Sometimes even the most perceptive of us can have a blind spot or a complete brain freeze. I’ve been editing Copper for more than eight months and hadn’t realized that, unlike every other magazine, we didn’t have a masthead! My friend Gene Pitts, editor of The Audiophile Voice, pointed this out. Well, duh! So, let’s acknowledge all the terrifically talented people who make Copper possible:

**Contributing Writers:**

**Cover:**
“Cartoon Bob” D’Amico

**Cartoons:**
James Whitworth

**Parting Shots:**
James Schrimpuf, B. Jan Montana (and others)

**Editor:**
Frank Doris

I'd also like to thank all the writers and others who contributed to previous issues. You may even see
some of them come back...

We’d like to welcome new contributor Ray Chelstowski. He is a contributing editor at record collector’s magazine *Goldmine* and writes the “Vinyl Finds” column, as well as feature stories and reviews. He is the former publisher of *Rolling Stone* and *Entertainment Weekly* and writes his own music blog, *Disciples of Sound*.

In this issue: Professor Larry Schenbeck considers Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* and *Idomeneo*. John Seetoo begins an in-depth interview with John Grado of phono cartridge and headphones maker Grado Labs. Dan Schwartz contemplates the ordinary beauty of rock band *Elbow*. Ken Sander remembers the future (or was is the past?) with progressive rock icons *Nektar*. Anne E. Johnson looks at female rocker extraordinaire *Pat Benatar* and early piano jazz master *Jelly Roll Morton*. J.I. Agnew asks: are 180-gram vinyl pressings really better?

Ray Chelstowski is on a mission for McIntosh. In “Confessions of a Setup Man Part Seven,” I keep my eye on the prize. You can’t always get what you want – or can you? Tom Gibbs covers new high resolution *Rolling Stones* re-releases. Don Kaplan listens to the earth’s heartbeat: *Native American music*. Robert Heiblim launches a series on how audio products are manufactured. Rich Isaacs continues his deep dive into *Italian progressive rock*. Copper’s AV squad wraps up the issue with some basic hi-fi-manship, a musical contribution to medical science and Mendocino driftwood.
Who needed audio forums back then, with this kind of advice? And who else thinks this looks like the work of Don Martin, Mad's Maddest Artist? From Audio, May 1954.
You can't go wrong with the creative application of printed wiring. From reader Chris Kelley.
Now I get it! From *Electronics Made Easy*, 1956.
Jeff Rowland Design Group gave these buttons out at a CES around the late 1980s or early 1990s.
No need to spend hours on speaker placement; just get this! From Audio, August 1958.
When I was a few years out of college I had put together a pretty respectable stereo system, in large part thanks to the advice of my friend and The Absolute Sound writer, the late Bob Reina. We had known each other since high school. He always had more money than me and was able to buy good gear at times when I could only dream of it.

But by the time I was in my mid-twenties I had Dahlquist DQ-10 speakers with dual subwoofers and a Van Alstine-modified crossover, a Harman Kardon T60 turntable (later a Linn LP12 with a Syrinx PU-3 arm and a variety of cartridges), a NAD 3020A integrated amp with the preamp section feeding a Dynaco Stereo 416 power amp, and a bunch of Monster Interlink Reference interconnects and homemade speaker cable. Almost all of it bought used. It sounded good. I was happy. I was living in a condo complex and my adjoining neighbor was deaf (literally) so I could blast the stereo any time.

I was not happy being an electronics/industrial buyer; I detested the politics, favoritism and nepotism at one company and shortly moved to another, where the head of procurement treated us miserably. (A few years later he got arrested for taking kickbacks from vendors.) So, at the age of 27 I wanted a career change.

Sometimes you do get a break. I’d been writing pop music reviews for The Absolute Sound for about a year and a half when editor-in-chief Harry Pearson aka HP invited me to go to dinner with him one night in 1987 – and offered me a full-time job. I took it; the story is in Issue 102.

But before then I had already been a pop music reviewer at the magazine for about a year and a half. Soon after I got that gig Bob and Harry started putting the squeeze on me. Bob: “Now that you’re working for TAS you’re going to have to upgrade your equipment.” Harry: “Every reviewer needs a
reference system.” Me: “I don’t have any money!”

Over the course of many phone calls, my resolve weakening, the three of us started going over what kind of equipment I should upgrade to. One day Harry said, “You sound like an Audio Research man to me.”

Meaning, I should get an Audio Research SP-11 MkII preamplifier, Harry’s reference at the time. $4,995. About $11,275 in today’s money. In other words, ridiculous, unobtanium, out of the question, Mr. Faversham. Me: “How am I going to do this? It’s impossible!” Harry: “You won’t be satisfied with anything less than an SP-11 [MkII]. And you can get it for about $2,700 at industry accommodation.”

The SP-11 MkII was the undisputed number one preamplifier in the world at the time. Rarely has a single piece of equipment been so dominant in its heyday. A two-chassis design using six 6DJ8 tubes, it had every feature an audiophile could possibly want and was stunning in its industrial design. It’s become a true audiophile classic. You’ll soon be able to read much more about it in Ken Kessler’s upcoming book, Audio Research: Making the Music Glow, due in August.

I told Bob what Harry said. Bob replied, “wait a minute. You have a mortgage on your condo, right? Interest rates are good right now. You can refinance your mortgage, pay the same monthly payment, and get $13,000 cash from the deal!”

It had never occurred to me, but Bob was in finance.

First response: “That’s crazy.” Second response: “I can?”

You know where this is going. I did the deal.

I called Terry Dorn, who handled industry accommodation purchases for Audio Research Corporation. “I want to buy an SP-11 MkII.” I was not expecting his reply. He told me they could not sell one to me. Whaat? I work for TAS! “We have a strict company policy and can only sell to qualified equipment reviewers. You’re a music reviewer so sorry, we can’t sell one to you. I hope you understand.”

Actually, I did understand and respected ARC’s position, even if my dreams of sonic glory felt crushed. I told Harry, and his reaction was somewhat less equanimous. “He said WHAT? Get Terry on the line!” “No, no, Harry, it won’t do any good. Terry is right.” Harry thought for a minute, stared at me with that laser-beam-through-steel-plate look of his and said, “I’m going to call Mike Kay and tell him to sell you an SP-11.” Michael Kakadelis, known to everyone as Mike Kay, was the owner of
Lyric Hi-Fi, the legendary Manhattan high-end store and a king among dealers. Harry made the call. He hung up and said, “Mike will sell you one. But we are to tell no one about this.” Yep, comprende.

I made an appointment with Lyric, drove into the city, handed the sales guy a check and loaded the two boxes into my 1985 Firebird. A little shakily, considering the magnitude of what I had just done. It didn’t really hit me until I got through the Midtown Tunnel into Queens. I can’t have an SP-11, huh? I can’t have one, you say? Can’t have one? Can’t have it? Well, I got one. I got one. I GOT ONE, HAAH HAAAHHHH!

I should end the story here for dramatic effect, but I have a feeling you want to know what happened next. I got home and very carefully unboxed the SP-11 MkII and put it into my system. In the middle of this, Harry had called. “Well? Did you listen to it yet?” He sounded like a giddy teenager eager for gossip. “Call me when you do!” He was almost as excited as I was.

I wanted to listen immediately, and so did my friends who were there for the Big Event, but resisted the urge until it had warmed up for about an hour. Yeah, I was pretty hard core in those days. Finally, the momentous first-needle-drop moment had come.

Ever have that feeling when the adrenaline is pumping through your body and you can feel the burn of the excitement? Of course you have. It’s a miracle I was able to cue the record. (I don’t remember which one.)

Well, after all that build-up –

Good lord.

Oh my g-d.

I need to sit down. Give me the strength to breathe.

You might recall my previous preamp was a NAD 3020A. I had just gone from a mid-fi component to the greatest preamp in the world.

The difference was not subtle. The soundstage was expansive, beyond the boundaries of my room walls. The resolution was beyond anything I could have begun to imagine (though I’d heard the SP-11 MkII at Harry’s, hearing a component in your own system is as we know an entirely different experience). The tonal balance was perfect, the highs extended, the midrange rich and palpable, and the bass more detailed and authoritative than I could have dreamed of.

With that one needle drop, my system went from pretty darn good to conveying that magic – there’s no other way to put it – that elevates an audio system from being a mere reproducer of sound to something that conveys something of the feeling of being there with the performers and connecting you to the music in a profoundly emotional way.

I was ecstatic.

Postscript:

Of course Terry Dorn eventually found out that I got an SP-11 MkII. I forget how, and it was ultimately a non-issue. Terry is one of the finest people in the audio industry. We became warm
friends and he eventually became ARC’s president. He retired from the company in 2015.

I eventually sold the SP-11 MkII for an Audible Illusions Modulus 3 because I loved the AI’s sweet midrange (still do) and I needed money at the time and pocketed a nice chunk of cash on the deal. Do I ever have seller’s remorse? Yeah. Even after all this time.
My first stereo wasn’t as impressive as the effort it took to sell my parents on why buying it was such a good idea. I had received enough money in gifts that Christmas to more than cover the cost. But my folks saw music and stereos as gateways into “the dark side of life.” Frankly they would have preferred that I put all of the money in the bank. But what fun would that have been? This was maybe the first time that I didn’t take their “no” as the final answer and decided to press on.

I made a lot of solid arguments that each chipped away at their resolve. From my vantage point now I’m surprised that they granted as many “appeals” as they did. Years later when I was named publisher of *Rolling Stone* I reminded my mother of her main objection. She and my Dad would say, “rock n roll is never going to pay the bills.” At the time I didn’t know how wrong they would be but I also didn’t care. Finally having reached a point of exhaustion with the whole thing they left the door cracked open and I ran right through sinking $59.99 plus tax on an all-in-one Emerson cassette deck/amp with speakers. I had been eyeing it all season long at Caldor, our one stop for everything from clothing to auto supplies. I still remember picking it up, plugging it in and hitting “play.” It didn’t sound anywhere as good as my brother’s JVC set up but I didn’t care. I was in the game with a focus forward on the grand prize – a McIntosh system.

One my aunts had a state of the art McIntosh set up. Even then at the tender age of 10 as I would watch it operate in her home I knew that I was in the presence of greatness. That green glow from the amp and preamp were as mesmerizing and hypnotic as the sound that soared through her speakers. It didn’t matter that the music was Andy Williams and not Aerosmith. THIS was how music was meant to be heard.

A few years later my parents saw that rock and roll wasn’t going to steal my soul after all, and they began to help me build what became my first system. It started with the purchase of a Technics receiver. Then came a Panasonic turntable. I bought a Sharp cassette deck and Pioneer speakers - again from Caldor - and while I knew this was a long road from McIntosh I was getting closer.
Over the years I’d upgrade components here and there and it got to a point where the equipment in my own home was pretty good. I had developed a fondness for Adcom products and they became the hub for the system that would drive sound through our house and our outdoors. That system largely fed in wall/in ceiling speakers so it just seemed silly to invest in a McIntosh set up that wouldn’t do much more than provide a lot of eye candy to our music room.

Then about ten years ago we expanded the living area in our basement and that created a space where I could finally establish a proper “man cave.” This isn’t some fancy Architectural Digest-worthy set up with flat screen TV’s and wet bars. Instead, it’s the real deal. Here open and exposed is the air conditioning handler for the first floor. It sits diagonally across the room from a 275 gallon oil tank. The floor remains concrete but an area rug covers most of its surface. Above is duct work along with items we will never use, stored in the rafters. To make this ideal sound set up seem even more studio-perfect, this is where I keep all of my tools. They are stowed in metal cabinets with tamped doors that looked like they wanted to rattle and buzz at the mere suggestion that the room needed a stereo. But I did it anyway.

This was my opportunity and one I didn’t see presenting itself again (until that day we decide to downsize and move). The roadway was cleared when my wife surprisingly endorsed the idea with an unforgettable amount of enthusiasm. I later learned that she had hoped that moving my music downstairs would mean that she and the kids would no longer have to be exposed to whatever I wanted to listen to, often at the highest volumes the upstairs system would allow. What she didn’t know was that since the floor wasn’t soundproof, things wouldn’t markedly change. It would still get loud. But I didn’t have time (or interest) in explaining that. This was another open door that wouldn’t stay open forever. I decided like I had before to run through it and buy a really good stereo. I’ve never looked back.

