a few years on the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. It was pretty small compared to what it would become, but Hanley definitely helped get it off the ground. By the later 1970s things were slowing down for him more.

LS: They say “journalism is the first rough draft of history.” Some of these things have certainly been covered by popular media.

SW: Journalists have covered Hanley to a degree, although during the prime of his career he rarely got more than passing attention. Lately he’s had a greater share of retrospective attention, mostly from specialist sources—the best published interview with him appeared in the audio-production magazine *Recording Engineer/Producer*, which some of your readers might know from years past. One scholar, John Kane, has taken on the responsibility of documenting Hanley’s life and career with an unprecedented level of detail. Keep an eye out for his book, *The Last Seat in the House*, due to be published in early 2020.

LS: As a historian and cultural analyst, your goals are necessarily distinct from those of journalists or critics. Why would someone like you study Hanley’s work?

SW: Hanley is a small part of a larger project I’m working on, but he’s a really important part. I’m finishing up a history of live music in the U.S. that covers the period from about 1850 to the present day. Yes, it’s as absurdly over-ambitious as it sounds! One of my many goals with the project is to reflect on how live music actually manages to happen. Which is to say, live music doesn’t just happen. It takes an incredible amount of work to put on a performance. The required infrastructure has grown dramatically over time. Hanley is one of many figures that allow me to get into what I call the *enabling conditions* of live music. With Hanley, we get to see how much problem-solving was required to develop the basic tools that allow a live performance to work, which then sets an expectation for how performances should work—in particular, how they should sound.

LS: Let me see if I get this: first you investigate what allows a performance to work. Then you determine how that sets up people’s expectations, whether for the next performance or for other matters. So what you’re really talking about is how people create cultures, which are based on things that work repeatedly, which means they reliably sustain and express our values, desires, fears, et cetera. Sometimes they help us revise all that: we go electric. In any case, we embrace these means of enabling performance.

SW: Yes, that’s a good summation. But in particular I’m looking at work that was ignored or dismissed by most historians. I do realize that looking at live music this way takes attention away
from the artists we usually think of as the main attraction. Obviously, the audience that comes to see U2 or Kiss or Beyoncé is there to see that artist. To truly understand live music and the impact it has, though, you need to go behind the scenes. Economy matters—where does the money come from? And so I talk a lot about promoters and the business of concert promotion. But the details of staging and production are just as crucial. That’s where Hanley comes into play, along with figures like Chip Monck, who worked closely with Hanley on the Newport festivals and at Woodstock, and later toured with the Stones as their stage designer and production coordinator. Or Jules Fisher, who did lighting design and stage production for a host of 1970s touring acts—David Bowie, Kiss, the Stones again, P-Funk. When you’re dealing with artists of that caliber, you’re dealing with stars that have a larger-than-life presence. Yet when you’re in an arena watching them perform, they’re often reduced to a speck on the stage. Good production brings that larger-than-life quality back into play. It ensures that the audience has the experience they are there to have, that everyone can hear and see them in a way that brings them pleasure.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwIymq0iTsw&authuser=0

*Photo of Steve Waksman by Julian Parker-Burns.*
I know there’s a policy of having us writers not write about PS Audio products. But sometimes it’s something that’s just screaming at us (well, me) to do. Paul McGowan’s recent video/pod-thingy about Power Plants (a device that regenerates AC power and supplies it to an audio system) brought this to mind.

[I trust readers will know we’re running this as an audio system story they may be able to relate to, not to sneak in a product endorsement. – Ed.]

I currently use a DirectStream P20, because I got a great deal and so could afford it. Before the P20 I had a P3. Even before that I had an early iteration – it was called a Power Plant Premier. I first encountered one in David Bock’s studio/anechoic chamber, where he tested mics. He got it from PS Audio’s Paul McGowan, to whom I had introduced him in 1996. I didn’t even know about the device at the time but David swore by it, and told me about when he built a unit that was functionally very much like the Power Plant Premier when he worked as a tech at the Hit Factory in NYC. His unit was built out of a repurposed power amplifier.

Anyway, I’ve moved up in the world of these things: from the Chinese-made Power Plant Premier to the Boulder-built P3 and now the P20, and it’s that initial impression with the PPP I want to talk about here. Which might have been subtle to the average listener, but not to me.
I knew my system very well – it had been unaltered for years, as I’ve written previously. The one change I can point to that in some ways resembled the magnitude of the change I encountered with the PPP was the addition of a truly stunning power cable – the Kimber PK10 Palladian. Mid-bass tightened right up (not that I previously knew there was any tightening to do) and “reality” was rendered much more “real.” It was astonishing. So it was with the Power Plant Premier: I was, again, literally, stunned.

On thinking about it, it made perfect sense.

The vast majority of us build our sound on alternating-current power (the few exceptions being those who run their systems on battery power), and that AC power is subject to all kinds of depredations before it enters our walls. But unless you’re very, very, lucky, live in the middle of where no one else does, and have no electrical demands on the lines that bring you power, you may have no idea of what sonic effect the impure AC power is having on your system. (This is presumably why music sounds best late at night.) Of course, I live in a single-family house – lucky me – in a very crowded neighborhood smack in the middle of Los Angeles, where the power draw is in high demand by everyone.

In any event, I didn’t know what I was hearing regarding the effects of “raw” AC power, until the power to my system was separated from the source and quite literally regenerated. And once I heard that “truth,” I had some conversations with Paul and became an acolyte and a proselytizer. I realize that it’s likely that few people can actually afford to “rebuild” their AC power using a product like the P20, but even if you can’t afford it, you ought to at least hear it.

But it’s that first listening with the PPP that I most vividly remember, that sensation of being left with my jaw-hanging open.

Of course, the bigger picture is that this is about a whole category of products – AC power regenerators – and not just those from PS. But very few companies build anything like them And while I assume my system sounds incrementally better with each iteration, the truth is, after that initial shock, I have little patience for listening carefully to any changes – I just assume that they’re there.

Accuphase makes AC regenerators (and they’re pretty nice looking): http://www.accuphase.com/power_supply.html, as does a company called Monarchy Audio (https://www.monarchy-audio.com/AC_Regen_frm_Main.htm).

In any event, if you care to trust me, I’ll tell you: if you need it, and most of us do, you have no idea how your system can actually sound until you hear it with fresh-built power.

And I guess I’m still a proselytizer.
Born in 1945 in North London, Rod Stewart grew up listening to a variety of music, from Al Jolson to Little Richard. When he got his first guitar at age 15, he started off learning folk songs. That foundation in a wide range of musical genres has served Stewart well his whole career. There’s a lot more to him than just being the young rascal who sang “Maggie May.”

Stewart’s first musical gig was as harmonica player with a rhythm and blues group called The Dimensions (later Jimmy Powell and the Five Dimensions), which started getting regular work at Rolling Stones hangout Studio 51 in London. The more Stewart watched Mick Jagger, the faster he learned about performing. Soon he was ready to move on to greater heights.

The next step was being hired to join a well-known group called Long John Baldry and the All Stars (soon renamed the Hoochie Coochie Men). Baldry seems to have been very supportive of Stewart, at least at first, even singling out Stewart’s contributions during interviews. Stewart found the confidence to start doing solo gigs, and in 1964 he signed a contract with Decca. The only result was the single “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” written by blues harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson. It didn’t chart, which makes it fair game for us!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ak_Dsz1UAE

Over the next few years he continued to work in bands (Steampacket, Shotgun Express), before landing a job of a whole new caliber – with the Jeff Beck Group; you can hear him on their albums Truth and Beck-Ola. In 1969, he signed with Mercury, determined to make it as a solo act. But not long after he made that decision, he was drafted as singer for the band Faces (he and Ron Wood, who had just become the band’s guitarist, were close friends).
By the end of 1969, he’d finally released his first solo album, *An Old Raincoat Won’t Ever Let You Down.* (It was released in the US as *The Rod Stewart Album.*) In the studio with him were Ronnie Wood and Keith Emerson, among others, whose contributions helped to display Stewart’s gifts as both interpreter and songwriter. The critics were duly impressed.

Besides a few covers – most notably the Stones’ “Street Fighting Man” – the album is mostly Stewart’s own compositions. The title song is a Stewart original, demonstrating his long familiarity with the blues. Stewart’s now-iconic hoarse, passionate singing gets a leg up from the barroom ivory-tickling of Ian McLagan of The Faces, not to mention the unbridled drumming of London session regular Micky Waller.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lMGxOyt0A64

*Gasoline Alley* (1970) was Stewart’s second solo album, improving in sales over the first one but still not bringing him star power. It’s a very nice collections of songs, however. All the time he’d spent with English, Scottish, and Irish folk songs comes into play for the moving song “Jo’s Lament.” Its melody is heavily indebted to the Irish tune “Rosin the Bow.”

Several of his Faces colleagues are on hand, but for this track only it’s Stewart’s guitar playing that’s the feature.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=948HVnbUOCk

Stewart’s real breakthrough came with *Every Picture Tells a Story* (1971), which hit No. 1 on both the UK and US charts and provided hits like “Maggie May” – a surprise hit, released as a B-side for “Reason to Believe” – and “I Know I’m Losing You.” While disc jockeys played “You Wear It Well” and “Twisting the Night Away” from *Never a Dull Moment* (1972), those who bought the album were treated to the Stewart/Wood rocker “Italian Girls” with its typically snide lyrics:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDyL3CoynfQ

*Smiler* (1974) did great in the UK but less well in the US, and critics laughed at it. The gender-switched “You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Man” (yes, the Carole King song) didn’t help matters. But the opening track, a cover of Chuck Berry’s “Sweet Little Rock ‘n’ Roller” is lots of fun. Stewart really does have a way with the blues:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJtO2AK0uJs

Although Stewart continued the decade with plenty more high-charting albums like *A Night on the Town* and *Blondes Have More Fun,* nothing lasts forever. With *Foolish Behaviour* (1980), the sheen was off the crown; Stewart began a slow descent down the charts. Stewart (now with Warner Music) was stepping away from the straight-up blues-rock sound, adding violins and saxophones and jazz harmonies, and the public (literally) wasn’t buying it.

But give “So Soon We Change” a chance, with its reggae groove and jazz flute. It’s not that the song
is particularly great, but it’s interesting to note the difference in Stewart’s voice: There’s a calmness and clarity in the high register that’s almost unrecognizable. It’s a hint of the development and exploration he’d undertake in the following 30 years or so.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4xUH0GydoY

Stewart’s chart free-fall reached its nadir with the album *Human* in 2001, which only reached No. 50 in the US. Maybe the low numbers reflected Stewart’s unwillingness to stay still in his musical journey, a thing that fans often find frustrating. They want the same artist they knew back in the day, even when the artist has moved on. *Human* was Stewart’s first album with Atlantic and the first to include no music he’d written himself.

Maybe a thinking fan will listen to this album and realize what it shows about Stewart as a musician – one who appreciates the work of others and wants to pay tribute to it. For example, listen to his version of Curtis Mayfield’s “It Was Love That We Needed.” He clearly adores this song; there’s no sense that he’s out of his comfort zone or completing an assignment just to tick a box. His heart is in it all the way.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTKsMGdLeT4

Stewart’s second rise to the top came thanks to his commitment to American popular standards, a genre choice few would have predicted when he first made a name for himself as a blues-obsessed Mod in late-’60s London. In 2002 he released *It Had to Be You: The Great American Songbook*, complete with Nelson Riddle-style arrangements for strings and jazz combo. It did so well that he went on to record four more volumes in the series, all of them charting in the top five.