Here in Connecticut we have lost almost all of the great stereo stores that I grew up with. But one remains and they always have a used equipment selection that’s expansive, filled with only the best names in the game. I had arrived at their showroom with the intent to buy a new McIntosh system. Instead I wandered into this used area and the vintage models they’d restored reached out and captured my attention with an iron grip. The inventory stretched across decades, brands and products. There were scores of great finds to consider, but my eyes went right to the stack of Macs!

In the end, I walked away with 1971 C28 pre-amp, a 1967 M250 amp, and a 1972 Thorens TD 160 turntable. I later picked up a 1984 Nakamichi RX-202 cassette deck with a tape carriage that flips out and spins when you reach the end of a side. To me it was worth it for that hat trick alone!

I married everything to a pair of Polk Audio Monitor 5s that I had bought back in 1992. Polk lost their way soon after that but these speakers never stopped delivering a clear crispness across the entire sound spectrum. All of the components found their home inside a cabinet that my older brother Brian had bought from a local Goodwill. He restored it and gave it to me as a birthday gift when I was in high school. From that point forward it became the longtime home for my audio equipment. Now down here in the man cave it began its second tour of duty. This became the base from which those first few sounds of magic would appear. After the set up I don’t remember what I played first. I think that’s because I was as much in awe of those green lights then as I was looking at them as a ten year old in my aunt’s den.

This man cave system has now been in operation now for almost ten years. Along the way the C28 was completely overhauled. The turntable has enjoyed a full tune-up. The tape deck? Well it only
gets used from time to time so when it’s called on to perform it does so with precision. But the amp?
She stays behind closed doors in the cabinet quietly doing her work with amazing brilliance and only
comes out to greet guests when people want to see the setup. There are no moving parts or even a
pilot light to indicate that she’s on. It’s the most modest piece of equipment that I own as well as the
one item that captures the complete attention of everyone that asks to see her. She’s steady and
strong.

Over the years I have been back to the store for repairs and I always wander toward the room where
the used gear resides. Almost without exception there’ll be some new item that grabs my eye. It
could be a new Mac, with a brighter display and a few more functions. And I’d be lying if I said that I
didn’t think once or twice about an upgrade. Then I’d get home and lay eyes on these great pieces of
equipment. At this point they are more than prized possessions. They are more like old friends.
Through their hands I have played new releases that I have been charged to formally review for
magazines like this. Or I play the very same vinyl copies of records that began to define me as a
teen. And as I sit back with headphones to quiet the floor-stomping my family uses to get me to turn
things down, I’m reminded of how my dad would slap the hallway wall to get me to do the same.
With this system it’s not like things have come full circle, but that they haven’t changed. And for me
when it comes to sound that condition will always be my “gold standard.”

Header image: Ray's personal McIntosh C28.
The Healing Power of Music

THE RUN-OUT GROOVE

Written by James Whitworth
"HAMMOND OR WURLITZER?"
"HAMMOND OR WURLITZER?"
We audio people often discuss products of all sorts, whether audio components, music media, accessories and so on, but do we really know much about how these are made and what goes into their creation? I have had the pleasure and done the hard work of being involved with directing the manufacturing and marketing of many thousands of products over my career and thought it would interest Copper readers to get some insight into the process.

Much of my career has been on the company or corporate side. I have not always been the artist, inventor or tinkerer that conceives and builds a product but I have worked with and for these people and the process is still much the same. Whether a corporate or individual effort, the motivations are also generally much the same (despite some views to the contrary), but the various approaches taken by different people can explain the differences in outcomes of sales (in numbers of products sold) and also the price of the product. Don’t you ever wonder why there is such a wide spectrum of prices for similar items such as loudspeakers or amplifiers, for example?

I will be doing a series of articles, as the process of bringing a product to life is both complex and long, and perhaps you do not want to read a short novel here. I will focus specifically on audio products, though I have been involved in the making of many other types of items and the process is much the same. My hope is to give you some insight and maybe even delight regarding the hard
work that goes into most every item offered to the public.

It all starts with inspiration. This could be of the corporate type, the search for more sales and profits. It could also come from the basic idea of better serving and helping people through a new or better product. It might be a brainstorm of an inventor, mad scientist or researcher. Or inspiration may be result of other factors, such as the availability of new semiconductors, software, loudspeaker driver materials or production techniques. For example, look at Gayle Sanders’ Eikon loudspeakers, which are about as different from his earlier work on Martin-Logan electrostatic speakers as possible and which couldn’t have been produced until recently.

It is often passion that drives things, but it can equally be a dispassionate consideration of the market and the needs of customers. In my career what I have seen as the common elements: the product solved someone’s problem, or delighted them more, or offered some new function, experience or ability. None of this is particular to any product type, price point or market, though of course those factors may affect the number of products sold.

Even inspiration needs to be enabled by practical reality. This is where preparation, research and defining what you may be attempting to build come into play. As you may imagine, this process again varies widely. In large audio companies like Sony or Harman, for example, very broad areas of research can be involved as these firms make almost every variation of audio product, while smaller or more focused companies may limit their efforts to amplifiers, loudspeakers, digital processors, etc. Successful companies may often expand their areas of interest to related items both horizontally, i.e., branching out from manufacturing loudspeakers for stereo listening into home theater audio, multiroom audio solutions and headphones. They can also expand vertically, such as Sony going from their audio roots into making televisions, cameras and other electronics.

Generally, this revolves around the engineering skills and capabilities a company has or is interested in. Consider that Dyson has gone from making vacuum cleaners to heaters and cooling products, hair dryers and even electric vehicles – all related to their expertise in compact digitally-driven motors.

In contrast is the work of the restless minds of inventors and mad scientists (we might have a few of those in the audio world!). I am not sure how to describe someone like Bob Carver, but we have seen him make innovations in amplifier technology several times in his career, including his recent cool-running tube amplifiers, as well as signal processing (like his Sonic Holography patent), loudspeakers and more. Although his inventions can arise from his “skunk works” type of outside-the-bureaucracy approach, it still at its core revolves around a lot of research into what is feasible and the building of many prototypes and proofs of concept to see if an idea can be made real.

Another approach can be seen in the work of Dr. Floyd Toole, who (along with many other loudspeaker designers) used rigorous scientific methods to measure and understand people’s listening preferences. Through his research, Toole developed a frequency response preference curve that today informs the work of many other loudspeaker designers (though other designers do not follow this curve at all). Yet another method can be seen in the early work of Mark Levinson, whose motivation and inspiration were to build the best audio equipment possible at the time, and he hired excellent engineers and cut them loose with no budget restrictions in mind.

Inspirations then, comes from many areas, and let us not discount the more basic motivations of seeking more profits and sales; keeping up with technical developments, or of simply responding to what the competition is doing or to market needs. Wireless audio, streaming audio and powered
speakers come to mind as example of products driven by the aforementioned factors. Industrial design is another factor – today, mainstream consumers want smaller, sleeker and more portable products, and better fit and finish.

To be clear, though: inspiration is where new product development starts, but that, along with motivation and research and development in and of themselves do not make a product. Instead, they make the basis for a product possible – and drive its creation.

What comes next is a target. Some firms call this a PID or Product Initiation Document, while others may not be so formal. It can be a statement of who the product is being made for, some of the goals of the product, how big the market opportunity is, facts about its competitive positioning, the likely selling price, the methods of selling and marketing the product, and other details needed to consider if the project has a chance of being successful.

If you cannot define these things, then let’s say you are probably making art, which of course is done for its own sake and not for commercial reasons. Certainly, some audio components and many other technical creations are art according to this point of view, and may turn out to be expensive, rare, odd or different and often only for the few.

As we will see going forward, these considerations and others regarding methods, technical solutions, materials, fit and finish requirements and other choices affect the quantity and the cost of the products and have significant impact on the product that is ultimately sold to the consumer. It is not easy or simple to make a product. It can and often is a difficult path if not a marathon.

The target also doesn’t define the product itself; it’s just a goal to try to achieve. To get there we must go back through our research, we must look into the parts and components needed for the product and see if we can in fact come up with a design and a bill of materials that can fit the requirements.

Indeed, we now have to closely define these requirements in what is generally known as a PRD or Product Requirements Document. As we go over the parts lists and argue costs, we also need to precisely define the features and functions of the product. Each feature, each button, each part often needs to be reviewed to see if it is needed, because each one adds to the complexity of the product and of course its cost.

One of the paradoxes of product development then becomes clear: it is harder to make a good inexpensive product than a cost-no-object one. Industry people say this not to make light of expensive, rare or luxurious products but only to point out that making inexpensive products often involves tougher choices. If you can just keep raising the price that is easier than having to choose between which part, level of finish, level of performance to make your product. No disrespect meant for high priced product but it is a fact. In other sections of my series on the other hand I will point out the tough spot small makers are in that often make it hard and expensive to make products.

In the end, the market decides what is worthwhile or good. I have seen gold-plated feet ruin the profitability of certain audio components and cause their failure – and as it turned out, it was a feature that most buyers did not even notice or care about. I have also seen the opposite, where a lack of care in these same sorts of details caused a product to fail. Also, many potential products don’t even get to the see the light of day. As the process of product definition works its way through development, many products are “killed” when they show they cannot “close the gap” enough to come close to the goal, while others may evolve in unforeseen ways – becoming more or less feature-rich, more or less expensive, or evolve in terms of their feature set, their place in the
competitive market or their customer target.

Part of this process involves the creation of “proof of concept” prototypes. These can be crude or sometimes sophisticated working prototypes. The product creation process also involves testing, finding the required in-house and outside vendor manufacturing resources, securing the parts and components to idealize the product and its performance, going through industrial design concepts to think about not only how the product will look but how it will be made, and much more. Often this involves a collaboration of an entire team, not just the scientist, engineer or inventor who came up with the initial idea. This includes those who will sell it, market it, pay for it, make it, work on it and ship it – everyone in a company usually, and the more aligned the effort, often the better the outcome.

Once we have initiated the product and more or less decided it is possible to make it, we must move to the next steps of actually designing it. This too is another gateway the product must pass through, and many do not make it through this next stage. In the next installment, we’ll look at the design stage and see the process in which the refinement of an idea leads to an actual product. We will see the pitfalls ahead as we run this gauntlet to get products to market – or not.
Richard Halem from Creative Management Associates calls and asks me for help. He has a group flying into JFK tomorrow and he wants me to escort them and their equipment through customs. And then make sure they are tended to here in New York before they fly on to Saint Louis for the first stop of their US tour. The band is called Nektar and they are riding a hit album in Germany with the album, *Remember the Future*, moving up the Billboard charts. They are signed to Bellaphon Records in Germany and are licensed to Passport Records (a division of Sire Records) in the States. A simple task for me; I have done this before.

Nektar is a progressive rock band from England but based in Germany back in the day. They would
become one of the more well-known bands of the genre, and have been playing, with various lineups, from 1969 until the present.

Early afternoon the next day I run up to CMA and meet Richard Halem for some float money, then I taxi over to JFK to meet the group and road crew in the International Arrival terminal. We gather their luggage and I give band member Derek “Mo” Moore cab fare and load them into a taxi heading to the Holiday Inn on West 57th street in Manhattan. Then I gather up the road crew and we taxi over to the cargo area to get the band's equipment. The road crew are a crusty-looking lot with exceptionally long and unruly hair, beards, and hippie-type patches all over their jeans. They seem okay; there are five of them. Three are British; Paul Higgins handling the stage, Pete Lango and Rab Murdock always scrambling up ladders hanging and focusing lights. The other two are Vinny Schmidt the sound man, always looking sharp with his long blond hair, striking blue eyes, and leather bell bottom pants. Then there is Tommy Jung, who looks like a scruffy, intellectual professor [you mean like Larry Schenbeck in his younger days? – Ed.] or grad student. Those two are German.