His performances of numbers by greats like Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart are nothing to snicker at -- and believe me, I snickered in 2002 when I heard about this project. Who knew Rod the Mod had a proper crooner hiding inside? He might not offer the silky sound of Sinatra, but he’s expressive and musical, truly understanding the genre.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDlr89os5s4

With 32 solo studio albums and 50 years in the music business under his belt, Stewart shows no signs of stopping. However, he seems to have reached an age where he acknowledges that his musical future is possible only because of his musical past. At this writing, his *Rod Stewart: The Hits* tour included 25 dates in 2020. Nothing wrong with giving the fans what they want.
Vacuum tubes, also known as thermionic valves, or just valves in the UK, are electronic devices whose operation is based on thermionic emission. This is defined as the emission of electrons from the surface of a solid, in proportion to temperature. The physics of this process concerns the relationship of the thermal energy of the electron with the work function of the material, but in fear of my excitement escalating into a detailed explanation of electron orbits around atomic nuclei, I will skip straight to the plain English account, sparing my readers the lecture.

A heated electrode, called a thermionic cathode, that is placed inside an evacuated glass bulb (a bulb in which the air inside has been removed to create a vacuum) emits plenty of electrons. The number of emitted electrons increases with temperature. The heated cathode then becomes surrounded by a cloud of electrons (a space charge). When a positive potential is applied to a second electrode called the anode within the same glass envelope, the electrons are attracted by the positive potential at the anode and current flows.

(Header image: vacuum tubes glowing in the dark. The glow is produced by the heaters which provide the thermal energy necessary for thermionic emission. Photo courtesy of Agnew Analog Reference Instruments.)

This type of device, containing two elements, the anode and the cathode, functions as a diode. It allows current to flow in one direction only. This type of tube can be used as a rectifier - a device that takes the AC (alternating current) from the wall and converts into the DC (direct current) needed by an audio circuit.
Things get much more interesting if we add another element inside the glass envelope. A grid can be placed between anode and cathode. The electron flow can then be controlled by the grid potential. A negative grid potential with respect to the cathode potential will repel electrons. If it is made sufficiently negative, it will cut off the electron flow. Modulating the grid potential will modulate the electron flow and hence the current through the tube.

In a typical simple tube circuit, a small audio signal fed to the grid of a three-element tube, known as a triode, will modulate the current through the tube (between the anode and the cathode) in proportion to the audio signal. Current flowing through the load connected to the tube will result in a voltage across the load. A small signal voltage at the grid will modulate the current flowing through the load and, given a sufficiently high DC supply to the circuit, the modulation-dependent signal voltage across the load will be much larger than the signal voltage at the grid. A small signal voltage has essentially been converted into a large signal voltage, resulting in amplification!

Unlike the simple diode, tubes with (control) grids like the triode and other tube types (such as tetrodes and those with even more internal elements) are capable of amplification. This development, occurring in 1906 with the invention of the Audion by Lee de Forest, has had a massive impact on our technological progress.

The vacuum tube provided the necessary infrastructure for electrical sound recording and reproduction, the telephone, radio, television and the entire modern era in telecommunications, radar, industrial control and automation systems, medical imaging, computers and all subsequent developments in amplification devices - which form the backbone of pretty much everything we take for granted nowadays.

Early vacuum tubes had very low amplification factors. Gain was at a premium, so if a tube was designed for an application demanding linearity, the tube itself had to be capable of linear operation! These early low-gain vacuum tubes were impractical for use in negative feedback circuits, which sacrifice amplifier gain for error correction. (Without getting too technical, in a negative feedback amplifier part of the circuit’s amplification capability (gain) is used to reduce distortion in the output.

Up until the 1930s some incredibly linear tubes had been created. But they were not cheap, they were not easy to manufacture and they were not exactly energy-efficient.

The tetrode, the pentode and the beam power tube improved on efficiency and manufacturability, but not on linearity. Later triode tubes mostly developed along the same lines. Much higher amplification was becoming available and negative feedback became popular, to electronically compensate for the lack of linearity. This resulted in more complex circuits with a higher component count, but the overall cost was lower as the less-linear tubes were easier to make. (Indeed.)

Then came the transistor (invented in 1947), followed by the solid state operational amplifier (or “op-amp”), housed in a tiny integrated circuit package. Each new invention made things smaller, cheaper and easier to manufacture, with the devices producing less heat and operating more efficiently on lower voltages. Transistors and op-amps ushered in the era of affordable (and disposable) consumer electronics, but were not more linear as devices. (Sound familiar?) Circuits became much more complex, large amounts of negative feedback became the norm in audio circuits and prices went down despite the massive increase in component count in the average audio circuit.

Yet, the 1930s directly-heated triode tubes still remain the most inherently linear devices ever made.

Triodes are inherently linear devices, some types more so than others. The 45 was popular for low
power applications. The 2A3 offered a bit more power and the legendary 300B even more, with a single-ended amplifier using one 300B tube producing around 7 W of power at best! This was considered a lot at the time, especially when the 45 triode in a similar single-tube configuration was only capable of a few milliwatts! More power could be obtained with multiple output tubes in parallel single-ended or push-pull configurations, but high-power applications usually required the use of large and expensive transmitting triodes, such as the 211 and the 845, which operated with power supply voltages in the kilovolt range! All of these tube types allow incredibly simple, minimalist circuit configurations, with no need for feedback.

They sound good.

But, as with all the fine pleasures in life, they come at a cost. Having said that, anyone who has ever attempted to wind a grid structure with ultra-fine wire to the level of accuracy and repeatability required in vacuum tube manufacture will never again complain about tube prices.

In fact, once glass blowing, precision machining, exotic materials processing, assembly and all the manufacturing and testing equipment required are all factored in, tubes are pretty reasonably priced. I wouldn’t want to have to make them myself for the prices we can buy them for, in all honesty.

Here’s a video about manufacturing vacuum tubes, from the How It’s Made TV show:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8n4WVRKkmww

But I also wouldn’t want to have to live without tubes, so I am glad that they are still being manufactured. In fact, some of the 1930s triodes are still being made today and are still being used, both as replacement parts for vintage equipment as well as for new designs! How many other products can really boast continued relevance and desirability over a period of 90 years?

Yes, they are big, heavy, inefficient, produce a lot of heat, require shockingly high voltages, and no university nowadays will teach students how to make them or use them. But they still find applications in a wide range of fields:

There are the audiophiles, who feel that their tube amplifier simply sounds more realistic than anything else. (There are subsets of tube aficionados – those who prefer minimalist designs among them.) I often find myself in agreement, given a well-designed and properly implemented unit.

There are the musicians, especially electric guitar and bass players, who find that nothing else will give them the dynamics and tone of a vintage tube amplifier. It should be noted that the requirements for musical instrument amplifiers are different than for high-fidelity audio systems. The emphasis is not necessarily on linearity, but in the behavior outside the linear region. When tubes are pushed outside their linear region of operation (overdriven), they tend to produce mainly lower-order harmonics, musically and dynamically related to the signal, which tend to sound pleasant. Second harmonic distortion is an octave above the fundamental and third harmonic distortion is a musical fifth above. By comparison, the fifth harmonic is a musical third, but it won’t ask you if you’re playing on a major or minor scale!

Tubes tend to produce mainly second and third harmonic distortion, depending on the circuit configuration and operating level, with higher-order harmonics fading into insignificance. Other amplification devices tend to exhibit the opposite picture: Low second and third harmonics, but
predominantly higher-order harmonics. Moreover, tubes have a very gradual transition from “clean” to “distorted” sound.

Tube amps can provide a wide tonal palette, responding to the dynamics of the performer’s playing style. With electric guitar and bass, the tube amplifier is very much an integral part of the instrument, which is why it is customary to record these instruments with a microphone placed near the amplifier’s loudspeaker. Vacuum tube musical instrument amplifiers, both vintage and modern, are sought after by professional musicians and are a regular feature in the world’s most highly regarded recording studios.

There are the recording and mastering engineers, many of whom love the sound of vacuum tube microphone preamplifiers, tube equalizers, tube compressors, and so on. Some of the finest, most transparent and most highly sought after studio equipment is based on vacuum tube electronics. Once again, the very gradual transition from “clean” to “dirty” on a well-designed tube mic preamp works wonders in naturally representing the impressive dynamics of a live performance, where it is generally desired to remain within the linear range. Tubes can offer a huge amount of headroom along with low noise, when carefully selected, resulting in an impressive dynamic range. More “realistic” dynamics result from the very gradual transition from clean to dirty, the predominantly low order harmonics and their “natural” relation to the signal level. This is what makes them sound good in all kinds of signal processing equipment as well. Being known for designing and using all-tube signal paths in the studio, I am obviously in agreement here.

A less obvious but hugely influential supporter of vacuum tube electronics is the military and defense sector. Tubes would survive an EMP (electro-magnetic pulse), whether naturally occurring (such as from lightning, an electrostatic discharge or a solar storm) or as part of an intentional attack. Solid state devices are very sensitive to EMPs and often do not survive such incidents. Mission-critical vacuum tube equipment is therefore still maintained, just in case.

While the military and defense sectors are known for funding and embracing new technologies, they are also famously reluctant to let go of proven, time and field-tested technologies. They also need a regular supply of tubes to keep their old faithful gear going. Considering the circumstances under which military equipment must remain operational, this gives a few hints regarding the reliability and ruggedness potential of a well-made vacuum tube!

Finally, there are medical imaging, transmitter, certain instrumentation and countless other obscure applications, uses and abuses for vacuum tubes in the present day. The vacuum tube manufacturing industry is certainly not what it once used to be. But it is still active, thanks to continued demand. In the recording industry, I have been observing a steadily growing interest in vacuum tubes in recent years. As far as music production, recording and reproduction are concerned, I believe that vacuum tubes will always have their place, regardless of technological developments in other areas.

Less is often more when it comes to sound. At the highest levels of sound quality, things don’t need to be practical or easy. They just need to sound good. As long as vacuum tubes keep on sounding good, they will stay.
In this new three-part series, you and I will explore the life and times of Owsley Stanley, who early on financed the Grateful Dead with money he made as a “cosmic chemist” and was instrumental in the design of the band’s legendary “Wall of Sound” stage system. “Bear,” as he came to be known, was a hoot and I have thoroughly enjoyed doing the research for this series. Hopefully I can relate that to you, dear reader.

The drug discussions will make some of you uncomfortable. However, talking about this time period without talking about drugs would be like describing the Old West without horses. Something’s always driving the times, man.

Owsley Stanley once stated that any retrospective of his life should not include mundane details such as birthplace, parentage, etc. I will only say he was born in 1935 to parents of bluegrass aristocracy, his grandfather being a well-known Kentucky politician, Augustus Owsley Stanley, for whom our boy was named. There was however nothing ordinary about our subject, and he detested the name Augustus because this nickname always morphed into “Gus.” So Stanley opted to legally change his name to just Owsley.
Nothing about Owsley would ever be normal. He taught himself to read by age two and a half reading comic books, and later related that he learned to read “more or less as a Chinese person would,” seeing words as if they were pictures. Because of this unorthodox method of self-teaching he really didn’t see letters as separate entities and struggled with the dictionary later on in life, since he saw letters as mere strokes and didn’t understand the relationships between them.

It is typical of a gifted child to have a hard time in school and Owsley was certainly gifted. Let’s face it, schools are designed to put people into boxes and this kid would resist boxes his entire life. Owsley’s mom had divorced his dad when he was eight and moved her small family from Virginia to live with her sister in Los Angeles. But young Stanley was so difficult she shipped him back to his dad when he was 11. How a kid can get into that much trouble by the time he was 11 that his mother would ship him cross-country to a dad who had re-married and started another family is hard to imagine.

Owsley was hardly repentant. He now had a step brother who he said he treated “like dog sh*t...I was being dumped on and so I dumped on him.” In order to instill discipline his father enrolled him in Charlotte Hall Military Academy. We can imagine how well that worked and in fact he was tossed, and not because of his grades since he was a top student. The headmaster remembered him and
described Owsley as a brainchild, a wunderkind. Officially Stanley was expelled because he smuggled alcohol into the school and got the entire student body blasted on homecoming weekend. This is remarkable for two reasons. One, he was in the ninth grade and small in stature so how he was able to do this remains a mystery. And B, this was the guy that would eventually be influential in turning on an entire generation.

After a short stint back home the dear family sent him as a voluntary patient to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, a psychiatric institution in Washington, DC. That he was willing to go tells the tale of life in the Stanley home. Owsley’s dad was a raging alcoholic (maybe the unwitting provider for the homecoming party?) and prone to drunken rages. As odd as it seems, Owsley was content during this 15-month stay at St. Elizabeth’s. He learned self-hypnosis and became known as something of an escape artist. More importantly Stanley reached a place where he felt that not only had he mastered his situation but also was not at fault for all his problems.

Once released, he returned to the parental home but soon quit high school in the eleventh grade. Despite not having a high school diploma he was admitted into the Engineering School at the University of Virginia. Owsley had a photographic memory and would buy his textbooks, read them all through, then return them to the bookstore for full credit in the first week of class and never need to see them again. His father wouldn’t support him in college because he hadn’t graduated from high school (?) and so despite academic success Stanley only lasted a year.

He was 18 and the year was 1953. In a classic moment that would be repeated in millions of households over the next 20 years (including mine), Owsley announced he was buying a motorcycle and his dad threw him out of the house. He lived with his grandparents for a year during which he suffered a swimming accident and permanently damaged his right middle ear. He subsequently heard sounds differently and would eventually turn this into a skill which we will talk about later.

In 1954 Owsley Stanley moved to Los Angeles and got a job as a rocket test engineer at Rocketdyne. During a later short stint in the Air Force at Edwards Air Force Base he taught himself electronics by taking apart every piece of gear he could get his hands on. (Staff Sarge must’ve loved that.) The ability to teach himself whatever he wanted to learn, to get into engineering school without a high school diploma, and then get a job as a rocket test engineer without an engineering degree, underlines how impressive a man he was and would continue to be his entire life.

After the Air Force he began working around Southern California in radio and TV stations. In 1964 he moved to Berkeley to take classes in the beginning and at the very heart of the counterculture movement. He began smoking pot and shooting speed so much he was booted from his rooming house for his wild behavior. He had begun trying to finance his habits by selling methedrine and so he wandered into a chemistry lab on campus looking for a scale. In the lab was a young grad student putting up glassware. Her name was Melissa Diane Cargill.

Melissa and Owsley were soon living together. At one point he was given a capsule containing a white powder synthesized by the Sandoz pharmaceutical company in Switzerland. The substance, LSD-25, was the twenty-fifth derivative of lysergic acid diethylamide that had been discovered by Dr. Albert Hoffman in 1938 in his search for a respiratory stimulant. LSD-25 was actually legal at the time, and was being used in the early 1960s in experiments designed by the US Army as either a stimulant to increase soldier perception or as a weapon. (The Army. It’s a Great Place To Start.)

Owsley and Melissa set about trying to manufacture the stuff. It was not legally a drug, only categorized as a chemical at the time. But the process proved difficult and required a deeper understanding of organic chemistry than either of them had. This would have deterred anyone but Owsley Stanley. He went to the library, experimented with Cargill and eventually developed a
chemical more potent than that being made at Sandoz. Amazing. He would say later that making LSD required no more chemistry knowledge than making a cake. You just had to figure out how to do it, and everything on how to do it was published and available.

The sales from his methedrine experiments and now LSD, even though half of what he made was given away for free, started to create a bankroll and a reputation. In October 1965 he and a friend drove to La Honda to meet Ken Kesey. The author of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (and my favorite, Sometimes A Great Notion), Kesey had started the Merry Pranksters party machine. Owsley began providing his superior LSD to the Pranksters parties, which included the Hells Angels and guys like Hunter S. Thompson. Stanley was impressed with Kesey, thinking he’d met someone whose personality rivaled his own. But they never really bonded and the freak-outs that ran amok in Merry Pranksters Land were too much for him.

On a weekend in January 1966 the Trips Festival was held at the Longshoremen’s Hall in San Francisco. There were bands like Big Brother and the Holding Company with some 3,000 revelers all completely stoned on the acid Owsley supplied for the event, and all jammed into a hall designed for 1,700. Members of the Grateful Dead were there as well. Dennis McNally, later the Dead’s biographer, described a scene where “There were simply more people tripping in a single room than anyone had ever seen before.” The event was organized by Bill Graham as a favor to Kesey but Graham was outraged to find Kesey standing at a back stage door dressed in a silver spacesuit complete with helmet and letting in a steady stream of bikers. Those were the days.

One week after the festival Stanley joined the Grateful Dead at the Sound City Acid Test. It’s hard to believe today that these things were going on, but the Dead were regular entertainers at these “acid tests” that were essentially designed to turn people onto LSD and create a culture which the Dead were right in the middle of, and in a way would become caretakers. During this time period Owsley along with friend Tim Scully had been assembling state of the art sound equipment and he was looking for an outlet. At the Sound City event he met Dead bassist Phil Lesh.

Lesh described hanging with Stanley as “like being in a science fiction novel” and added that besides Garcia, he’d “never met anyone with as great a breadth of interests...and was actually articulating the fuzzy visions we’d had regarding the Meaning Of It All.”

Owsley asked Phil what he could do for the band. Lesh said they didn’t have a manager. Owsley wasn’t interested in that. So Phil said, “well, we don’t have a sound man.”

Yep. Like that.

Next, Part Two: Owsley Makes Good Use Of That Money
When Nancy Wilson was growing up in Chillicothe, Ohio, in the 1940s, her father bought every Nat “King” Cole and Billy Eckstine album that came out. Besides the record player at home, Wilson relied on a corner juke joint to expose her to new music. And she loved to sing along with everything, from pop tunes to hymns at church.

She started performing while in her teens, and by age 19 she’d been hired to tour with the Carolyn Club Big Band, led by saxophonist Rusty Bryant. It was Julian “Cannonball” Adderley who took enough of an interest in her career to suggest she move to New York, which she did in 1959. Within a few months she had a regular gig singing at the Blue Morocco in the Bronx. (Harlem is often assumed to be the center of New York jazz at that time, but the stretch of Boston Rd. between 166th St. and Prospect Ave. in the Bronx was lined with top-notch clubs.)

Capitol Records soon offered her a contract, and she stayed with them for 20 years. Her first taste of real fame arrived in 1962, when the single “Save Your Love for Me,” from the album Nancy Wilson and Cannonball Adderley, became a hit. Wilson went on to record over 70 albums, which garnered three Grammy Awards. When she died in 2018, she left behind a legacy of masterful jazz and R&B singing.
Enjoy these eight great tracks by Nancy Wilson.

1. Track: “Teach Me Tonight”
   Album: Something Wonderful
   Label: Capitol
   Year: 1960

*Something Wonderful* was Wilson’s second album. Celebrated arranger Billy May did the honors, leading an orchestra of winds, brass, percussion, and piano.

“Teach Me Tonight” is a number by Gene de Paul and Sammy Cahn that attracted many big artists in the 1950s. This recording is a great introduction to the style that made Wilson famous: deceptive simplicity over a foundation of understated emotion. May’s sly writing for the horns is the perfect foil for Wilson’s pure delivery of lines like “One thing isn’t very clear, my love / Should the teacher stand so near, my love?”. 

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quQrc0k0woI

2. Track: “Joey Joey Joey”
   Album: Broadway – My Way
   Label: Capitol
   Year: 1963

It’s hardly unusual to find a jazz musician dipping her toe into Broadway repertoire. (It should be noted that this album was quickly followed by *Hollywood – My Way*, and the two discs were subsequently re-released as a set.) What sets this record apart is Wilson’s distinctive choice of Broadway songs, including rarities that few others were bothering with.

One of those is the winsome “Joey Joey Joey,” from Frank Loesser’s *A Most Happy Fella*, with Jimmy Jones playing piano and conducting the jazz orchestra. In the show, the character Joey is singing about himself -- how he gets restless when he stays in one place for too long. A woman’s voice gives it a whole different context, making it sound like advice to somebody who’s stuck in his life. Wilson comes across as concerned but wise.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLywPqS46zU

3. Track: “At Long Last Love”
   Album: Gentle Is My Love
   Label: Capitol
   Year: 1965

The orchestra on *Gentle is My Love* is arranged and conducted by Sid Feller, who made his name working with Ray Charles. Unlike the previous two examples, Feller included strings. As a result, the arrangements can get a bit cloying (if you know Charles’ original recording of “Georgia on My Mind,” you’ll notice the same issue), but Wilson’s singing grounds them.

Cole Porter originally wrote “At Long Last Love” for his long-forgotten 1938 musical *Now You Know*, but the song became a standard on its own. Notice the way Wilson elongates notes within each musical idea but punches the close of each phrase. It’s especially obvious in those opening lines.
because of the “shock/mock” rhyme:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwK7C2wJYas

4. Track: “Bridge Over Troubled Water”  
   Album: *Now I’m a Woman*  
   Label: Capitol  
   Year: 1970

There are more pop- and R&B-inspired songs than jazz on this album, a sign of Wilson’s changing tastes (or perhaps it was a financially practical move). The sources for material range from Paul McCartney to the Philly soul songwriting team Gamble and Huff.

Arranger Bobby Martin is responsible for this version of Paul Simon’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” a song that had only been released by Simon and Garfunkel a few months before. This performance shows a more introspective side of Wilson’s style.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztn-gtmS4Zk

5. Track: “Tree of Life”  
   Album: *This Mother’s Daughter*  
   Label: Capitol  
   Year: 1976

*This Mother’s Daughter* has a funk and fusion feel, thanks to arrangements by Dave Grusin, who also played piano and Fender Rhodes. Fusion pioneer George Duke joined in on Moog synthesizer, and rock master Steve Gadd played drums.

Several songs, including “Tree of Life,” are by soul composer Eugene McDaniels, whose “Feel Like Makin’ Love” had been a massive hit for Roberta Flack two years earlier. (As Gene McDaniels, he had a number of hits on his own including “A Hundred Pounds of Clay,” “Tower of Strength,” and others.) As usual, Wilson’s patient control over her expression and phrasing give this song a rewarding sense of motion.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCxO4e6OsXw

6. Track: “I Loved You All the Time”  
   Album: *Take My Love*  
   Label: Capitol  
   Year: 1980

1980 brought the end of Wilson’s long association with Capitol Records. This was her last album for them. About a third of the tracks are produced by Humberto Gatica (a 16-time Grammy winner). Mark Linnet and Hugh Davies produced the remaining songs.