Things are moving along and the paperwork is in order. An air-ride tractor-trailer rig (or "saddle schlepper" as the Germans called it) has come from St. Louis to pick up the equipment and will be used for the whole tour. Two drivers were hired to split the driving (there will be some long overnight hauls).

The crew starts unloading the gear from the plane and it smells like curry. WTF? I walk into the belly of the jet and it is like a Pakistani restaurant. The equipment is being loaded off and it smells too. I ask roadie Tommy Jung why they went with Pakistan Airlines, for freight. He said that airline, as opposed to Pan Am or Lufthansa, usually had the best price. “And the smell,” I ask? and Tommy says we’re not worried and it will air out. “I hope so!” I answered but I am not so sure. As it worked out, he was right. You never knew what you’d encounter as a rock and roll road manager, but guitars and amps reeking of curry was a first.

We are about an hour into the load out when a Port Authority police car came to a screeching halt next to the semi, lights strobing. Two P.A. cops have their hands on their guns as they jump out of the squad car. What the hell? I think, and I step up to them. Seeing me a clean-cut although long haired dude, they accepted me as the spokesman. It was either Vinnie Schmidt or Pete Lango who handed me the paperwork. The P.A. cops checked it out and then went into the cargo hold of the plane and checked the equipment.

After ten minutes or so they said we could continue unloading. Everyone is relaxed now, and I asked them what caused their reaction. The older cop said, “we were watching the unloading on the closed circuit [security] TV and you guys looked like drug smugglers coming off the plane...it was too obvious-looking, we had to check it out.” “Really?” “Yeah most of the hash smuggled into the US comes from Pakistan.” “But these guys flew out of Frankfurt!” “We know that now,” the policeman answered.

With that over with and the plane cargo bay finally empty the crew starts loading the truck. It was a lot of equipment. The lighting and special effects filled up the truck's trailer. Nektar put on a big show which in those days was rare, with the exception of maybe Pink Floyd. One could see the band knew what they were doing; their loading procedure was systematic, with attention paid to weight, load, and space. They finished late in the afternoon, closed the trailer door and the truck drove out for an overnight drive to St. Louis.

We flagged down two taxis and the band and I made our way into Manhattan. I got the boys checked
in and I call Derek (“Mo”) to have everyone to come down to the hotel’s restaurant coffee shop. We move some tables together and, in a few minutes, everyone is there. We have the tables close together with Mo sitting next to me. We order dinner and beers. It is on me, I tell them (I have float money for expenses). Even though I had briefly met everyone earlier, Mo goes around the table introducing everyone, telling me their names and jobs.

There are four band members. Derek “Mo” Moore (bass) and Roye Albrighton (lead guitar and lead singer) are both over six feet tall which is very tall for British men. Allan “Taff” Freeman (keys) is Scottish but hasn't been there for a long time. Ron Howden (drums) has a sly smile but was nice enough. Mick Brockett is the lighting technician and is considered a band member. He is an artist for sure. Because of his load in and set up requirements he must travel with the road crew. His light show is unique and an important and definitely a big part of Nektar’s show. The band is English but has been living in Germany (in the Darmstadt area) for over two years.

They have all ((band and crew) paid their dues and worked hard to get to this point. There is a feeling among them, a commitment to the mission. No question that this is where they want to be. It is a good family feeling and one you cannot fake.

Mo starts to fill me in on their situation. There are becoming a really big group in Europe. Record sales over there are significant and in Germany their album has gone gold. Their album sales here in the states are also good. There is a strong buzz about them, and they are moving up the Billboard charts. It is their time, their shot and they were not going to fu*k it up.

With Mo sitting next to me I asked him why as an Englishman he lives in Germany. In short, he answers, “In the UK there are tons of rock bands and not enough gigs to sustain Nektar. In Germany, there isn’t as much competition and being British also gives us a cachet.” Of course, it went unsaid that they had to be really good to take advantage of that.

Ron Powell is their American manager. He is a successful midwestern promoter (Panther
Productions, based in St. Louis). Richard Halem of CMA is the booking agent. The road manager for
the upcoming tour is Mary Ann. She is Ron’s right hand and takes care of everything, so Ron wants
her to be the tour manager for the US gigs. Kind of makes sense; sure, she has no experience, but
she is smart and efficient, she can learn. Besides Ron is the promoter of record for many of the
concert dates. “So, what’s the big deal,” he says with the bravado and misconception of someone
who has never toured with a band.

Next day late morning I meet the boys in the hotel lobby and get them checked out. I hail three taxis
and we load up and head for the airport. Once there I get them to the gate and board them onto the
plane. I am done, it seems, nice guys, too bad I could not do the tour with them. I wish ’em well and I
grab a taxi home.

That evening Mo calls me and has some questions about load-in problems they are encountering. If it
is not clear to you yet, Mo is the group’s leader and deals with their business (money, gigs record
companies, and promotion). Musically they are more democratic.

Early next afternoon Mo calls again about equipment problems and tells me of the frustration of
explaining to Mary Ann their touring needs. She is in her normal mode of gatekeeper for Ron. She
does not know the difference between a legitimate request and an unnecessary one. The boys are
getting frustrated.

They are set up in the old Ambassador Theatre in downtown St. Louis near the Golden Arch. There is
a lot to do. All the equipment runs on European voltage and transformers must be used to convert
everything to US voltage. That can create a buzzing sound in the gear, so that must be worked out.
There are many adjustments and fixes that must happen. When that is done, then rehearsal starts to
further ferret out any other bugs or needed fixes. This is actually a good way to ramp up for the
coming tour.

Mo calls again the next afternoon and we go over some of his questions and then I say, “look, I like
you guys, a lot, but if you are having these kinds of problems you should hire me to solve them. You
know I’d only been hired to get you into the country and on to St. Louis.” He pauses for a second and
says, “you’re right, let me see what I can do,” and hangs up.

Mo and the guys know this, but they do not have a say so about it. Ron has made the choice. Mo and
the crew already know that if I was their road manager the tour would go more smoothly. They have
seen me work and they know that I am their best chance for navigating tour issues and for
representing the band.

About five hours later Richard Halem calls and says, “can you go to St. Louis tomorrow?” “Sure,
what happened to Mary Ann; I thought she was the road manager?” “She slept with Roye.” WTF?
“The whole band insisted to Ron that she was unfit to be road manager and that you had to be
hired.” Intimacy with a band member is unprofessional and makes it very awkward for everyone
else. Never mind that it was a brief moment of boozy passion. It was a fight, but Ron ultimately had
to cave in.

Some things are meant to be. Early next morning I hopped on a flight to Saint Louis.
Earlier this month I watched the Met’s free streaming presentation of Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*; these nightly broadcasts are a generous, welcome gift to a pandemic-bound world. Yet as I watched, I couldn’t help thinking of Neal Zaslaw’s notorious essay, “Mozart As a Working Stiff.” In it, he argued that Mozart’s creative activities were motivated “most often [by] his need for cold, hard cash, of which he was perpetually short.”

Some of Zaslaw’s colleagues objected to this line of thought, but he got it right. In the 18th century, music was still a *craft*. Like bread, it was best baked fresh every morning. Composers spent their lives chasing after commissions, cultivating patrons, meeting deadlines.

As a pioneering freelancer in Vienna’s merciless gig economy, Mozart at first found himself in great demand as private teacher, concertizer, composer. For a while he had it all: solid income, servant, carriage, posh apartments. Then, Zaslaw tells us,

*Austria fell into a foolish war with Turkey, the economy slid into a depression, and many of Mozart’s noble patrons were either at the front or hiding on their country estates. The theaters were closed, many musicians were let go, and Viennese musical life declined precipitously.*

As the depression dragged on, Mozart fell into serious debt, although by 1791 he was clawing his way back. That spring he began sketching out *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)*, a German comic opera that would be enormously successful. In July he interrupted work on it to dash off *La clemenza di Tito*, an old-fashioned *opera seria*, for the coronation of Leopold II as King of Bohemia. Its organizers wanted an early September performance, so he had to work fast. (Contrary to legend,
Mozart was not an especially speedy composer.) But the money was okay, and he spotted an opportunity to bond with the new administration.

Mozart wouldn’t have chosen Tito as a subject himself. Its antiquated libretto had little in common with the fast-paced comic operas he had made with Lorenzo Da Ponte. Court poet Caterino Mazzolà was brought in to modernize the book, shortening it and inserting duets and ensembles; Mozart himself added three lavish ceremonial scenes.

It wasn’t enough. Two of the three principal characters remain nearly unplayable, and the convoluted plot creaks along to an altogether predictable conclusion. In theory, the title role of Tito (Titus), emperor of Rome, attempts to furnish a classical model for wise, just and beneficent tyrants. In practice, Tito’s virtuous speech and behavior make him thoroughly boring: since he’s already perfect, he can’t possibly undergo any character development.

Anti-heroine Vitellia, daughter of deposed emperor Vitellius, wants to become empress herself, so she asks her lover Sesto (Sextus) to murder Tito, his friend. Torn between love for Vitellia and his bond with Tito, Sesto rips into the best music of the evening, the stunning aria “Parto, Parto.” It’s still a favorite for mezzo-sopranos who want to show us what they’ve got. (Yes, it’s a trouser role; click here for translation.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqoYqgqg5ZQ

The Met production I watched—featuring the beautiful and talented Elīna Garanča, above—is not itself a train wreck. It’s well-cast, well-sung, and mercifully short, at least by operatic standards. But it doesn’t catch fire until Sesto delivers “Parto,” and only fitfully afterwards.

The greater tragedy of Tito is that it laid waste to Mozart’s health. Late that August, he traveled to Prague for the premiere and fell ill. Returning to Vienna, he quickly resumed a hectic professional life (details here). By the end of November he had been confined to bed, unable to finish yet another commission, the Requiem. He died on December 5.

Watching Tito reawakened my curiosity about Idomeneo, an opera seria Mozart had composed ten years earlier. So I did some research last week, relying heavily on landmark studies by Daniel Heartz and Nicholas Till. At the very least, I hoped to discover what others already knew: that Idomeneo offers as rewarding an experience for modern audiences as any other of Mozart’s top-shelf efforts.

Short answer: yes, absolutely.

Long answer: better brush up on your Greek mythology.

Idomeneo belongs to a group of works called sacrifice dramas, in which the protagonist vows to make a painful human sacrifice to appease a wrathful deity. For Greek tragedians, nothing was more dramatic—and more theatrically useful—than ritual murder, especially if it involved blood kin. Every doomed protagonist’s step bore stageworthy fruit: first, he or she painfully anticipated their foul deed; then they committed the deed itself; finally, protagonist and surviving family members found themselves wracked by guilt forever. Such guilt was both communal (= public shaming) and personal; in the latter case, pursuit by snake-haired Furies (= Eumenides, Erinyes) was a strong possibility.

These days we may be more familiar with sacrifice narratives from the Old Testament—Abraham and Isaac, Jephtha—but for Euripides, the multi-generational travails of the House of Atreus provided
source material for a wealth of tragedies. The handful that concern us here relate to King Agamemnon’s daughters Iphigenia and Electra. In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Agamemnon, becalmed in northern Greece with his fleet, vows to sacrifice his daughter if the gods grant favorable winds, blowing his armies towards Troy. She becomes a willing victim, exhorting the chorus to dance around the altar on her behalf.

In a later, alternative ending, a mountain hind miraculously replaces Iphigenia at the crucial moment; the goddess Diana carries her off to *Tauris in Scythia*. Euripides constructed a whole new play, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, from that. Heartz noted a “bitter irony” in the conditions of her rescue: “as high priestess of Diana in a barbarian kingdom, Iphigenia is forced to perform human sacrifices.”

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. That’s our opera for next time, Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride*, an absolute masterpiece (not being sarcastic!) from 1779, two years before Mozart composed *Idomeneo*. Obviously Greek tragedy was in the air; Heartz points to several places where Mozart modeled his work after Gluck. The younger composer had lived in Paris, had read Fénelon’s *Télémaque* (a prime source for the Idomeneo story), and was personally close to F. M. von Grimm, the Parisian critic who championed it for operatic treatment, praising its potential for “passion and movement . . . interesting spectacle [and] strong and pathetic situations.”