Wilson nails the fusion of jazz and soul in this Leon Ware number, “I Loved You All the Time,” contrasting clear upper arcs of melody with a breathy lower register.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbRzv53vN-U

7. Track: “Other Side of the Storm”
   Album: *A Lady with a Song*
   Label: Columbia
   Year: 1990
   “The Other Side of the Storm”

The R&B of the 1980s had a heavy influence on this 1990 album, and as always, Wilson adapts handily to the needs of the genre. In her early 50s when she recorded this, she takes advantage of the natural middle-age thickening of her voice to give the lyrics a great sense of longing. “Other Side of the Storm” is by another R&B hitmaker, Sami McKinney.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buo50ylQrns

8. Track: “Loving You, Loving Me”
   Album: *If I Had My Way*
   Label: Columbia
   Year: 1997

The album *If I Had My Way* includes two songs by frequent collaborator Skip Scarborough, who also provided tunes for Earth, Wind and Fire among others. One of Scarborough’s tracks is “Loving You, Loving Me.”

Wilson, age 60 at this point, demonstrates her power as a storyteller. And although she’s still pulling on those vowels mid-phrase, her delivery has become smoother over the decades, her cadences like velvet, and her emotions closer to the surface.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Es_zMXX3NhY
Crate Digging, Part 1

TO BE DETERMINED

Written by Tom Gibbs

Generally this particular time of year, there’s typically not a whole lot going on in terms of notable new releases in the music world. So this issue, I’m focusing on some interesting finds from my recent explorations in independent music stores and thrifts and the like. I really like hitting the thrifts, because, well, people die, or have other life changing events—and sometimes their family members don’t have a clue what’s in the donation box they drop off. Sometimes the contents are surprisingly interesting! And there’s such a relative glut of cheap CDs currently out there—I enjoy the hunt for that elusive disc, and getting it for minimal cash outlay; I avoid ordering full-price CDs if at all possible. There’s some notable stuff here, but some of it was completely unknown to me—I
The Church - *Magician Among the Spirits*

There’s a St. Vincent DePaul Thrift near me; I often drop in, and have been surprised at the variety of the CDs that are typically on the shelf. The prices tend to be a bit higher than my real comfort zone ($2 versus the typical $.50 - $1); I’ll buy just about anything for $1 or less, but am a bit more selective at the $2 price point. *Magician Among the Spirits* had been on the shelf for several months running; the case was cracked badly, and the disc release date was 1996—which is typically beyond the point that I consider The Church’s classic period. However, the sign on the front door greeted me with “50 Percent Off Everything!”, so I decided, what the heck and dove in.

Here's the thing: I’m a huge fan of The Church, especially from about 1985 through 1995 or so—what I consider their classic period. But I’d never heard of this album, ever; never seen any reference to it, and, of course, most of my catalog experience with a lot of bands was based on pre-internet, pre-Tidal or Qobuz experiences. The 1980s brought a lot of change to me personally; I got married, new baby, a couple of step kids, moved to Atlanta, new job, new house—you get the picture. It made keeping abreast of much of what was going on in the music world somewhat difficult for me.
I still heard the Church played on local college radio, and “Under the Milky Way” got played to death (still love it, though), but they basically only existed on the margins of my consciousness.

*Magician Among the Spirits* came at the tail end of The Church’s Arista Records period, where Steve Kilbey, bassist and de facto leader of the band approached Arista with the new record in 1996. The Church had their biggest commercial success on Arista with 1988’s *Starfish*; and while the Arista period was something of a mixed bag creatively, financially, it had been a successful one. Arista, however, outright rejected the new album, and immediately dropped The Church from the label. Undeterred, Kilbey decided to self-release the record on his own label, Deep Karma/White Records. It would take $250,000 dollars to make the deal happen, and the $250k was every penny the band had left in the coffers.

And of course, without a mainstream record label, the band had no mainstream distribution system, so they brokered a deal with another independent. As everything was coming to a head, the distributor suddenly went bankrupt, and all $250k worth of CDs ready to ship were held in limbo. By the time the legal issues were resolved, the warehoused merchandise waiting in the U.S. had simply disappeared without a trace; for all practical purposes, the album had no release status outside of Australia, and received virtually zero airplay and exposure anywhere else. This just about crippled the band in every imaginable way—Steve Kilbey conveyed to the press that The Church, for all practical purposes, was essentially dead, and *Magician Among the Spirits* was probably their last record. Fortunately, they soldiered on, and the band still exists to this day. I saw an interview with Steve Kilbey a while back where he mused on how amazing it is that he’s even still around, because he’d probably spent close to a million dollars on heroin (he’s been clean for a while) over the course of his lifetime as a musician!

When I got home with my new find from St. V’s, I immediately replaced the jewel case (yeah, I’m a nerd, and still have a huge box of replacement CD cases in the basement), and during my inspection of the disc and booklet, I noted that the CD was sourced from Australia. So somehow, it made it here to the U.S.—rare, but not nearly as rare as the handful of U.S. pressings that must be out there somewhere. When I loaded the disc into dB Poweramp to rip to my music server, I have to admit that I was a bit shocked that it actually pulled metadata from the internet—so some successful rips had obviously been made in the recent past. Of course, after getting it onto my music server, I started checking out any availability elsewhere—next to zero, in terms of purchasing the CD, with a few very highly collectible discs available on Discogs, Amazon, and eBay. But—and here’s the good news—surprisingly, it’s available for streaming on a variety of sources, including both Tidal and Qobuz. Yay!

*Magician Among the Spirits* came at a time of transition for The Church, and some personnel changes had taken place; Steve Kilbey’s bass and voice was still front and center, and it was still very much his show. Kilbey’s distinctive voice is one of the band’s calling cards, and it’s as addictively sultry as ever here. The core group of Kilbey and guitarist Marty Willson-Piper was augmented by the return on four of the songs by another founding member, guitarist Peter Koppes, who had quarreled with Kilbey regarding the band’s direction. New drummer Tim Powles was joined by violinist Linda Neil and various percussionists; when Peter Koppes departed a couple of years earlier, Kilbey felt freed to follow a slightly more exploratory musical direction.

The centerpiece of the album is the fourteen-minute-plus title track, which is a dirge/vamp of sorts which drones on in a remarkably delicious groove, in which Kilbey’s near interminable bass figure just powers on and on. Marty Willson-Piper and Koppes trade guitar solos back and forth to great effect, and Kilbey and Koppes trade vocals through the verses, which also provides the tune with an enjoyable mix-up. At several points throughout, there are longish breaks with really atmospheric bells and percussion—the overall effect makes for a truly enjoyable listening experience.
This is not the “great, lost The Church album,” but if you’re a fan of the band’s important period from the mid-eighties through the mid-nineties, it’s absolutely essential listening. And that’s made so much easier by the current availability on the streaming services. Recommended.

Deep Karma/White Records, CD (download/streaming from Amazon, Tidal, Qobuz, Google Play Music, Spotify, Deezer)

---

**BILL BRUFORD**

**Master Strokes**

**1978–1985**

*Featuring Allan Holdsworth and Jeff Berlin*

---

**Bruford - Master Strokes 1978-1985**

I’ve been a huge Bill Bruford fan since the early Yes days; throughout his involvement with everyone, from King Crimson, his own group Bruford, UK, Earthworks, and other solo projects, his tasteful, jazz-inspired drumming has been one of the hallmarks of progressive rock. He’s definitely considered one of the greatest rock drummers of all time, and the diversity of his work outside of Yes and King Crimson shows that he’s one of the greatest drummers, period. That said, I kind of zoned out in real time during the “Bruford” period; I stumbled onto this CD, *Master Strokes 1978-1985*, at a 2nd and Charles (always hit-or-miss) for $4 last fall. Post-Yes, Bill Bruford was an integral part of the second incarnation of King Crimson, and in-between the third Crimson revival, he focused on his own proggish group Bruford. Which featured legendary guitarist Allan
Holdsworth, along with Dave Stewart (not that Dave Stewart!) on keyboards and Jeff Berlin on bass. This core group produced two excellent albums, *Feels Good to Me* (1978) and *One of a Kind* (1979); Holdsworth exited and was replaced by the very decent guitarist John Clark for the third album, 1980’s *Gradually Going Tornado*.

*Master Strokes 1978-1985* contains selections from all three Bruford albums; also included are selections from two albums with another former Yes sideman, keyboard wizard Patrick Moraz, 1983’s *Music for Piano and Drums* and 1985’s *Flags*. As odd as the pairing of drums and keyboards sounds, the results are surprisingly enjoyable and effective. I ended up finding the vinyl for most of the albums covered here, as well as finding CDs for the Bruford titles. The Bruford/Moraz CDs are a bit more difficult to locate. This was actually an interesting and fertile period for Bill Bruford; the “Bruford” side gig ended up creating the near-legendary UK album with Holdsworth, former Crimson compatriot John Wetton, and multi-instrumentalist Eddie Jobson. UK is generally considered one of the pinnacles of Progressive Rock, and you can hear the seeds being sown here in this excellent collection.

There are multiple highlights here; one of the great things about this period is that, unlike during the upcoming third King Crimson iteration, Bruford had not yet stumbled onto his fascination with the Simmons SDX electronic drum kit. Bruford’s later Crimson albums showed good work on the synthesized kit, but it’s nowhere nearly as interesting as I find him on acoustic drums. So that’s the big bonus: everything you hear on the drums here is completely acoustic. One of my personal favorites is Bruford’s take on the Max Roach tune “The Drum Also Waltzes,” which is a really outstanding drum solo taken from the *Flags* album with Patrick Moraz. And Moraz’s contributions from the two duet albums are outstanding; even though the two ex-Yes men came from different eras of the band, they share an amazing synergy on their tracks together. From the Bruford album *One of a Kind*, both “Hell’s Bells” and the title track are really imaginative prog workouts, with ample room to display Bill Bruford’s talents at the drum kit. “Travels with Myself—and Someone Else” is a nice and slow, keyboard-heavy, proggy ballad, where Bruford’s drumming reaches more into the jazzy side of the equation. *Feels Good to Me* is represented by “If You Can’t Stand the Heat” and “Beelzebub,” both are very fast-paced prog workouts and the entire album is definitely worth picking up. While I feel the tracks from *Gradually Going Tornado* are very good, I definitely missed Allan Holdsworth’s remarkable guitar work—but, still a great opportunity to observe more of Bill Bruford’s great drumming.

If you’re interested in all things Bill Bruford, his book, *Bill Bruford, the Autobiography*, is available and is an exceptionally enjoyable read that covers his entire musical history. His writing style combines a great deal of dry humor to the mix, and it’s an arresting read that’s almost impossible to put down. *Master Strokes 1978-1985* is very highly recommended as an introduction to this period between Bruford’s ongoing involvement with King Crimson. This excellent collection—as well as just about everything else that stemmed from this period—is available on Tidal and Qobuz for CD quality and high-res streaming.

E.G. Records, CD (download/streaming from Amazon, Tidal, Qobuz, Google Play Music, Spotify, Deezer)
Deep Purple’s *Machine Head* is one of the seminal albums from the first period associated with what became known as “Metal” music; many consider it the very first example of the genre. I don’t doubt or deny that one bit, but I’m sure there are a lot of Black Sabbath fans that would probably take issue with that assessment. Myself included, there are a ton of would be metalheads out there whose first attempt at picking out a tune on a guitar was “Smoke On The Water.” I know this album like the back of my hand. If I could write guitar tablature, I could easily write out the entire album; I’ve either played or heard every song a bazillion times each. And it never gets old.