And that’s how Mozart came to write a new, serious, Italian opera heavily influenced by French antecedents. It draws upon ancient myths in a modern (Enlightenment) manner, fulfilling all of Grimm’s directives. The composer took enormous pains, revising things right up until the opening and then afterwards. You can learn more here (or better yet, from Heartz and Till). See the synopsis here.

Several good audio-only recordings of *Idomeneo* exist. In this space I’m strongly recommending a new live staging from Madrid: Opus Arte OABD7276D. This is the *Idomeneo* I would use to introduce a friend to this particular opera. It re-imagines its characters not as classical Greeks nor as Mozart’s contemporaries, but as refugees and war-weary soldiers in the 21st-century Mediterranean Basin. The father-son conflict between Idomeneo and his son Idamante becomes part of an inter-generational struggle between those whose lives were shaped by war and those who now hunger for peace. The big choral scenes—another innovation borrowed from Gluck—ring truer in this staging than any other I’ve seen. Director Robert Carsen spoke at length about his vision:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWZ5-ik_YdA

Does every scene, every aria, function equally well in this bit of Regietheater? More often than not, I think. Carsen also pulls off a couple of coups de théâtre that will take your breath away. These touches work partly because Mozart and his librettist Varesco had already distanced their work from its classical Greek roots. The Enlightenment’s humane attitudes gave a new energy and deepened perspective to the old stories' emotional conflicts. At every turn, *Idomeneo* emphasizes compassion over logic and absolutism. New community and family ties, exemplified in the marriage of Ilia (a Trojan prisoner of war) and Idamante (a Greek conqueror), triumph over old allegiances and unthinking adherence to nation and caste.

Here Carsen’s big themes—war and the human toll it exacts—get strong support from staging details that provide subtext: a trickle of small gestures, reactions, and subtle “business” make the storytelling more consistent and natural. It becomes clear, for example, that the soldiers plainly despise their captives. They follow Idamante’s orders only because he’s in charge. Likewise, Elektra’s eventual descent into madness results from PTSD-induced paranoia and her mania for
vengeance. She too is pursued by Furies and cannot overcome them.

Because the cast is well-matched and equally strong as singers and actors, it's difficult to single out exceptional individual performances. (In a review posted on this page, I make more detailed observations.) Conductor Ivor Bolton's crisp, propulsive reading shows off the gorgeous wind writing sprinkled throughout the score. (Mozart had at his disposal the famed Mannheim Orchestra, then resident in Munich.) I was glad they used Mozart's 1786 recasting of Idamante as a tenor rather than the 1781 soprano (= castrato) version; any production that emphasizes 21st-century naturalism but reverts to a trouser role would have struck a false note. Also wisely cut were two arias for Idomeneo's confidant Arbace, originally played by a longtime member of the company; they impede the action and offer nothing essential to the story.

Sound and picture are exemplary. Two trailers for the video are available on YouTube; neither adequately conveys the theatrical power of this production's lighting and scenic design. It needs to be viewed on the biggest screen in your home.

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

Header image: Cambridge students--all men--costumed as Eumenides for an 1885 University production of Aeschylus' drama (public domain).
I had thought that the intervening time between Part One and Part Two of these pieces on the great Manchester band, Elbow, would bring about greater familiarity with their recent works, but despite much listening, I remain hung up on their 2014 album The Take Off and Landing of Everything. Also, I’ve written myself into a corner – theirs is a kind of music in which nothing shouts at me, “You have to write about this!” and yet, I want to communicate some of what I find so compelling about the band. (If I were in it, I’d be very flattered.) I want to proclaim it as “no big deal” music, and in the regard, and while it is in fact no big deal, that in itself is a big deal. There’s nothing that leaps out, except everything – but also nothing.

What I mean to say is that no single thing in the music just has to make itself known to the listener – unlike, say, my fave band of all time, the Fabs. With the Beatles, millions of critics or otherwise have found so much to write about. And every element of most every album leaps out. Elbow are more like a really psychically-comfortable jacket in which you know you look so great in it you don’t have to think about it. It just is.

So, anyway, enough of this nonsense:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSLzZJ9vLfi
Antenna up and out into New York
Somewhere in all that talk is all the answers
And oh, my giddy aunt, New York can talk
It's the modern Rome where folk are nice to Yoko

Oh my God, New York can talk
Somewhere in all that talk is all the answers
Everybody owns the great ideas
And it feels like there's a big one 'round the corner

It's melodic and anthemic. And I love the reference to “where folks are nice to Yoko.” (Maybe there's just a certain kind of sentimental person who loves the love between Ono and Lennon - and that alone is enough.)

There seems to be a consensus view that The Take Off... is a darker album than the later Little Fictions or the recent Giants of All Sizes. I don’t hear it. Maybe it's just my natural obtuseness for lyrics. Then again, there's this, from "My Sad Captains":

Another sunrise with my sad captains
With who I choose to lose my mind
And if it's all we only pass this way but once
What a perfect waste of time

I can see how one might construe these lyrics as negative. But I hear them as very positive, and grown-up - words to live by.

The departure of founding drummer Richard Jupp after The Take Off and Landing of Everything seems to have left a small hole in the band, not quite made up for by Elbow hiring a completely able session drummer - a small hole, but a hole nonetheless. Their arrangements have gotten a touch more conservative, as if the sometimes-brilliant arrangements of the tunes on the albums with Jupp are his work. Which they might well be. If the drums on The Take Off... are like Chris Frantz on the Talking Heads’ Remain in Light, the drums on the later albums are more like Phil Collins in mid-period Genesis. They’re not as broken-down, as elemental.

As to my increasingly confounded frustration with having to write about this music - well, it was my decision. I’m trying to communicate, using the most imperfect medium, my enthusiasm for something that exists in a perfect medium. Elbow perfectly encapsulate the problem, as if I’m having to dance about architecture. This is art-rock of the strongest kind that we now get in today’s music. (Not like Gentle Giant or Yes, but almost - just not about the art aspect; like the Beatles, it’s just who they are.) It could be the work of one man - nothing stands out, except all of it; all of it outstanding.

Header image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Drew de F Fawkes.
Brooklyn-born Patricia Andrzejewski wanted to be an opera singer. Instead, she ended up as one of the most successful female rock stars of all time.

She’d started singing lessons as a young child. Her marriage at 19 to Dennis Benatar took care of the problem of an ungainly last name, but by then she was distracted from music and focused on “real” life. Good thing she went to a Liza Minnelli concert in 1971, a performance that she found so inspiring that she re-committed to music.

Whenever she could, she sang open mics in Manhattan clubs - particularly Catch a Rising Star, where the manager invited her back and offered to manage her singing career. Harry Chapin hired her for his musical The Zinger at a small theater in Long Island, and she landed some commercial jingles. By the time Chrysalis Records signed her in 1978, Benatar had paid her dues and was ready for the big time.

Her debut album was In the Heat of the Night (1979), which eventually reached the No. 12 spot on the charts. It also provided a strong first single, “Heartbreaker,” a cover of a song recorded the year before by British blues-rock singer Jenny Darren.

In fact, the album consists mostly of covers. “No You Don’t,” by the British glam rock band Sweet, proved that Benatar had no fear when it came to rocking out. You can also hear evidence of her training: Her intonation is excellent. Among Benatar’s fellow musicians at these sessions was Neil Giraldo on lead guitar and keyboards. He would go on to be not only her lifelong musical partner and primary songwriter, but also her husband. Other members of the band are Scott St. Clair Sheets on
rhythm guitar, Roger Capps on bass, and Glen Alexander Hamilton on drums.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5J2DSMh9s94

The following year, Benatar released Crimes of Passion (1980), which climbed all the way to No. 2 and stayed there for five weeks. Radios worldwide couldn’t get enough of the single “Hit Me with Your Best Shot,” by Canadian songwriter Ed Schwarz. The album won Benatar a Grammy Award for Best Female Rock Performance.

Joining the band for this album was drummer Myron Grombacher, who continued to work with Benatar for almost 20 years. Otherwise the lineup is the same as the previous album; Keith Olsen was the producer.

Although Benatar, Giraldo, and Capps wrote several of the songs together, one of the most interesting tracks is the cover of Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights.” This shows quite a different side of Benatar’s voice, the gentle, sweeping motions of the melody cradled in soft layers of synth.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6o96bRMJ7z4

The Grammys gave Benatar another nod for the single “Fire and Ice,” an original composition from the album Precious Time (1981). Olsen produced again. For the first time, most of the songs are original, written primarily by Giraldo.

Benatar shares compositional credit for the story-song “Evil Genius.” Grombacher’s drums contribute particularly to the character of this song, and again Benatar’s exacting intonation is impressive. The arrangement is fleshed out by a chorus of four sax players.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihfGdnOY9QI

Besides being the year that Benatar married Giraldo, 1982 was the release year for the album Get Nervous. Many of the album’s songs were collaborations of Giraldo and hitmaker Billy Steinberg, who co-wrote “Like a Virgin,” “True Colors,” and other juggernauts. But it was D.L. Byron who wrote the album’s big hit, “Shadows of the Night,” originally recorded by for the 1980 movie Times Square. Benatar won her third Grammy for her cover.

One of the Giraldo/Steinberg numbers, “I Want Out,” is noteworthy for Benatar’s hard-rocking vocal performance, which is arguably more interesting than the song itself. That smooth, nimble voice from “Evil Genius” is now a cracking, growling force.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CvM8Wlq7J4

By this point, Benatar was on a roll, dropping annual albums that consistently performed well on the charts. In 1983 she made her only live record, Live from Earth (important for including the studio track “Love Is a Battlefield”), followed by another studio album, Tropico, in 1984 (providing the smash single “We Belong”). Seven the Hard Way was released the following year. Its biggest single,
“Invincible,” was originally used on the soundtrack of the film *The Legend of Billie Jean*. The song also garnered a Grammy nomination.

It’s fun to hear Benatar attempt Motown on *Seven the Hard Way* as she covers a Four Tops song, “7 Rooms of Gloom,” which was the opening track on side B of the LP. Obviously, you need more personnel for a decent Motown sound, so she brought in the Uptown Horns, Donnie Nossov on bass, and over a dozen backup singers. Benatar really seems to glory in this material.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS0UFVo2nE

Benatar finally slowed the pace of her career a bit, waiting a couple of years to record *Wide Awake in Dreamland* (1988). She was itching to branch out from rock, so her next effort, *True Love* (1991), focused on the blues. The group Roomful of Blues provided brass for these mostly up-tempo “jump blues” songs.

A nice example is the cover of B.B. King’s “Payin’ the Cost to Be the Boss.” Benatar delivers with lots of humor and a solid groove:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBvRDt1E-X8

*Gravity’s Rainbow* (1993) was Benatar’s final recording for Chrysalis. Although sales were less than stellar, the single “Everybody Lay Down” did very well, reaching the No. 3 spot in mainstream rock. Produced by Don Gehman, known for his work with John Mellencamp and Stephen Stills, the album is named after a Thomas Pynchon novel, although it’s not clear how the songs relate to that title or the novel itself.

A particularly interesting track from this album is “Disconnected,” which opens with African percussion and quickly becomes a hard-driving head-banger with a touch of Southern, sort of George Thorogood meets Black Sabbath. Giraldo burns rubber on the guitar, and Frank Linx drives pylons into the harmony with his bassline.

After a few years away from the studio, Benatar released *Innamorata* (1997), which barely grazed the Billboard 200. Her most recent album to date is *Go* (2003), produced by Giraldo on the Bel Chiasso label.

Instead of a single drummer on a set, the lineup for *Go* includes four percussionists. There’s also a string section; Giraldo did the arrangements. Strangely, *Go* is not available on any streaming service. However, fans have loaded its tracks onto YouTube. Enjoy them while they remain! For example, the title song is a very heavy rock number that exchanges short vocal phrases with crunching guitar riffs. Without question, Benatar is still at the top of her game on this album.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kOG31GQ9fQ

At age 67, Benatar continues to tour, proving that rock and roll can keep on flowing forever in a strong woman’s veins.
Are 180-Gram Vinyl Records Really Better?

REvolutions Per Minute
Written by J.I. Agnew

Disk records have been around for a while, long before they reached their vinyl form. Since then, vinyl records have been available in different sizes and profiles.

During the mass-manufacturing process, vinyl records are pressed into shape from a “puck” of extruded PVC, using a steam-heated hydraulic press. The exact profile of the records is given by the two stampers, or molds, fitted to the press, on which the two stampers are mounted, one for each side of the record. The final product is trimmed to remove the “flash,” or excess material sneaking out from between the molds. (For a brief explanation of the process, click here. You can also refer to my articles in Copper Issues 92, 93 and 94.

For many decades, the big quest in this sector of manufacturing was to figure out how to optimize the pressing cycle, process parameters, mold geometry and PVC compound, in order to make the thinnest record possible in the shortest possible time without introducing negative side effects. Given that during its heyday the vinyl record was the best-selling consumer medium, the savings in PVC during large manufacturing runs were considerable and the ability to pump out more records per shift would maximize profit.

Some record industry insiders would therefore consider the thinnest records to offer the best value and the machines capable of manufacturing them quickly as representing the epitome of quality.
Nowadays, however, it is the thick, heavyweight 180-gram pressings that are regarded as the better quality item.

But, are 180-gram records really better?

**Do They Have Deeper Grooves?**

One popular misconception is that thicker records must have deeper grooves. They don’t. Groove depth is set during the cutting of the master lacquer disks and is ultimately limited by the thickness of the lacquer coating on the aluminum substrate on these disks. Every lacquer master disk ever made has had a very similar coating thickness, so there was no way to cut deeper grooves.

The maximum groove depth that can be cut on a lacquer master disk is nowhere near deep enough to even remotely approach producing a corresponding groove in the final vinyl disk that would be deep enough to break through to the other side of the record. Because of this fact, even on the thinnest records ever made, the thickness of the final product (the pressed vinyl record) never imposed any limits on possible groove depth.

In fact, even if it were possible to cut deeper grooves than permitted by existing lacquer master disks, the playback cartridge cantilever would most likely bottom out long before the grooves on the opposite side of the record were disturbed by excessive depth. Moreover, the maximum permissible groove depth for playback cartridge compatibility, as defined by the standards documents pertaining to record manufacturing, is much less than the maximum depth possible on lacquer disks. Therefore, in practice, lacquer disks are not the limiting factor either.

Moreover, the vast majority of records available are not even close to using up the maximum groove depth permissible. Deeper grooves do offer sonic advantages, up to a certain point, as long as they remain compatible with available playback cartridges. But most records in existence have shallower grooves than what would offer the best sound quality.

This is primarily due to the fact that deeper grooves are also wider, and as such, they take up more real estate on the record surface, which greatly reduces the playing time per side of the record. Mainstream record labels have traditionally preferred marketing over sound quality and the buying public was generally assumed to be morons who didn’t know any better and were not able to hear the difference in sound quality, but wanted to feel that they were getting more music for their money. Audiophiles aside, this assumption was sadly a rather accurate observation of market trends.

Also, a double LP of excellent sound quality is much more expensive to produce than a single LP with double the duration per side and much inferior sound quality. But the single LP would sell better, to an audience that was indeed mostly oblivious to sound quality concerns anyway. The single-LP version would necessarily need to have much shallower grooves and perhaps much more restricted low frequencies and dynamics, along with a poorer signal-to-noise ratio.

Yet, from the late 1950s up to the late 1980s, when disk mastering equipment manufacturers went back to only manufacturing truly profitable items such as guided-missile systems and microphones, the main focus of this industry was how to fit more playing time per side of a record. A glance through the relevant research papers from this 30-year period reveals that improving sound quality was not among the research questions. Increased playing time, loudness and automation to eliminate the need for too much skill in the mastering process (highly skilled and potentially irreplaceable reasonably-paid professionals were already becoming unfashionable back then), were what everyone in the record-manufacturing business was after. Which is how a small niche market, predominantly concerned with sound quality, developed in parallel, but this is a different story for
another issue.

Deeper grooves also wear out the cutting stylus faster, so the lower-priced disk mastering services prefer keeping their expenses to a minimum by cutting shallower grooves and keeping the stylus in use longer.

So, why did the industry go back to making thicker records if it wasn’t for being able to support deeper grooves?

Are They Flatter?

Some claim that 180-gram pressings are flatter. But, in fact, thicker records need more time to cool, which is one of the most important stages for creating a flat record. The vast majority of pressing plants nowadays are very unlikely to put more time into the process, apart from the very few facilities that specialize in quality (at a premium that mainstream record labels are guaranteed not to want to pay).

So, in practice, thinner records are more likely to leave the factory in a flat state than thick ones.

Thicker records that have not been allowed adequate cooling time are not going to be flat to begin with and they certainly won’t be getting any better after leaving the factory.

Once a record leaves the factory, it is subjected to mishandling, extreme temperatures, improper storage and the retail environment, before reaching the safety of the home of a caring collector. Even if a record leaves the factory perfectly flat, it is very uncertain if it will remain as flat for long. Thicker records may prove a bit more durable, if they are made with due care to begin with, so they may have better chances of surviving the journey from the factory to the buyer’s home. This may be the only valid technical advantage of 180-gram records, yet it is not often found in the marketing hype.

Better Playback Angle Geometry?

Another question is whether the slight difference in record thickness would raise the playback cartridge enough (less than 0.5 mm?) to materially change the vertical tracking angle (VTA), stylus rake angle (SRA) or tonearm statics (the fact that a sloping structure behaves differently in a dynamic environment than the same structure without the slope, and there’s at least nine inches from the tonearm pivot to the stylus tip). The difference in angle created by a thicker record can be calculated and it is small. Is it audible? Well, the same lacquer master disk can be used to produce stampers to be used on two different presses, one pressing thin records and the other one pressing thick ones. The difference would be small, if audible at all; in my experience, much smaller than the difference between records of the same weight and thickness pressed using a different PVC compound (as would happen when stampers produced from the same lacquer masters are sent to different pressing plants in different countries; for example, for an international release).

The difference in sound between different PVC compounds is due to the elastic deformation effects of the record yielding under the playback stylus tip. Different PVC compounds produce records having different physical properties. In theory, any change in material thickness would also change the physical properties, but in most practical cases, the effects of the platter mat resilience will most probably dominate the resonant behavior of such a system to a much greater extent than a 0.5mm thickness change. The audio experimenter preparing to discover and document PVC compound and record thickness effects had better be prepared to begin with a massively rigid, non-ringing platter that does not require a resilient mat.
Despite all of the above, the main selling point of 180-gram records has more to do with human psychology than anything related to sound or music: a heavier object better serves to fulfill that fundamental human need to feel that you are getting more for your money. In this case, more plastic.

Buying records essentially boils down to the simple fact that it is something we enjoy. It makes us feel good. If buying a 180-gram record makes you feel better than having a lighter one, then there is no reason not to go for it.

Finally, there can be no harm in a record being heavier than it needs to be. At least, until you decide to move and feel safer carrying your prized record collection yourself, at which point you will probably explain to your physiotherapist that perhaps thinner records are fine after all...!

*Header image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons/Ryankusumojr](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Record_collection.png).*
If you love the up-tempo, jangly blues and stride piano of Fats Waller and Fletcher Henderson, don’t forget to give thanks to Jelly Roll Morton, who practically invented that sound. And he would have been the first person to tell you that.

Born in a Creole neighborhood in New Orleans in about 1890, Morton got the salacious nickname “Jelly Roll” when he was a teen playing piano and singing naughty songs in brothels. His family name was LaMothe, but reportedly he adopted his stepfather’s last name to save his mother from the shame of having a son who played jazz. In the first decades of the 20th century, that new genre was considered as dangerous as rock and roll would be in the 1950s.

He toured first in minstrel shows and then in vaudeville, composing constantly and wowing the audience with his tricky finger work and energetic style. His original tunes like “Jelly Roll Blues” and “King Porter Stomp” provided inspiration to a host of other musicians. Whether on his own or with a variety of ensembles that he put together or joined over the years, he made dozens of 78 RPM discs.

When Morton signed with RCA Victor and moved to New York, he thought he had it made. But not a lot of New York musicians were interested in blending with his particular sound, and his records didn’t sell well. Victor dropped him in 1931. After a few rough years, he moved down to Washington, DC. There he met ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, who did a series of interviews and recordings with him in 1938. Later that year, he was stabbed nearly to death. He never completely recovered, and he died in 1941, just after relocating to Los Angeles.

Given his short life and his unusual style, we’re lucky to have as many recordings of him as we do. Enjoy these eight great tracks by Jelly Roll Morton.
1. Track: “Big Fat Ham”  
   Album: *Jelly Roll Morton and His Orchestra*  
   Label: National Record Exchange  
   Year: 1923

This is Morton’s earliest known recording; the poor technical quality is worth overlooking for its historical value. Jelly Roll and His Orchestra was a six-man band with varying personnel, and it’s not always clear who’s on which recording; we do know that those distinctive woodblocks, which make it sound like somebody’s dancing, are the work of Jasper Taylor, who was also known for playing washboard and xylophone on the minstrel and Wild West circuits. Morton provides piano harmony, although the brightness of the brass on this primitive recording tend to overwhelm his more mellow instrument.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr0tpkfyueU

2. Track: “My Little Dixie Home”  
   Artist: Jelly Roll Morton Trio  
   Label: RCA Victor  
   Year: 1929

Every few months, Morton would make a handful of discs with whoever he could find to play with him. Thus the Jelly Roll Morton trio was not a well-established group, but a couple of guys (Barney Bigard on clarinet and Zutty Singleton on drums) who were willing to come into the studio. Other group names Morton (or the record companies) used in the 1920s included The Stomp Kings, Kings of Jazz, and the Steamboat Four.

The balance is still a long way from ideal on this 1929 recording, but you can get a much better sense of Morton’s stylistic effects – the syncopated accents, the little glissandi as decoration, the very separate roles of the right and left hands, as if they’re played by two different people.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcI-geNOx2c

3. Track: “Strokin’ Away”  
   Artist: Jelly Roll Morton and His Red Hot Peppers  
   Label: RCA Victor  
   Year: 1930

One group that Morton recorded with consistently for a few years was the Red Hot Peppers. This was a seven-piece band grounded by the rhythm section of Morton on piano, Bill Beason on drums, Bernard Addison on guitar, and Billy Taylor (not related to the famous pianist) on bass. The buoyant clarinet solo is courtesy of Albert Nicholas.

Besides tickling the ivories, Morton also composed most of their music. His solo starting at 1:40 is surprisingly restrained, limited to the upper registers, the perfect contrast to the full-band sound. The RCA Victor quality is immeasurably better than that of the smaller companies.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZs5zyNzFj4
4. Track: “Fickle Fay Creep”
   Artist: Jelly Roll Morton and His Red Hot Peppers
   Label: RCA Victor
   Year: 1930

Although it was still released as a Red Hot Peppers disc, this track is just a duo with Morton on piano and Bill Beason on drums. It’s a great chance to hear Morton’s expressive syncopation. A “creep” is similar to what was called a “crawl” in stride piano: an easy-going slower-tempo tune. Morton seems to have been particularly fond of this composition, since he recorded it several times, including once under the title “Soap Suds.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbFOlyM8gFU

5. Track: “Never Had No Lovin’”
   Artist: Wingy Manone and His Orchestra
   Label: Special Editions Records
   Year: 1934

Always looking for work, Morton sometimes sat in with other people’s groups. Wingy Manone was a trumpeter and bandleader from New Orleans (he was called “Wingy” because he lost part of an arm when he was a kid, but he used his prosthetic so skillfully that many people never knew). He specialized in hot jazz, so there was a lot of crossover with Morton’s style. This is a top-notch group of musicians, including the great Artie Shaw on clarinet.