There’s an independent record store near me called CD Warehouse; there are two locations in Atlanta, and it’s always a good place to pick up catalog disc titles for generally around the $5 mark. If I absolutely have to have it, even as much of a cheapskate as I am, I’ll pay $5 (especially for a Japanese CD!), and I grabbed this disc just prior to the holidays. The standard catalog issue of *Machine Head* has always seemed congested, lacking clarity and dynamics, and with an extra dollop of hiss on top—it probably wasn’t transferred from the original master tape. It’s serviceable enough that I enjoy listening to it on occasion on the music server, but for real thrills, I’ll pull out the vinyl.

I think everyone out there probably knows this album as well or better than I do, so I’ll not give any blow-by-blow (sorry, Jeff Beck!) comparisons, but on first listen—like, WOW! This remaster betters
the catalog issue in every way imaginable, and has power, dynamics, and clarity in spades—this is as close to listening to the vinyl as it gets! I’m totally blown away by this CD issue, it’s like hearing this classic music for the very first time. As far as I can tell, the Tidal and Qobuz high-res masters are taken from the same remaster. Very highly recommended!

Warner Brothers Japan, CD (download/streaming from Amazon, Tidal, Qobuz)

Cyrus Chestnut - Soul Food

I first became aware of Cyrus Chestnut in the early Nineties; I was working a job with a large commercial printer, and my function there took place in 200 square-foot self-enclosed, air conditioned unit that was freestanding inside a massive un-airconditioned paper warehouse. I’d get the occasional visitor, but not many—so I could spend the vast majority of the day listening to a lot of music generally uninterrupted by anyone. Because of the configuration of the building, I had virtually zero radio reception; I could pick up the local small-college jazz station, as well as an AM all-classical station. I listened to the jazz station a lot; they had the occasional promo offering, and on one occasion, I won a Cyrus Chestnut CD, the excellent trio disc Revelation. Which has gone on to become one of my go-to discs for evaluating bass response on a good system—it’s a remarkably good
Anyway, over the years (especially in the pre-internet era), finding additional Cyrus Chestnut discs was pretty much a non-starter—especially after Tower Records went bust.

I picked up this disc at a Goodwill in Charleston, SC, this past August, while visiting a relative. This Goodwill was undeniably the biggest dump of any I’d ever visited in over a decade, with the poorest selection of CDs I’d stumbled across in a very long time. There were probably fewer than a hundred CDs on the shelf, and as I scoured them several times, this disc, *Soul Food*, suddenly jumped out at me. Holy crap, a Cyrus Chestnut CD! Released in 2001, this is another outstanding title that has only helped build his sterling reputation in my mind.

All over the place stylistically, this disc offers Chestnut’s traditional trio setting on several numbers with Lewis Nash on drums and Christian McBride on bass. And on a handful of tunes, Stefon Harris is added to the mix on marimba and vibraphone. A full brass section, featuring James Carter on sax, Marcus Printup on trumpet, and Wycliffe Gordon on trombone appears on a couple of tunes, and the three individually make appearances on a few other tunes.

This is one of the most well-recorded, best-sounding CDs I’ve ever heard—if you happen to stumble across a copy, grab it. This is one of those discs that will definitely make you think that CD quality might just be good enough! And it’s available to stream on both Tidal and Qobuz in CD quality, so check it out if you get the chance. Very highly recommended.

Warner Brothers, CD (download/streaming from Amazon, Tidal, Qobuz, Google Play Music, Spotify, Deezer)
New York City’s Brooklyn is famous for a number of things. It has some of the most expensive real estate in New York; some of it with a higher square dollar per square foot price than in Manhattan. Brooklyn was the location of Ebbets Field, where the legendary Jackie Robinson broke the Major League Baseball color barrier playing for the Dodgers. It is presently the home for numerous celebrities, such as Matt Damon, Adam Driver, Emily Blunt, John Krazinski, Michael Shannon, and Keri Russell. Jay-Z was instrumental in bringing the NBA Nets to Barclays Arena in Brooklyn. Nearby is the original Junior’s Cheesecake. Nathan’s hot dogs were made famous after starting in Brooklyn’s Coney Island.

And since 1972, some of the most unique audiophile loudspeakers have been designed and manufactured by Brooklyn’s own Ohm Acoustics. Utilizing acoustic design concepts from Lincoln Walsh and Neville Thiele, Ohm has consistently created speakers that delivered top notch sound quality and has pioneered engineering milestones, such as the omnidirectional Walsh conical speaker, which continues to this day as their signature product.

Under President John Strohbeen, Ohm has sold to over 120,000 customers and continues to innovate in the acoustic engineering industry and sell on a direct marketing basis to audiophile fans around the globe. John Strohbeen graciously took the time to take some questions from John Seetoo for Copper.

**John Seetoo:** I am old enough to remember Tech HiFi, which you founded in Cambridge,
Massachusetts. It was one of the first stereo specialty stores to feature Japanese hi-fi brands like Sony, Pioneer, Teac/Tascam, Kenwood, Technics/Panasonic, Onkyo and Sansui. How did you go from studying engineering at MIT to becoming a retail audio entrepreneur?

**John Strohbeen:** Having a good stereo was a high prestige item but low on the list of acceptable expenses for a scholarship student. At the time, Boston area dealers sold for list price but New York dealers sold mail order for about 20 percent off. I quickly realized that if I could get eight orders at 10 percent off I could afford [a good stereo] system from the margin. I only got four people to order; but it got me started.

A few years later, the school received complaints that I was using their tax-free dormitory as an audio store (which I was) and the school forced me to rent a retail space. Now that I had a store, I wanted to keep it open, so I hired other students to cover most of the time. One of these people was Sandy Ruby, the graduate tutor in my dormitory. Sandy ran the store for a summer when I went home to Iowa. When I returned, Sandy told me he wanted to do this full time and be the permanent manager. I offered him a partnership and we made the best decision of our careers: We opened a second store, but hired two store managers and devoted our personal time to growing the business.

The Vietnam War was hot at the time and veterans were bringing back Japanese audio products that outperformed the American-made products we could buy; so we wrote to the companies in Japan and became early promoters.

Five and a half years later, I left MIT without graduating.

**J. Seetoo:** While you are not the founder of Ohm, you have successfully manned the helm for over four decades. How and why did you get involved with Ohm and what led to your taking over the company?

**J. Strohbeen:** Marty Gersten had founded Ohm when his employer, Rectilinear [speaker company] of the Bronx, declined to license Lincoln Walsh’s patent. Tech HiFi was a very, very large Rectilinear dealer and Marty wanted us to buy his new Ohm line. I agreed [to carry Ohm] if he agreed to make less expensive speakers for us to sell under the TDC brand (our private label Transducer Design Corporation). We made a deal...

**J. Seetoo:** I am a longtime Ohm speaker fan and obtained a pair of Ohm C2 speakers back in 1978, the year you took over the company. I still have them and have even mixed recording projects with them. While the Walsh omnidirectional speakers are clearly the product that sets Ohm apart from its rivals, the C2 and L speakers were big sellers during their production time. What circumstances led to the halt in production of Ohm’s conventional loudspeakers? As Ohm continues to service them, would a reissue production of these or even the later model CAM 32 and 42 ever be in the cards for the future?

**J. Strohbeen:** Being box speakers, the L and C2 suffer from the same problems with imaging and narrow listening “sweet spots” that are eliminated with the Walsh driver. I don't think I am ready to go backwards. We do take any Ohm speaker in trade and give up to the full original selling price as a trade-in value. We refinish and upgrade the [older speakers]; then offer them for sale with our home trial and a warranty.

**J. Seetoo:** One of the things that had attracted me to the Ohm C2 speakers at the time was a sense of realism in the music that, to my ear at the time, was comparable to what I had heard in professional
Did Ohm ever attempt to market to the recording studio industry or was it always focused predominantly on the audiophile market, and if so, why?

**J.Strohbeen:** The woofers for the C2s and L benefited from Marty’s experience with the full range Walsh drivers. These woofers needed no crossover and were connected directly to the input. Actually, for a couple of years this century I worked closely with one of America’s leading pro sound consultants on developing a Walsh based studio monitor. We made and sold a few systems together, but eventually realized that DSP work was going to cost as much as the hardware. Neither of us had the expertise to do the job right. Since then, the programming [for DSP] has become easier and we are using that experience with our 20/20K Series.

**J.Seetoo:** One would think that with best-selling Brooklyn artists such as Norah Jones, Grizzly Bear, The Yeah Yeah Yeahs and the late Sharon Jones, there is a wide range of Brooklyn originated music that would be optimally heard on Ohm speakers. As a longtime Brooklyn based company, has Ohm ever been approached by or been involved with the Brooklyn independent music scene?

**J.Strohbeen:** Not in my tenure at Ohm. Marty had once been approached by [race car driver and heir to the Revlon fortune] Peter Revson to develop super-sized versions of the Ohm A for outside monitors at the Metropolitan Opera, but Revson died in that tragic race track accident in 1974. We are currently developing a custom system for Jalopy, NYC’s premier ‘old-time” music venue. We shall see... (The Jalopy Theater and School of Music is one of NYC’s premier venues for folk, bluegrass, and other roots and Americana acoustic instrument based music. They also provide music instruction classes.)

**J.Seetoo:** Given the current generation’s standard of listening through earbuds, would Ohm consider producing a small bookshelf speaker to capitalize on the resurgence of interest in vinyl records? I would think given your design expertise that it would have the potential to blow away most of the current competition. If so, would such a speaker be something like the Ohm L?

**J.Strohbeen:** Is an Ohm L “small” by today’s standards? Would it need an expensive stand to sound right? Why fight old battles?

**J.Seetoo:** As (composer and record company founder) David Chesky has also acknowledged, the current generation listens to most of their music on earbuds or headphones. Has Ohm ever considered designing headphones, and how would you approach trying to recreate the Ohm omnidirectional aural experience with them?

**J.Strohbeen:** I don’t like the presentation of headphones; the sound should not come from the center of your head. When you move your head, you should get more imaging clues – not have the source move. Stax, with their ear speakers, have come the furthest [in achieving this] in my humble opinion.

**J.Seetoo:** The late Japanese composer Isao Tomita launched a series of large outdoor concerts during the 1980s and 1990s, including a 1986 show at Battery Park in New York that he called the “Sound Cloud.” It involved synthesizers, fireworks and lights, and a spread array of speakers that created an omnidirectional audio environment that surrounded the listeners with music coming...
simultaneously from everywhere and nowhere. Are you familiar with Tomita’s Sound Cloud, and is this the kind of approach that Ohm’s Walsh speakers strive to emulate in enclosed spaces?

**J.Strohbeen:** I am not familiar with Tomita’s Sound Cloud; but, if your description “...with music coming simultaneously from everywhere and nowhere.” is accurate - no. This is not what we try to achieve with Ohm speakers. We aim to position each performer in their own source location (height, width and depth) which remains firm from every listening position.

**J.Seetoo:** Following in that vein, you’ve written an article on the Ohm website about the cultural differences between sound and frequency curve preferences of Japanese audiophiles vs. US ones. While you mention the engineering work that went into modifying the voicing of Ohm speakers for the Japanese market while retaining Ohm’s characteristic imaging, is this cultural preference differential something that you have found in other countries also? Does Ohm keep its unique “Brooklyn audiophile sound” universal, or do you tweak it for international tastes?