Morton provides background harmony, which you can hear best when the winds drop out during Frank Victor’s guitar solo at 0:49. Morton gets his own 32 bars starting at 1:53.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3u0orB0nJY

6. Track: “Original Rags (Joplin)”
   Artist: Jelly Roll Morton
   Label: Vogue
   Year: 1939

Although Morton did play and compose many rags, this is his only recording of music by Scott Joplin (1868-1917), whose name is now synonymous with ragtime. This is a five-theme medley published in 1899; Joplin did not name the individual rags. Morton has an easygoing style when he plays these, quite a different energy from his jump and stride recordings.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fx7rETfy5qM

7. Track: “Buddy Bolden’s Blues”
   Artist: Jelly Roll Morton
   Label: General Records
   Year: 1939

Even in his earliest days performing in a brothel, Morton loved to sing while he played piano. Here’s
a fine example from late in his career. (If you’re a serious ragtime fan, you might know Hugh Laurie’s recording of this song.) The tune is Morton’s tribute to cornetist Buddy Bolden, one of the founding fathers of New Orleans ragtime-based jazz back when it was still called “jass” at the turn of the 20th century.

Morton had a strong, clear baritone with the tight vibrato typical of his era. In the last verse he mentions Frankie Dusen, a trombonist who was also important in the New Orleans scene. The piano solo at the end sounds great, but there doesn’t seem to be a digital version of the whole thing. Here’s the longest excerpt available:

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

8. Track: “Swinging the Elks”
   Group: The Morton Seven
   Label: General Records/Tavern Tunes
   Year: 1940

In the 1930s, Hazard E. Reeves was at the forefront of producing jazz and ragtime records in New York. He was a huge fan of Morton’s playing and composing, but he grew tired of the record business before he could release everything Morton had laid down at Reeves Sound Studios. (Reeves moved out to Hollywood, where he was the first to use magnetic stereophonic sound in film.) The “Tavern Tunes” jazz catalog of General Records acquired Morton’s recordings. Here’s one of them.

This band, besides Morton, is Henry “Red” Allen on trumpet, Claude Jones on trombone, Albert Nicholas on clarinet, Eddie Williams on alto sax, Wellman Braud on bass, and Zutty Singleton on drums. “Swinging the Elks” is a fun, high-energy romp.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c18mfDwGl8M
The Rolling Stones in High(ish) Resolution

I’m focusing on several “high resolution” releases by the Rolling Stones from different periods of the band that have just been made available for streaming playback on Qobuz and Tidal. Most of these were released as double CD editions a few years ago, and may have been available for streaming elsewhere, but this is the first time they’ve been made available at anything approaching high resolution sound. And three of the four releases include a generous selection of bonus tracks accompanying the studio versions.
The Rolling Stones - Sticky Fingers (Deluxe Edition)

What more needs to be said about Sticky Fingers? This was the first full studio album following the departure of Brian Jones from the lineup, and the first opportunity for his replacement, Mick Taylor, to really strut his stuff. A period of transition for the Stones, but one of their biggest selling and most memorable albums ever, where the band really stretched their capabilities musically into previously uncharted territory. And certainly Mick Taylor’s kind of jazzy sensibilities really helped shape the overall new sound of the band. Sticky Fingers is top-five in the Stones catalog without a doubt, right up there with Exile on Main Street, Beggars Banquet, and Let It Bleed.

Last year’s release of the 50th Anniversary Edition of Let It Bleed gave me high hopes that the 24/96 streaming version of that record would be the definitive one we’d been waiting for, and hopefully with a plethora of bonus material. No dice — the new master was compressed as hell, and the sound quality wasn’t any improvement over the ABKCO SACDs, which I currently feel are the finest versions that currently exist of that period of the Stones. And the 50th Anniversary Edition came with zero bonus material. Nice.

So how does the new streaming version of Sticky Fingers compare? First of all, any hopes that it would also appear as a 24/96 release was quickly dashed — the Deluxe Edition is only available in 24/44.1, so the argument that these releases are high resolution is marginal at best. And right out of
the gate, my volume maxed at about one/third lower on the scale compared to my typical listening — this release is as compressed (or more!) than the aforementioned *Let It Bleed*. And I thought the sound had a bit of an edgy treble presentation — this isn’t an audiophile experience by any stretch of the imagination. And that’s not to say that the Stones albums from this period were audiophile classics; far from it, but I really feel that if the remastering hadn’t been compressed to death, there’d be a lot more dynamic range. And it wouldn’t have hurt them to attempt to give the new Deluxe Edition a bit more of a liquid midrange presentation.

If you’re a dyed-in-the-wool Stones fan, you probably already have the CDs, so you know that the one reason to get or listen to this set is the pretty generous bonus material. Which includes some alternate versions, as well as some live material from that period of the band — although the CD set includes a full disc of a 1971 live date from Leeds that was originally broadcast on the BBC. That concert footage isn’t present on the streaming release for some curious reason, although the equally compelling live tracks from 1971 at the Roundhouse offer some of the best live Stones sound of that era, probably easily bettering the sound from *Get Your Ya-Yas Out*.

The alternate takes include a version of “Brown Sugar” with Eric Clapton (!) on guitar — which is a really interesting comparison to the more fully fleshed-out album version. There’s an “unplugged” version of “Wild Horses” which doesn’t include the electric guitar solo in the center of the song, but is still very enjoyable. And there are alternate versions of “Can’t You Hear Me Knocking,” which is a kind of proto-alternative to the album version, as well as an extended jam version of “Bitch,” with some really nice Mick Taylor guitar work towards the end of the cut — he really shows what an excellent addition to the band he was. An alternate version of “Dead Flowers” rounds out the studio outtakes. The live tracks from the Roundhouse set all document the current version of the band’s takes on notable tunes from the *Let It Bleed* era, like “Live With Me,” “Honky Tonk Women,” “Love In Vain,” and “Midnight Rambler.” A classic version of “Stray Cat Blues” is thrown in for good measure.

All my listening was done on Qobuz — I’ve been having some recent problems with streaming my Tidal subscription via my music player, Roon. While *Sticky Fingers (Deluxe Edition)* won’t supplant any existing versions of the material strictly in terms of sonics, it’s definitely worth having for the pretty extensive bonus material. Recommended.

Universal Music/Polydor Records, CD (download/streaming from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube)
The Rolling Stones - Some Girls (Deluxe Edition)

1978’s *Some Girls* found the Stones at a point where they were trying to establish to the rock world that they were still relevant; disco was on the airwaves just about everywhere, and punk rock was pushing many mainstream rock acts out of the forefront. Mick Taylor had departed by this point, and new guitarist Ronnie Wood would bring a bit of punk sensibility to the Stones’ overall sound. But the album’s first single, “Miss You” — which is easily one of the best disco songs by any act, ever — would prove to the record-buying public that the Stones could still hang in there with the best of them. While many seem to think that *Some Girls* was quickly thrown together by the group, I think the actual truth of the matter is that the record is probably the last truly, fully-formed album the Stones released. And that was over forty years ago!

Despite the fact that this version is actually much closer to being truly high resolution at 24/88.2, *Some Girls (Deluxe Edition)* still suffers from the same ailments that trouble the *Sticky Fingers* release. The sound quality is anemic and lightweight, with a harsh treble presentation — yeah, I know, it really sucks for true fans. The new edition was remastered by Stephen Marcussen (he handled the remastering chores for a couple of these Deluxe Edition releases) — he got his first job as a janitor at Richard Perry’s Studio 55 in Los Angeles, where he worked his way up through the system and eventually worked on albums over a twenty year period from artists as diverse as Stevie Wonder, REM, Prince, Tom Petty, Frank Zappa, and the Stones. I consider a lot of those albums as...
pretty primo stuff from a standpoint of sound quality from the seventies through the nineties, so I’m basically mystified as to why these remasterings sound as lackluster as they do. Of course, none other than Bob Ludwig remastered *Sticky Fingers*, and it sounds terrible too — I guess there’s something in the water these days.

Of course, the big reason to indulge in listening to these tracks is for the bonus material, which adds a dozen outtakes from the *Some Girls* original sessions, which include old-school type rockers like “Claudine,” “So Young,” “Keep Up Blues,” and “Tallahassee Lassie.” The Stones try their hands again at country-rock with tunes like “Do You Really Think I Care” and “You Win Again,” and of course, Keith gets another vocal turn with the tear-jerker “We Had It All.” All very interesting, but the country-tinged tunes make it pretty clear why “Far Away Eyes” ended up making the cut for the studio release — it’s definitely the strongest of the tracks. The bonus tracks wrap up with the piano-boogie of “Petrol Blues,” which hearkens way back to the Stones’ earlier days.

My biggest disappointment with this Deluxe Edition — strictly from a standpoint of content — is that with all the included bonus material, they chose not to include the extended, disco single version of “Miss You,” which is definitely the definitive version of the song. Oh, well, despite the negatives, if you haven’t heard the bonus material here, this release is still recommended.

Universal Music/Polydor Records, CD (download/streaming from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube)
The Rolling Stones - Tattoo You (Remastered)

1981’s Tattoo You was basically released at a point where the Stones just took a lot of unreleased tunes from albums as far back as Goat’s Head Soup and Black and Blue, and as relatively current as their previous disc, 1980’s Emotional Rescue — and then reworked them to create a new album. Only two new songs, “Neighbors” and “Heaven” were actually recorded for the album; everything else had new vocal tracks and occasional instrumental embellishments added to bring the original tunes up to date. Shockingly, it was the dawn of the MTV era, and Tattoo You was all over the airwaves, with videos for “Start Me Up,” “Hang Fire,” and “Waiting For a Friend” getting prominently featured on the fledgling network. Which helped their record sales immeasurably!

This remastering is strictly that — it’s not a Deluxe Edition, and there’s no bonus content. Bonus content usually consists of unreleased tracks from the original sessions, and with these tracks all being reworked from a variety of albums, that pretty much explains why no bonus material was available for this release. Tattoo You is presented here in 24/44.1 sound for the first time; you’d think that would signal an uptick in the overall sound quality. Unfortunately, that’s not the case; also mastered by Stephen Marcussen, the sound is just as compressed here as the other releases in the series, and the overall sound is earmarked by a very brittle, lightweight quality that has a harsh and overly emphasized treble response. I know the Stones were never known for audiophile quality recordings, and this one really punctuates that impression, regardless of how great an album it is.
from a performance standpoint. YMMV, but personally, I’d pass.

Universal Music/Polydor Records, CD (download/streaming from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube)

The Rolling Stones - Exile On Main Street (Deluxe Edition)

*Exile on Main Street* occupies an unusual position in the Stones catalog; rated by *Rolling Stone* Magazine as number seven on their list of 500 greatest rock albums of all time, it’s widely considered The Rolling Stones’ best album — especially by Stones fans. From an audiophile perspective, however, it’s also regarded as perhaps the worst sounding Stones album of all time. Regardless, it’s still revered by Stones fans as the pinnacle of their creativity. Some of the tracks were culled from the album that preceded it, *Sticky Fingers*; the balance were recorded at a chateau in France that Keith Richards had rented as an escape for the band from England’s brutal tax laws. Apparently, the band owed quite a bit in taxes, and had blown through the money that had been set aside for their increasing tax obligations. They essentially escaped to France to avoid having the British government seize all their assets. The Rolling Stones mobile truck was on site for technical purposes, and members of the band and their entourages all lived in the chateau while the recording took place. By all reports, copious amounts of drugs were ingested by group members during the sessions that often ran into the wee hours. Eventually, some final work was done on the resulting
album during some sessions in Los Angeles.

Often described as a “murky” album, in terms of its sound quality; there’s a ton of information out there that implies that at the time of the original double LP pressing, the vinyl being used by the pressing plant was sourced from recycled materials. And was of exceptionally inferior quality; ground up bits of record labels could be clearly seen in the vinyl pressings. That very well may be, but over the course of almost fifty years of pressing and repressing, then mastering and remastering, I can’t begin to describe how many complaints I’ve heard about the generally abysmal sound quality of just about every reissue of *Exile*. When you take into consideration the sound quality of *Sticky Fingers* — which has never been considered anything approaching audiophile grade, it’s pretty easy to extrapolate that it’s very likely a combination or less than perfect source tapes and poor execution of the LP and/or CD pressing.

The Deluxe Edition contains additional tracks from the original session tapes; they’d been previously released when the CD reissue was released in 2010, but the current version marks the first time they’ve been made available for streaming in anything approaching high resolution sound. Which, unfortunately, is only 24/44.1, and the sound is about on par with the other three releases reviewed here, which means that it’s heavily compressed and exhibits the same harshness of treble shared by the others. I’ve heard from a variety of sources that the best available versions of this record are from SHM in Japan; there’s a CD that sells for about $25, and an SACD that sells for about $60. While I haven’t heard either, reliable sources say they’re the very best you can get, and well worth the asking price, especially to hear this classic album in first-rate sound.

The real reason for listening here is for the ten additional tracks included as bonus materials. I’ve often heard that, if you’re a Stones fan, *Exile* is your favorite album, or you’re not really a Stones fan! And the bonus tracks definitely give you some insight into the development of some of the songs that eventually ended up on the album — it’s a great glimpse into the creative process of the Glimmer Twins. Recommended, in spite of less than perfect sound. With classic, first-rank Rolling Stone tunes like “Rocks Off,” “Rip This Joint,” “Tumbling Dice,” and “Happy,” there’s a lot to like here.

Universal Music/Polydor Records, CD (download/streaming from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube)
Grado Labs was Founded in 1953 by Joseph Grado and has become synonymous with phonograph cartridge excellence and also, over the last 30 years, in the headphone market. John Grado started working for his uncle Joe in the 1960s and eventually took over the company in the 1990s. His sons Jonathan and Matt have now also joined the company, so Grado Labs is currently in its third generation of being a family business, all out of the same Brooklyn factory they started in.

John Grado graciously sat down with me (figuratively, considering the current situation) for this interview.

**John Seetoo:** In another interview, you mentioned that your three reference recordings for checking headphones are *Jazz Party* by Duke Ellington, Eric Clapton’s *Unplugged* and a record by Ella Fitzgerald, *Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie*!

What is it about those specific records that you feel cover the spectrum of music sounds needed to evaluate headphones?

**John Grado:** I feel anyone who has to listen, compare and categorize their findings needs a reference point. Since the beginning these three have been that for me. On Duke’s *Jazz Party* I listen to the xylophone; on Eric’s *Unplugged* it’s the applause and on Ella’s album I listen to her voice. Everyone, I’m sure, has their own system [for evaluation], and these are part of mine.

**JS:** You are a tremendous Beatles fan and Ringo Starr is a friend and Grado headphones owner. Do you ever include any Beatles records in your quality control test listening, and if so, which songs and what specific elements (vocals, guitars, drums, etc.) do you listen for and why?

**JG:** I am a big Beatles fan, have been since the fourth grade when they first visited the United
States. Ringo is an acquaintance; he is a good friend of my best friend of over 60 years, Mark Rivera. Mark and I actually had a Beatles cover band in the fourth grade and Mark is currently Ringo’s musical director and saxophonist for Billy Joel. I truly enjoy the Beatles’ music, [they’re] actually my favorite band, but the songs haven’t worked into my reference listening list.

JS: Do you have your own criteria for tweaking a headphone design if the vinyl (presumably played on a Grado cartridge-equipped turntable) sounds noticeably different from the CD or SACD of the same recording?

JG: When designing a headphone or cartridge we have our techniques of controlling and guiding the design through the process, techniques we’ve learned over many years of working with different materials, shapes and forms. We’ve learned how to control and damp the different resonant frequencies to blend and work well together, [and lower] the noise level. Bottom line, we produce and sell products and sound that we like, and we’re happy to have a customer base that enjoys what we enjoy.

JS: Are there one or several Grado cartridges that you deploy to check your headphones? Also, what other equipment (amp, preamp, et al) comprises your monitoring setup?

JG: We use our Lineage Epoch3 phono cartridge mounted on a Grado Signature tonearm which is mounted on a Micro Seiki turntable. This all feeds into Audio Research electronics and plays through our custom-built speaker design consisting of 32 headphone drivers in each of the two towers. The headphones are driven by a Grado Signature HPA-2 headphone amp.

JS: Audiophile writer and critic Steve Guttenberg is a fan of Grado headphones. He says that all the various speaker formats, such as planar magnetic, dynamic, and electrostatic have headphone equivalents. However, he feels that Grados are the only headphones on the market that one can consider analogous to horn speakers, which he thinks are the reason Grado headphones exhibit the same “live,” open and “immediacy” qualities in music reproduction. The reputation of Grado headphones and their characterization as being excellent for listening to live music and recreating the sense of space for ensemble performances has been echoed by many reviewers. These are also shared traits with horn speakers.

Were there any particular model loudspeakers whose sound influenced the design of Grado headphones?

JG: We are thrilled to have Steve Guttenberg as a fan of our products; it’s always nice knowing our work is appreciated. But, there were no loudspeakers that influenced the design of Grado headphones; it was the sound of live music. The headphones were part of getting recording mixes right under live situations. Joe [Grado], with me as his assistant, did many live recordings and this let us hear what things sound like live and helped us develop what has become known as the Grado sound.

JS: The RS1 was the first Grado headphone model to use wood construction. You have since used cocobolo, jarrah, spruce, mahogany and other woods in manufacturing headphones and cartridges. Are there certain sonic properties that these hardwoods possess, akin to guitar lutherie, that inspires you to try these woods for headphone and cartridge design, or are you first captivated visually by the woods or other qualities, with the design driving the engineering to create the sound?

JG: In 1994 I woke up in the middle of the night and thought, “let’s try wood.” I then started the
journey. Within two days we had built a headphone out of walnut. Why walnut? That was the only wood we happened to have in the shop and we needed to start somewhere. We listened to this headphone and immediately knew we liked what we were hearing, although we didn’t think the final design would be using walnut. We are trial and error types of designers; we get an idea and go to work. Every idea doesn’t work out but we learn from it and move on. We went through numerous woods till we came to mahogany, and that’s what we used to make our first wooden headphone, the RS1.

Over the years we have used several different woods. The first was for Bushmills Whiskey, who gave us whiskey barrels, white oak, to make headphones out of for one of their promotions. Then, after Hurricane Sandy in 2012, we got a maple tree that had been knocked down locally and made our first limited edition headphone out of that. Just recently, we introduced the first headphone made out of hemp wood, and this is a real mind blower.

We enjoy working with different woods and the challenges they bring [in making] a reputable product for Grado.

**JS**: The explosion of DIY music production on computers in artists’ bedrooms – Billie Eilish being one of the most notable of late – makes pro-level recording headphones a necessary piece of equipment. As Grado competes successfully with many larger companies in the consumer headphones market, getting into the music production arena would be interesting, especially given the current demographics.

Since Grado headphones are admired and owned by several famous musicians, has there ever been an exploration into designing a professional headphone specifically for music production? If so, what changes in the frequency response and design do you think might be required to meet the market need without diluting the famous Grado sound?

**JG**: We haven’t designed a headphone specifically for the music production arena, but we are aware that our headphones are used worldwide by some of the most prestigious recording engineers in the world. One of the largest recording companies buys RS1s for their engineers and one famous engineer used the RS1s to redo the vocals on [an album by] one of the surviving Beatles that he had produced.

Listening through headphones is a personal [experience] and to one’s preferential taste, but we hear back that the engineers who use Grados like them because they hear [music the way] it sounds live and that’s what they want.

**JS**: Your uncle Joseph Grado received his first exposure to the electronics and hi-fi business while working at Marantz. Do you recall any stories he might have told you about that time or any lessons that he learned before forming his own company in 1953?

**JG**: Uncle Joe didn’t work for Saul [Marantz], he did some unpaid industrial design work on the early Marantz equipment. Joe had three or four non-audio businesses before Saul introduced him to Sherman Fairchild of Fairchild Industries in the early 1950s. Sherman was also an audio enthusiast, and had a phono cartridge production line that was having quality control issues. Joe agreed to work and correct these issues using his talents as a master watchmaker. By the time Joe had completed that task he had come up with his own ideas for phono cartridge designs and left Sherman’s and set up designing and building cartridges on his kitchen table. He'd build a few and go out and sell them and then go back and build some more. As demand grew, he needed to set up a real production line,
and when his father closed his fruit store, Joe took over the space. Grado Labs still occupies that space today.

Joe and Saul stayed close friends till Saul's death in 1997.

**JS:** Joseph Grado was awarded a US patent for the first moving coil phonograph cartridge, which was an audio milestone. Has any competitor ever come up with an innovation for cartridges that impressed either you or your uncle as something that made either of you go, “Wow! How come I didn’t think of that?”

**JG:** Joseph Grado was awarded the first US patent for the stereo moving coil cartridge and enjoyed receiving royalties during the life of the patent, although he didn’t enjoy fighting manufacturers who infringed upon it, but he did and won.

I never knew of any audio product that Joe was sorry he didn’t think of first. He did admire other people’s work but Joe was the type that would always try to see how he could make something better, in the audio realm or anywhere else. I remember having lunch and he’d tell me how to improve the shape of a fork to eat with, or the filter of a coffee machine so the water flows more evenly over the coffee grinds. The one thing he didn’t want to improve was the hot dog stand hot dog. He liked them a lot and that tradition continues.

**JS:** Grado Labs has made a number of cartridge improvements over the last few years. Can you elaborate on some of them without divulging any proprietary trade secrets?

**JG:** We have been using our patented Flux-Bridger design since 1972. Each cartridge is built using 43 parts. These parts consist of molded plastic, molded metal and most are made on Swiss screw machines. This design is like a fine Swiss watch, taking from Joe’s background as a watchmaker. [The Flux-Bridger design uses four separate magnetic gaps that the cantilever bridges in order to generate a signal. This construction is said to reduce distortion and offer other sonic advantages. – Ed.]

Over the years we have worked at refining the parts, which [has] helped with cutting down on the effective moving mass of the cartridge. In our latest series we have worked at eliminating noise through the signal path and in our wooden series [we’ve initiated] a process of thermally aging the wood, which we have found has a dramatic positive effect on the performance of the cartridge.

**JS:** Grado Labs currently makes a line of cartridges specifically for the DJ market. What were your first thoughts and Joseph’s when DJ’s began scratching records and bringing bass-heavy sound systems to events as hip-hop started in the late 1970s? Did you think at the time that they might need a new cartridge and stylus design, or did Grado Labs react to increased demand from a more established market later on?

**JG:** Grado didn’t get onto the DJ market till later on in the 1990s. We were kind of pulled into it by the market demanding us to give them a cartridge of higher quality than was available to them at the time. We used our Flux-Bridger design but adjusted it to track from 3 to 5 grams with a more stable cantilever for back cueing and a spherical 6 mil diamond stylus. The response from end users has been overwhelmingly positive.
In Part Two John will talk about Grado’s ultimate-performance cartridges, changes in vinyl formulations over the years, bringing the next family generation into the business, why pizza is so good in Brooklyn and more.
All plants are our brothers and sisters, 
they talk to us and if we listen, we can hear them. 
If we wonder often, the gift of knowledge will come.

- *Arapaho nation literature*[1]

You've seen and heard it before: American Indians playing drums and other instruments while vocalizing in a language you don't understand. At least that's how Native American music has generally been depicted in films and on television. But unless you happen to have studied and already enjoy the music of indigenous tribes, there's much to be discovered about this rarely explored area of music.

Indian culture is closely tied to nature, and music has always played a meaningful role in this relationship. Although the earliest examples of Indian music can be found in documents written by European explorers, researchers believe American Indian music dates back many centuries before those documents were written.[2]
There are hundreds of Native American tribes throughout the United States and every tribe has music that reflects its own traditions. Music performances tell stories about a tribe’s heritage, wars, triumphs and defeats, are essential for ceremonies and celebrations, and employed for specific purposes like asking for rain or a successful hunt. From invoking spirits and speaking to the dead, from singing prayers and songs to curing the sick, traditional Indian music is an integral part of people’s daily lives and includes some of the most haunting songs and instrumentals you’re likely to hear.