**J.Strohbeen:** Yes, we have found differences in sonic balance preferences and occasionally [we’ve done] custom drivers for consumers that need to fit [their speakers to] a specific room/placement problem. I do believe these systems in their rooms sound more like our standard systems in our room.

**J.Seetoo:** What other manufacturers, if any, do you feel are Ohm’s rivals in terms of the omnidirectional and wide “sweet sweep” approach to hi-fi that you have pioneered? Also, are there any technologies that you think you would pursue if Walsh’s designs were unavailable?

**J.Strohbeen:** I feel MBL does a very fine job of [producing] fully omnidirectional speakers. But they still suffer imaging problems that come with fully omni designs: The center-channel image moves with you as you go from speaker to speaker. We also experienced this problem with the Ohm A and Ohm F. The current generation of Ohm Walsh speakers has nearly eliminated this problem.

**J.Seetoo:** From an acoustical engineering perspective, which would you say is your proudest achievement at Ohm?

**J.Strohbeen:** There are three: the width of the listening sweet sweep to [encompass] nearly the whole room; the firmness and precision of imaging and the naturalness and intelligibility of vocals.

**J.Seetoo:** Ohm is three years away from its 50th anniversary. Are there any hints as to what may be in store for Ohm fans to celebrate a half century of excellence in audio over the next couple of years?

**J.Strohbeen:** I believe the Ohm 20/20K Series can compete with any speaker in the world, when used in the right sized room, on any dimension of quality and surpass them in the width of the speakers’ sweet sweep. For our 50th Anniversary, we expect to claim top-ranking in a couple of other sonic dimensions.
In the first installment of this two-parter, the three Shulman Brothers, along with Gary Green, Kerry Minnear, and John Weathers had completed recording their fourth album, *Octopus*, in 1972. They began touring the States in support of their third album, *Three Friends*, as the opening act to Black Sabbath. This proved to be an unfortunate pairing, due to the stylistic mismatch of the acts. The heavy metal audiences were not kind to the band. One most unusual set of gigs found them (without Sabbath) opening in England for screenings of the *Jimi Hendrix* concert film, *Jimi Plays Berkeley*. Subsequent tours in later years saw them opening for more compatible groups such as Jethro Tull or Yes. Some of the Yes dates even included The Eagles taking the stage between Gentle Giant and Yes. (Only slightly less weird than a show I saw in 1973 with Lark’s Tongues in Aspic – era King Crimson opening for The Eagles.)

Citing a desire to spend more time with his family, Philip Shulman, the eldest of the brothers by ten years, decided to quit the group while touring Italy following the release of *Octopus*. Although there was talk of disbanding, Gentle Giant decided to continue as a five-piece. Their first album as a quintet, and their first on their management’s British label, WWA, was *In a Glass House*. Philip’s absence was reflected in a diminished use of various acoustic instruments and greater reliance on Derek’s harder-edged vocals. Columbia declined to release it in the US, believing (to put it kindly) there was little commercial potential. It ended up selling quite well as an import. The album also marked a parting of the ways with their supremely talented engineer, Martin Rushent (perhaps he grew tired of seeing his last name misspelled on the previous two LPs). Rushent would go on to a very successful career as a producer/engineer of punk and new wave bands such as The Stranglers and The Human League.

*In a Glass House*, a concept album dealing with psychological issues is, to be sure, a more
challenging album than their previous works. The opening track, “The Runaway,” begins with the sound of breaking glass, which is looped into a rhythmic pattern (similar to the cash register sounds that open Pink Floyd’s “Money”).

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcX2DqdDxI0

“An Inmate’s Lullaby” is an odd piece written from the perspective of a patient in an insane asylum. The much more up-tempo “Way of Life” switches gears midway through with a classically-tinged passage sung by Kerry Minnear before returning to the less-melodic style of the first part. It finishes with a section laden with counterpoint leading into a repeating organ riff that might have one thinking that (on the LP) the record was sticking.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UlcZQX5oDiY

“Experience,” the track that opens side two of the album, shifts through so many moods that, well, you just have to “experience” it.

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

The album’s sweetest and most melodic track is “A Reunion,” sung by Minnear, whose vocals have a tentative, hesitant quality. It’s a short piece with delicate guitars, contrapuntal bass, and strings lending an almost chamber-music feel.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJJ7d_yQ-bY

(Just for fun, here’s a very nice Chapman stick rendition of “A Reunion” done by Rob Martino)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a56I0MS215w

In a Glass House closes with the title track, another romp through multiple moods replete with saxophones, heavy riffs, light moments, and even some acoustic slide guitar, all underpinned by John Weathers’ deceptively simple drumming.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MRP-FBOixc

Tacked on at the end is a very brief collage of bits from the songs, book-ended by the sound of breaking glass.

Special mention should be made of the album’s cover, which can be seen in the videos. A thick black border frames a clear window onto which have been silk-screened the negative images of the five members playing instruments. Through the window, an insert can be seen with similar images, slightly offset, depicting the members playing different instruments. Above the window, the group
and album names are set in a classy, understated font. The actual inner sleeve features the lyrics superimposed over a screened full-size image of the giant from prior covers. Altogether, it is a beautiful package.

Gentle Giant’s sixth studio album, *The Power and the Glory*, also featured an unusual cover. The image was that of the king of spades from a deck of cards, with rounded upper corners and old English “G” letters where the “K” would normally be. The British release on the WWA label was laminated, giving it a glossy look. In the US, they were now signed to Capitol Records, who produced the cover in the standard matte finish.

*The Power and the Glory* was another concept album, exploring themes of power and corruption. “Proclamation” opens with the distant roar of a crowd and an oddly processed electric piano riff. Derek sings, “You may not have all you want or you need, all that you have has been due to my hand” – the declaration of a purportedly benevolent leader. The track features plenty of their complex instrumental interplay, but also contains an uncharacteristically dissonant vocal glissando passage at the 3:20 mark that goes on a bit too long.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spkFNvp1lEc

“So Sincere” expands on the concept of the benevolent overseer. The track became a featured part of their live show, ending with a full-on percussion extravaganza. All five members pound away on various drums and, at one point, the guitarist, drummer, and keyboard player are all playing xylophones. Here’s a live-in-the-studio example from a German TV show in 1974:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIaG8a9ACYY

“Aspirations” is sung from the perspective of the populace yearning for salvation. Sonically, it is a beautiful, dreamy piece.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhEwRBYNs8w

There is also an instrumental outtake of “Aspirations” available on some of the digital re-issues with variations on the bass line.

Often cited as a standout track, “Playing the Game” starts out with a truly unusual rhythmic counterpoint that includes the use of a vibraphone, the ring of a telephone, and the sound of a drumstick hitting a violin. In the lyrics, the leader boasts of his power, influence, and infallibility.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fA4IbJr3NW8

Side Two (all of the band’s albums were released prior to the introduction of the Compact Disc) opens with “Cogs in Cogs,” one of the more up-tempo cuts. “No God’s a Man” is a mellow track beginning in 3/4 time before running through other time signatures.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=im-P5Dy9QsY&list=OLAK5uy_nEOPw_GHzDUu7eMvtrPyZuzJM-
“The Face” is, again, faster-paced with shifting time signatures and violin and guitar solos in the middle. “Valedictory” features a funky beat and a brief reprise of the vocal glissando from “Proclamation.”

Not included on the original LP is (surprisingly) a track called “The Power and the Glory.” The band had been urged by their label to create something commercial, and they gave the label three more songs, of which this was “the worst” according to Derek Shulman. When WWA released it, “we yelled at them, and they gave it back – took it off the market.”

Gentle Giant’s last great studio album, their seventh, was *Free Hand*. Understandably unhappy with WWA, they had now signed with Chrysalis in the UK and the album was released in the US on the Capitol label. The album was successful enough to crack the Top 50 on the Billboard chart.

In keeping with their penchant for unusual intros, “Just the Same” starts with finger snaps playing off each other in the left and right channels leading into a bouncy 6/8 rhythm. The instrumental interlude in the middle goes from dreamy to funky, with saxes, synths, guitar, and handclaps before returning to the vocals and finger snaps.

“On Reflection” begins with an a cappella contrapuntal choral passage before introducing piano and tuned percussion. This then fades into a very pretty section sung by Minnear.

The title track’s instrumental intro is reminiscent of their work on *Three Friends*. Old-school video game sounds provide the opening for “Time to Kill.” It’s a tale of a life adrift, someone living for the day. On “His Last Voyage,” a solo bass guitar states the initial musical theme. Minnear handles the vocals on this song of an ill-fated ocean adventure.

“Talybont” is a short instrumental with a medieval/renaissance feel.
The album closes with “Mobile,” a rocking song that could be about the touring life.

(Personal story – when *Free Hand* was released in 1975, I had just graduated from San Francisco State University and was still working in a Wherehouse record store near campus. The neighborhood was predominantly African-American, so we sold a lot of soul and R&B records. Despite this, I had cultivated a small clientele of progressive rock fans. One day the phone rang, and a man asked if we had the new Gentle Giant album. I said we did, he asked how much, and said he’d be right down. This middle-aged white guy walks in and asks, “Where’s the new Gentle Giant album?” I led him to it and he said, “I’ll take it!” I asked him, “Have you heard it?” and he said, “No,” so I just had to ask him why he was buying it. He replied, “Some of the boys in the band are my wife’s nephews.”

Shocked, I said, “you’re kidding – the Shulman brothers?” He said yes, and I told him I’d really like to talk with him some more. He said, “No problem, I run the barber shop down the street.” When Gentle Giant played the Berkeley Community Theatre a short time later, he had the band autograph my copy of *In a Glass House*, got me backstage, and I was able to do an interview with Derek Shulman. Sad to say, my tape of the interview was not listenable, due to the ambient noise and multiple conversations happening at the same time. I did feel a bit chagrined – though not directly responsible - when their next album, *Interview*, was a concept piece expressing their displeasure with the constant demands of promotion and the music press repetitively asking for information about the band.

*Interview* was their eighth studio album, and a disappointment. Musically, it broke no new ground, and everything that had been impressive and endearing about their instrumental and vocal interplay up to that point started sounding annoying and unmelodic. Even Derek Shulman later was quoted as saying it “was the start of the erosion.” Take a listen to the title track, “Interview,” and you will probably agree. It has many of the elements of classic Gentle Giant music, yet something is off.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twD5D14ZZus

The last album to showcase their progressive sound was the 1977 live double LP *Playing the Fool*. A number of bootleg albums had been produced from their live shows over the years, including one entitled *Playing the Foole*. Capitol Records felt the need to make a distinction by putting “The Official Live Gentle Giant” on the cover. The material skewed toward the latter phase of their career, but included a few earlier numbers as well as a brief acoustic instrumental version of “Sweet Georgia Brown” in the style of Django Reinhardt’s Quintet du Hot Club de France.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k19Irzj9QmE&list=OLAK5uy_nBq8rswiPetmu2RFnywuMr28xbEdCJgP8&index=10

“Excerpts from *Octopus*,” is a medley of themes from that album featuring some precision acoustic guitar interplay from Gary Green and Ray Shulman, along with a recorder trio performed over very funky bass and drums. No other band could have done something like this. Here’s a smoking version from a 1974 performance on Belgian television.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TQdhTA8gNc
Two double LP compilations had been released in the UK, 1975’s *Giant Steps...the first five years* and 1977’s facetiously titled *Pretentious – For The Sake Of It*.

Unfortunately, the punk rock movement had begun, and progressive bands were now considered “dinosaurs.” Pressure to create shorter, simpler, more commercial songs resulted in their ninth studio LP, *The Missing Piece*. This was not the *Gentle Giant* sound their loyal audience had grown to appreciate. In those days, the record labels often came up with clever promotional items relating to the album in an effort to get the attention of radio station music directors and journalists. For this one, Capitol made a 12” by 12” jigsaw puzzle with the image of the giant (with a piece missing, of course). Despite their efforts, the album did poorly, appealing neither to the hoped-for new audience nor longtime fans.

The most appealing track, “Memories of Old Days,” is also the album’s longest, at just over seven minutes. Although lacking the complexity of their earlier work, it has some lovely acoustic guitar interplay.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSdAxP25FWU&list=OLAK5uy_lRrhZZOOhGWkJSdbZW0SPrrnLjlB3r_EBg

In stark contrast with that dreamy piece, most of the other songs are upbeat, and clock in at around three minutes. One of the few songs on the LP to remind one of *Gentle Giant*’s halcyon days, “As Old As You’re Young” is a bouncy number, and the only one sung by Kerry Minnear.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhprZ_VROlw&list=OLAK5uy_lRrhZZOOhGWkJSdbZW0SPrrnLjlB3r_EBg&index=6

There’s even a tongue-in-cheek attempt at the raw energy of punk in the aptly named “Betcha Thought We Couldn’t Do It.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Rre5N36_sk&list=OLAK5uy_lRrhZZOOhGWkJSdbZW0SPrrnLjlB3r_EBg&index=3

The band got one last shot with Capitol, 1978’s *Giant for a Day*. Unfortunately, it proved to be a continuation of their slide into irrelevance. Pedestrian rockers and lighter songs devoid of substance predominate, and none of them even approach the five-minute mark. Rather than pick out individual tracks, I’ll just link to the full album and let you click through.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4d7gzcEC_Go

*Gentle Giant* re-signed with Columbia records for *Civilian*, their eleventh and final studio album. It was their first to be recorded in the US, and utilized noted engineer Geoff Emerick (whose credits include *The Beatles* and many others). The sound, though, is denser and murkier than their earlier albums. Released in 1980, it was pretty much a straightforward rocker with no prog elements, but the songs were certainly an improvement on the previous disc. An air of cynicism and disillusionment permeates the lyrics of many of the tracks. A pounding drumbeat and synthesizer
sequencing introduces “Convenience (Clean and Easy),” the album’s up-tempo first track.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHcivcwc5YU

“All Through the Night” features some tasty electric guitar from Gary Green.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfTn2O_hQ6c

The moody “Shadows on the Street,” is sung, of course, by Kerry Minnear. Despite the slightly dark lyrics, it’s quite pretty.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ah_ylkJxY5I

“Number One” is a pointed complaint about inconsiderate people. It starts with a very deceptive riff. See if you can find the downbeat before the drums come in.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3LYTlN_o10

On Side Two, the sound of a train in the London tube opens “Underground.”

“Inside Out” is the album’s other down-tempo track. The song features a haunting chorus line of “Do I need lifting.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ag63YldkAng

Subliminal messages in the media get exposure in “It’s Not Imagination.”

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

The original LP ends with a very brief sound collage of four words “That’s/All/There/Is” taken from the other songs on the album. The fact that the band broke up following the tour that promoted Civilian makes those words prophetic. There is a bonus track on some of the digital releases, “Heroes No More,” that could also be interpreted as self-referential.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E89hCc66iA

Gentle Giant was an utterly unique band that deserved a much larger following. If you didn’t know about them before, I hope you’ve come to appreciate them.
With the exception of Foley artists or people who collect sound effects, I think it’s safe to assume that the vast majority of audiophiles are also music aficionados. As such, tastes in music are highly subjective, and opinions of musical works can often be 180 degrees apart. Rarely however, has there been a consensus so widely divided at the time of its release and a vindication reassessment decades later so complete as in the case of Lou Reed’s 1973 follow up to his *Transformer* hit record, the commercial flop known as *Berlin*.

By all accounts, *Berlin*’s downer tale of a crumbling marriage, prostitution, child abuse, drug addiction and suicide was both extremely depressing and alienating. Perhaps its only success that year was in keeping Lou Reed from becoming a mainstream pop music star. Among the influential reviewers, *NME* and the *The New York Times* praised the record, while *Rolling Stone* and rock music critic Robert Christgau panned it. In a 2009 interview with *American Songwriter*, Reed himself confessed that *Berlin* was “The one that almost sunk the ship.”
The vast majority of ink about Berlin has mostly focused on its poor commercial reception, its darkly cinema verite lyricism, and how critical reassessment now hails the record as “a classic.” As the lyrics were semi-autobiographical, with elements of the Caroline character based on Reed’s mother-in-law, it is not surprising that journalists and critics scoured the lyric sheet for article content and insights. Reed, priding himself first as a man of words before being a rock star, has himself rarely, if ever, cited the music of Berlin, per se.

Producer Bob Ezrin, who made his initial reputation with Alice Cooper and whose arrangements were in large part responsible for the “movie within a record” aural storytelling approach of Berlin, certainly deserves much of the credit for the timelessness of its music. Hiring a top notch band that included Jack Bruce, Steve Winwood, Aynsley Dunbar, Michael Brecker, and the lead guitar tag team of Steve Hunter and Dick Wagner, Ezrin reportedly almost had a nervous breakdown completing Berlin. The released record apparently was the result of months of editing long instrumental passages scored for a rock opera, leaving a lean and mean rock oratorio at the end of the day for RCA, the record company that released the album.

When Frank Doris and I discussed some of the records we use as sonic references for speaker evaluation, the one that came up immediately for both of us was Berlin. Several different mixing credits have been listed in the CD and vinyl releases, but the late Grammy Award-winning engineer Dennis Ferrante is the one cited on my copy, and as my sound engineering mentor, he related some of the stories from his Record Plant days on cutting overdubs and mixing for Berlin.

The opening title track piano introduction, played by Allan Macmillan with a world weariness evocative of Marlene Dietrich in a Von Stroheim movie, sounds amazingly lifelike for a 1973 vinyl rock record, and even more authentic subsequently on CD. Unlike the tininess of pianos on 1960s rock and roll records or the bombastic, over-processed-reverb concert hall ballad piano sound then-popular with bands like Procol Harum, Berlin’s piano has an intimacy that places the listener only a few feet away in the same room.
When prodded on how he got that sound onto analog tape to survive being cut onto a super-thin RCA Dynaflex record, Dennis told me it was a “trade secret.” Based on my experience with the Ferrante methodology, I suspect that a pair of Neumann U87 mics, a pair of Urei 1176 compressors and some Pultec Tube EQ units were involved, whether in cutting the original tracks, re-amping them, or possibly both. The mic placement, however, is where the art comes in, and that info may be lost to antiquity.

As the follow up to the platinum selling, David Bowie-produced Transformer, which featured Reed’s hit songs “Walk on the Wild Side” and “Perfect Day,” Berlin was intended to be a concept album that rocked. While Michael Brecker’s horns, Dunbar’s Keith Moon-esque drum fills and Jack Bruce’s jazzy bass on the songs augmented the orchestrations and sonic landscapes, Reed’s basic rock chords were strummed on acoustic guitar and the Hunter and Wagner team supplied the gritty edge against Steve Winwood’s Hammond organ wails. The pristine sound, which Reed would continue to explore in his experiments with Binaural recording throughout the rest of the 1970s, stood apart from the murkiness of Lou Reed and the clean, dry glam rock of Transformer.

Surprisingly, the bulk of the critics’ reviews essentially ignored the music, content to focus on the sordid aspects of the lyrics and the hints about Reed’s private life that they may have contained. While Ezrin would go on to use similar musical approaches with Pink Floyd’s The Wall, Reed’s numerous live performances of the songs from Berlin display a lot more rock muscularity than what Ezrin’s edited studio production might have alluded. Songs like “Caroline Says I,” “How Do You Think It Feels,” “Oh Jim” and “Sad Song” have plenty of rock and roll swagger, courtesy of the Steve Hunter and Dick Wagner one-two punch guitar approach originally cultivated with their work for Alice Cooper. However, rather than the in-your-face guitar mix that fans of the Stones or Led Zeppelin would gravitate to, Ezrin tones down the grinding guitars into another sonic pastel shade within the overall orchestral mix balance.

Reed’s monotone throughout the decades since has been a constant, but the freedom he has extended in concert to his supporting musicians and collaborators in various configurations, both electric and acoustic, show the range and power of Berlin’s music, which is easily on par with the best of his canon, both solo and with the Velvet Underground.

Rock and Roll Animal (1974) and Lou Reed Live (1975)

Reed was convinced by manager Dennis Katz and his brother, former Blues Project and Blood, Sweat and Tears founder Steve Katz, to revive his Velvets’ catalog for new audiences that discovered him through Transformer. Steve Katz was hired to produce a live record for the support tour to promote Berlin, and a top notch ensemble led by Hunter and Wagner went on to record Rock and Roll Animal, one of Reed’s most popular records and a landmark live concert album. Recorded in NYC at the Academy of Music, Hunter and Wagner unleashed their guitar pyrotechnics while Lou parodied front men like Bowie and Jagger. Together with Lou Reed Live, released the following year and culled from the same concert, the live renditions of “Lady Day,” “Oh Jim” and “Sad Song” are bristling with energy and more aggressive and extended guitar lines than their studio renditions, trading off riffs like some of the famous guitar duels of Neil Young and Stephen Stills or collaborating in harmony like Eric Clapton and Duane Allman on Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs. The influence of the harmonized guitar lines of bands like the Allman Brothers and Wishbone Ash are obvious, while the use of phase shifters and the off kilter rhythms of songs like “Lady Day” rein in the freewheeling improvisations that otherwise proliferate on “Sweet Jane,” “Heroin” and “Rock and Roll.”
Searching For a Good Time (1976)

This live concert broadcast from Boston’s WBCN was took place during Lou Reed’s *Rock and Roll Heart* era, which featured Reed on guitar and Michael Fonfara as music director and keyboardist. The other guitarist may have been Jeffrey Ross. “The Kids” and “How Do You Think It Feels” are given a punkier, Velvet Underground feel, and are sped up. Fonfara’s jazz fusion tendencies crop up in a Fender Rhodes electric piano solo that is half Chick Corea and half Stevie Wonder. Fonfara would continue as Reed’s music director for the next few years, including the *Street Hassle* tours, which also produced the live *Take No Prisoners* album. The subtlety and intimacy of the songs are squashed as the rock and roll attitude transforms them into amphetamine-fueled anthems. For those unfamiliar with *Berlin*, these versions sound like they could have been recorded at the same time as the Velvets’ *Live at Max’s*.

Take No Prisoners (1978)

Recorded in NYC at the Bottom Line utilizing the Binaural recording system (which places microphones in the ears of mannequin heads positioned strategically to simulate human listening perspectives), *Take No Prisoners* is peppered with Lou Reed’s standup comedy sarcasm and filled with his personal rants between and during songs, played with a jazz fusion backup band. The title track from *Berlin* is the only song from the studio album featured, but it is a jazzy take on the ballad arrangement from Reed’s self-titled first solo album. Interestingly, it contains the original version’s pre-chorus diatonic ascending riff, which was copied for “Lady Day” but left out in the acoustic Allan Macmillan solo piano recording.

Perfect Night in London (1998)

While Reed continued to perform individual songs from *Berlin* in concert over the next few years, there were no official live releases featuring any of those songs until two decades later. *Perfect Night in London* captures the Reed quartet of *New York* and *Magic and Loss* with Mike Rathke on
guitar, Fernando Saunders on fretless bass, and drummer Tony Smith. A relatively sedate record by Reed standards, “The Kids” is performed here stripped down to an almost folky strummed singalong, but retains a vibe reminiscent of the original Berlin release, courtesy of Saunders’ probing, fretless basslines which evoke the Jack Bruce studio version. By this time, Laurie Anderson, whom Reed would marry and remain with until he passed away from cancer, was already exhibiting a demonstrable mellowing influence on the usually acerbic Reed.

Unfortunately, no Berlin songs were included on Live in Italy, which featured The Blue Mask band with Robert Quine, who pushed and encouraged Reed to return to playing lead guitar. This led to some Velvet Underground-style guitar workouts that rivaled Rock and Roll Animal but with much more of an underground New York punk rock aesthetic.


An unusually acoustic-based live recording for Lou Reed featuring Rathke, Saunders, and Jane Scarpatoni with Antony Hegarty (of Antony and the Johnsons; she is now known as Anohni) on falsetto vocals, Animal Serenade foreshadows Reed’s St. Ann’s Warehouse Berlin revival production. Reed is able to alternately play with aggression and tenderness while Antony’s ethereal vocals, first heard with Reed on his Edgar Allan Poe tribute, The Raven, soar in harmony and the cello delivers an eeriness not unlike John Cale’s viola on the Velvets’ first few records. “Men of Good Fortune,” “How Do You Think It Feels” and “The Bed” are all instantly recognizable and capture Berlin’s poignancy and irony while the new arrangements harken back to Ezrin’s production yet take them a step further into the 21st century.

Berlin: Live at St. Ann’s Warehouse (2008)

The culmination of Lou Reed’s long sought critical vindication for Berlin finally came some 30 plus years later. Susan Feldman of St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn was a fan of Berlin and had been lobbying Reed for years to perform a concert of the record in its entirety. Filmmaker Julian
Schnabel, also a fan, joined the effort and proposed shooting a video of the concert as well with additional staged footage and video projections to augment the original photo inserts accompanying the record. *Berlin* would become an audio-visual experience impossible in 1973 but on the cutting edge of performance art and rock music shows of the modern age.

Reed played *Berlin* for five shows at St. Ann’s Warehouse in December, 2006. In addition to Saunders, Tony Smith and Antony Hegarty, Reed added the late Sharon Jones on vocals, Rob Wasserman on upright bass, and original *Berlin* guitarist Steve Hunter. Hal Willner served as music director, which included horns, strings and the Brooklyn Youth Choir. The live recording video and CD releases were a commercial success, and the shows were critically acclaimed. Reed subsequently took the *Berlin* production on a European tour, including a performance at the London Royal Albert Hall.

Here’s a video of the entire concert:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3K1s5TjU0U

In addition to the entirety of *Berlin*, Reed added “Candy Says” (performed by Antony Hegarty), “Sweet Jane,” and reportedly at Schnabel’s request, “Rock Minuet” to the concert set.

Hunter is on fire throughout the entirety of *Berlin* as he breathes fresh energy into the guitar lines of “Men of Good Fortune,” “How Do You Think It Feels,” “Sad Song” and “Lady Day,” with a simultaneous nod to both the improvised ferocity of *Rock and Roll Animal* and to the disciplined structure of the Ezrin and Willner arrangements. His guitar lines spit forth like a caged tiger who has found some holes from which his claws can snatch an unsuspecting prey within reach, especially on “Oh Jim,” Hunter’s diverse range of improvisational chops are especially impressive when the freewheeling psychedelic boogie rock solos of the 1975 live version of “Oh Jim” from *Lou Reed Live* are contrasted with the conversational, call and response gospel-meets-hard rock styled phrasing of the *Berlin: Live at St. Ann’s Warehouse* arrangement.

The layers of orchestral textures from the vocals, strings and horns pay proper homage to the studio version without losing the live spontaneity generated by Smith, Saunders, Hunter and Reed himself, who actually looks like he is enjoying himself in the video. “The Kids” even recreates, live for the first time in the Reed discography, the prerecorded anguished cries of the children being separated from Caroline (the original contained recordings of Ezrin’s own children), which was considered especially disturbing in 1973. *[Be warned; it remains one of the most disturbing and horrifying moments in recorded history – Ed.]*

Fully realized under Willner’s music direction, *Berlin: Live at St. Ann’s Warehouse* delivers all of the rock and roll edge at the core of the best selections from Reed’s songbook while maintaining the elegance of the original Ezrin studio release. It’s fitting that Reed’s final live recording before he passed away in 2013 was for, in retrospect, his arguably most ambitious artistic musical statement – and one that has since stood the test of time to earn its place at the top of his list of accomplishments, both for its high-fidelity audio standards as well as its musical strengths and daring literary gravitas.
NAMM: An Audiophile’s Perspective

FEATURED
Written by B. Jan Montana
The National Association of Music Merchants has been around in one form or another since 1901. It started as an organization for piano merchants, but soon expanded to include other instrument makers and merchants. It's held an annual show since 1902. Previous participants included Thomas Edison and Charlie Chaplin.

In the 1980s the headquarters of the organization moved from Chicago to Carlsbad, CA, and in the 1990s, the winter show relocated from Chicago to Anaheim (sound move). Since 1993, it's also conducted a summer show in Nashville.

The NAMM event is a trade show open only to NAMM members and selected guests like the media. I was lucky enough to be invited for the first time this year. Parking is a bear and the walk to the Anaheim Convention Center was a long one, but not just for me. Thousands of other people of all ages were doing the same thing. There was an air of anticipation and excitement that I haven't felt at a CES since the early aughts.

The approach to the convention center, and the convention itself, was crawling with cops directing both vehicle and foot traffic. I found the Anaheim police force to be incredibly helpful and polite, especially considering the potential melee they had to keep organized and functional. The same was true of the private security force guarding the gates.
The first venue I wandered into was the ACC North building, a huge, new venue with two floors. It happened to house the equipment in which audiophiles are most interested – electronic gear and loudspeakers.
I was immediately struck with the youth and diversity of the participants, in strong contrast to most US audio shows. Their questions revealed that they were genuinely interested in electronic sound equipment.
This system drew a lot of attention.
Many demos and lectures were offered in all the show’s buildings, including all the ballrooms at the Hilton next door. They were geared towards helping young people create and market music, a valuable service which, no doubt, contributes to the convention’s popularity. Obviously, there is an interest in vintage equipment as well.

This stage provided an opportunity for budding sound engineers to work alongside established professionals (mixmasters?)
I overheard a number of conversations in which people were discussing how hard it is to make a living at the music business in the digital age. One lady responded to say it was just as difficult in the analog age. Except for a few top acts and a lot of music executives, nobody made much money. She lauded the digital age because it allowed unknown bands to promote their product independent from $!@#$%^&*$ music executives.
There were many interesting speakers on display at the show including many brands I'd never hear of. Most of them – even the small ones – were far more dynamic than the typical audiophile speaker. It caused me to wonder if that wasn't one of the reasons young people were more attracted to pro gear. These units wouldn't look out of place in a fashionable home.
Another fine speaker represented by a true audio enthusiast. The big ones were priced at $7000/pr. - the same price as many audiophile cables. They sounded great with Hosa cables, an inexpensive pro product commonly used in studios. Most of the systems in the hall were wired with Hosa or comparably inexpensive cables. This fellow told me the only reason to go to with pricier cables is for road use, which demands more robust products. Seems the industry producing the music is a lot less fastidious than the end users.

Alan Sides, who owns five recording studios across the country, knows how important it is to use accurate monitoring systems. He couldn't find many on the market that satisfied him, so he decided to produce his own. He's often appeared at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) and in his first year, produced the best sound I'd ever heard from an audio system - and I've been to many audio shows. At the time, they cost $36,000, a bargain in audiophile terms, but they were just too large for most homes (and, as it turns out, most studios). So he's now producing smaller models. He once said that the final mix can't be any better than the equipment used to produce it. As well as the equipment, I would include the acoustics of the studio and the ears of the engineer.
To the left is an image of an actual speaker featuring four 15-inch, back-facing, dipole drivers surrounding a horn-loaded tweeter. Below them, in the white box, are two 18-inch woofers angled at 90 degrees to each other, also in an open-backed cabinet. I’m not really a fan of dipoles, but here’s proof that one’s preconceptions are always subject to change. Although these speakers were in a booth only about 150 ft. square, they were so dynamic, effortless and clean at high volumes, they reminded me of Alan Sides’ first speakers. Unfortunately, they present a facade about as large, with less WAF (Wife Acceptance Factor), so they are unlikely to be widely adopted by audiophiles. I’m using the promotional poster secured to the outside of the booth to illustrate the speaker as the booth was too dark to get a good photo.
Need more woof? Will 21 inches do? Want a Big Gulp with that sir?
Focal is a company most audiophiles will recognize. They presented as good a five channel demo as I've ever heard. The line featuring their beryllium dome tweeter is a giant leap forward for French-kind, and eliminates the last reservation I had to their sound. The exhibitor agreed to play a gorgeous Renaissance choral piece (a pleasant change from Hip/Pop/Rap), which demonstrated the system's ability to produce loud crescendos without distortion, and a credible 3D soundstage.

Here's a perfect recording device for those interviewing dolphins and whales.
If your drummer insists he's head and shoulders above the other musicians, here's the stage prop you need.
No stage show is complete without a light and smoke show, which is hard to photograph.
"Yes ma’am, the electronic stuff is very interesting, but I’m not an engineer, I’m a musician, so would you please direct me to the instruments!"

80 percent of the convention consisted of instruments, and surprisingly, 80 percent of them were acoustic instruments. I thought it would be all electric guitars etc. geared to pop music. I wasn’t disappointed. Who can't help but love craftsmanship like this?
Or this.
Or this.

Or this.
That craftsmanship was matched by enthusiasm.
And talent.

And determination.
Here's a drum set without drums. It sounded great with the help of a lot of electronics. It also called for great skill and accuracy, which were on display.
Lots of unique and interesting instruments.
The new Lumatone keyboard is completely programmable including the color of the 275 velocity sensitive keys.

Drop Labs aim to take audio to a new level by syncing music, movies and other audio to shoes that vibrate the soles of your feet. It's like standing on the stage next to the musicians - an experience I've never fancied.
No idea who this guy is or why he's being interviewed, but his ensemble reminded me of the flamboyant Jim Bongiorno.
Outside the Hilton, there was live music all day on the Yamaha stage. As you might expect, the PA system was as good as it gets.
In the final analysis, it's the people that make the show. I was lucky enough to meet some very interesting ones. However, I didn't have the time to meet the other 116,000 attendees, which is a shame because 20 percent of them were international visitors. The NAMM Summer Show will be in Nashville from July 9 - 11, and the next winter show will take place at the Anaheim Convention Center from January 21-24, 2021.
All photos courtesy of B. Jan Montana.
On the Beach In Puerto Vallarta, February 2019

PARTING SHOT

Taken by B. Jan Montana