The most important instrument used in Indian culture is the human voice. Solos, duos and group singing are common but unlike most European music, early American Indian music generally doesn't include vocal harmonies and can often sound “out of tune.” For example, when people sing together they may perform on pitch (blended unison) or without trying to sing exactly together (unblended unison). The Inuits use throat singing which produces a wailing sound by tightening and loosening the muscles in the throat, and may emphasize vibrato (a rapid, slight variation in pitch) as part of the aesthetic. When several tribes meet to share each others' music, vocables (words that don't have meanings) are often substituted for actual words so everyone can sing the songs performed by other tribes. Adding unconventional rhythms and accompanying them with irregular drum beats results in music that can sound unusual and complex.

Even though vocal harmonies may not be present, Indians do create harmonies by merging instruments built from materials found in nature. The three most significant types of instruments used by almost all of the tribes are drums, flutes, and rattles.

Drums are the oldest instruments on earth and the ones most important to Native Americans. Drums are thought to speak to the player: The vibrations help the player tune into the natural frequency of the earth and bring balance and renewal to the drummer. Numerous oral traditions refer to drumbeats as the earth's heartbeat (the spirit of life) and rapid drumming can signal the manifestation of a spirit presence. The drums are usually made using hollowed logs or wooden frames with animal skin stretched across the opening. Some small drums are hand held, single-sided drums on a frame; other small drums like water drums are created by stretching a moist, tanned hide over a wooden vessel or gourd filled with water. Extremely large drums are built so many men and women can play the instrument simultaneously when Indian nations come together to share songs and dances. The process of creating and playing a drum combines earth, air, water, and fire — all of the earth’s elements each with its own sound — resulting in an instrument that represents the circle of life. Because of their significance, small Native American drums often become treasured family heirlooms: They stay with the family for generations and are played during family gatherings.

The Native American flute is believed to be the third oldest known musical instrument in the world. Created after drums and rattles, bone flutes date back over 60,000 years. Originally played for personal reasons like meditation and healing, one of its uses was for finding a mate. A common Dakota legend about the creation of the wood flute tells the story of a young man who wanted to attract the attention of a maiden:

“A very long time ago there was a young man who was very interested in a beautiful young girl. He was always trying to get her attention, but she never seemed to notice him. Whenever she was present he would ride his horse proudly, but nothing he did seemed to attract her. One day when the girls were down by the river getting water, the young man went down to the river and began diving off rocks and swimming across the river, to show her how skilled he was, but again she paid him no mind.
Dejected, the young man walked into the nearby old growth forest and sat down at the base of a long dead cedar tree. As he sat there thinking about this girl, a woodpecker landed on a hollowed limb that was over his head... the limb had been hollowed over time from the wind and weather. The woodpecker began to peck holes...tap, tap, tap........ along the length of this hollowed limb......... tap. tap, tap.......as the woodpecker pecked, the limb broke off and fell next to the young man...[and] as the wind blew over this hollow limb with the holes in it, he heard musical voices coming from it. He picked it up and found that when he blew into this limb and covered the holes, he could make beautiful, mournful music to match the feelings in his heart. He sat there for a time making up haunting melodies.

The young girl heard this music coming from the old growth forest, and it was such a soulful sound that it captured her heart. She followed the sound of music into the woods, where she saw him sitting there at the base of this cedar tree playing this first flute that was given to him by the woodpecker, and as she listened she fell in love with his music and fell in love with him. They went off hand in hand to live happily ever after.”[7]

The story is also a cautionary tale: It says that once you find a mate, you should put the flute away and never play it in public again. If you do play it in public, you might attract another possible mate's attention.

The indigenous flute is unique to Native Americans and has a distinctive sound that differs from the flutes we're more familiar with.[8] Wood and bone flutes were utilized for many purposes including entertainment (e.g., the Lakota Tribes used the flute for courting and love songs), dancing, healing, meditation, and spirit calling ceremonies (e.g., the Hopi Tribe had flute societies that performed prayer ceremonies). Some listeners today feel there is almost nothing more relaxing and meditative than authentic Native American flute music because it enables them to feel more connected to the natural and spiritual world around us.[9]

Other significant melodic and percussion instruments played by various tribes include the Apache fiddle made from the stalk of an agave plant, rattles created from gourds or bones like small horns filled with seeds or other objects, and turtle rattles made from the shell of a turtle filled with objects like cherry pits.[10] Along with the drum and flute, the rattle was one of the most meaningful, significant and valued instruments used by most tribes:

“When you see Native American rattles, you may not realize all that they symbolize. The rattle is an instrument of independence. It is a piece that utilizes what the Native Americans refer to as the three kingdoms or nations. The animal kingdom is represented by the container or feather decorations used on the rattle. The mineral kingdom is represented by rocks used for sound or the paint used for decoration. The plant kingdom is represented by the container (if a gourd is used) or the wooden handle of the rattle. The Native Americans realize that spiritual energy can be derived from the trance like state that can be induced by music. The rattle causes our bodies and minds both to respond to it. Some cultures believe that music can unblock energy within our bodies and thus heal us of ailments. The beating of the rattle helps break up stagnant energy that is blocking the natural flow within your body. It can also help us focus on our souls, our cores. If you sit quietly alone or with friends and shake a Native American rattle, the music will help you clear your mind and open a doorway to a different emotional place.”[11]

Or at the very least, open your ears and help you explore a different style of music.

The term "Indian" usually doesn't include culturally and linguistically distinct groups like the Inuits (Eskimos). Inuits belong to the indigenous population of the Arctic and subarctic regions of Greenland, Canada, the United States and far eastern Russia (Siberia), and their history dates back thousands of years. These groups are nonetheless considered peoples of the Americas along with the Indians of North, Central and South America.

Some Indians believe music comes to them in their dreams and is performed upon wakening.

An attractive Navajo healing song for two voices in the newer style of harmonized chanting can be found at youtube.com/watch?v=3S2He2Ypq4.

Vocables are also used on their own as a musical style.

“How to Play the Four Elements on Drums,” at youtube.com/watch?v=b6UOFw5jNy is an informational video that demonstrates the sound of each element. Another informational video, this one explaining the significance of the drum, can be found at youtube.com/watch?v=cXw4iHh71yc.

Story as told by Phillip Lane (Phillip Brown Bear), a Lakota Elder, to flute maker Roger McGee (wind-dancer-flutes.com).

The Native American flute is unique because it has two air chambers: one located at the top, the other at the bottom with finger holes. Over time the instrument evolved and was carved using all types of hard and soft woods depending on what was available in the area and the sound the player wanted to produce.

Try listening to “Heart is sad, The Morning Song” for flute at youtube.com/watch?v=h1pxzStAAwk. Stay tuned after that selection: It's followed by a variety of chants and songs.

“Native American Shamanic Meditation Drums for Healing Body, Mind and Soul” includes a rattle, drums and an accompanying explanation of Shamanism at youtube.com/watch?v=XXsX7fNzjCE.

“Native American Rattles” (Indians.org).
In this final installment, I’ll introduce you to three more bands. Part one in this series focused on Premiata Forneria Marconi ("Award-Winning Marconi Bakery"), or PFM, the most well-known of the Italian rock bands. Another prominent Italian progressive rock group with an offbeat name was Banco del Mutuo Soccorso, translated variously as “Bank of Mutual Aid /-Relief /-Rescue.” They later shortened it to Banco.

BANCO DEL MUTUO SOCCORSO:

Their first (self-titled) album came out in 1972. The cover image of a terra cotta coin bank in the vague shape of a breast would become a logo of sorts for the band. The lineup featured dual keyboardists Gianni and Vittorio Nocenzi, who had founded the band (with different musicians) in 1969. Both brothers were highly accomplished players who utilized a number of electronic keyboards. Vittorio wrote most of the music, and Gianni was featured on piano. Rounding out the group were guitarist Marcello Todaro, bassist Renato D’Angelo, and drummer Pier Luigi Calderoni. The vocalist was Francesco di Giacomo, an imposing figure with a semi-operatic delivery. D’Angelo, Calderoni, and di Giacomo had been together in another band called Le Esperienze.

From a physical standpoint, di Giacomo was an unlikely front man – hugely obese, balding and bespectacled, with long dark hair and a very full beard – but the passion in his singing was unmistakable. He had a high tenor voice with a fair amount of vibrato, but not the kind of tone and vibrato that had made Acqua Fragile/PFM vocalist Bernardo Lanzetti so off-putting. “RIP (Requiescant In Pace)” gives a good idea of his singing and their initial sound:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf5MPOB6LLo
“Metamorfosi” is the longest track on the album. Here’s a live version from a 2010 Italian performance:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDmGd4g-z30&list=PLoRNXsrOuZ-W81sinf97y80xhwQEDwRY

Their second album, *Darwin!*, was also released in 1973. “La conquista della posizione eretta” (The Conquest of the Standing Position) shows them at their most intense:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uXxtsEC5ig&list=PLC5B0AFDB69D96E3B

It was followed by *io sono nato libero* (“I was born free”) in 1973. This album is considered one of their best. One of their most popular songs, “Non mi rompete” (Don’t Break Me), begins with sweet acoustic guitar and gentle vocals before shifting into a happy, jangly, wordless chorus that’s quite infectious:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXws0RYLo4A

This extended live version (with visuals from many different performances) features two guitarists, with some fine acoustic guitar throughout:

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

After this album had been recorded, Rodolfo Maltese replaced original guitarist Todaro. Like PFM before them, Banco attracted the attention of Emerson, Lake & Palmer’s Manticore label, and re-recorded some of their songs in English for a 1975 compilation album simply called *Banco*. It was not a strong seller, and they never had another American release, but if you were to have just one of their albums, this wouldn’t be a bad choice (although this photo on the back of the cover might not have been a good choice).
The following year, Banco provided instrumental soundtrack music for a film called Garafano Rosso. As with many soundtrack albums, the stylistic range used to illustrate the scenes is quite varied. To complement their standard instrumentation, guitarist Maltese adds some trumpet, Gianni Nocenzi plays clarinet, Vittorio Nocenzi contributes violin parts, and Renato D’Angelo plays contrabass.

The entire album can be heard here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBNL7U5JyOA

Also in 1976, they recorded come in un’ultima cena with lyrics in Italian. They released the same music on the Manticore label in Europe with English lyrics, under the translated title as in a last supper. The cover art depicted an arm being nailed to a plank, leaving no doubt as to the intended theme of the album.

Banco’s next record, ...di terra (“...of Land”) was quite a departure from their previous work. It was another instrumental album, but this time featuring impressive orchestrations by the Nocenzi brothers and Antonio Scarlato. Some of the orchestrations fall in the romantic/classical category, with an occasional nod to Stravinsky. The first track is the fully orchestrated “Nel cielo e nelle altre cose mute” (In the Sky and Other Silent Things):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfUybCemE2A

“Né più di un albero non meno di una stella” (No more than a tree no less than a star) opens with a
pretty piano part that’s reminiscent of Keith Emerson’s playing on “Take a Pebble” from the first ELP album (as well as the piano solo in PFM’s “Il banchetto”). Guitar and woodwinds are slowly brought into the mix, creating a nice flow before drums and flute add a more up-tempo rhythmic touch:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLbevJTvV8s

*Canto di primavera* (Song of Spring”), from 1979, would turn out to be their last new album in a progressive vein for 30 years! New bassist Gianni Colaiacomo adds fretless and six-string basses to his arsenal. Maltese again plays some trumpet, along with bouzouki and charango. “Ciclo” (Cycle) has a repeating pattern with a hypnotic feel:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw0Cbkdz0L0

“Lungo il margine“ (Along the Margin) is a languid piano and vocal piece in ¾ time:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIJqvjk2vOg

“Circobanda” (Circus Band) opens with Mongol mouth harp (a variation on Tuvan throat singing?) by sax and harmonica player Luigi Cinque before going through a number of moods. Skip to 33:34 in the video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrvT4cb6toE&pbjreload=101

The 1980s found Banco, like many other Italian progressive bands, attempting to fit in with the increasingly new-wave orientation of popular music audiences. This resulted in a string of albums with music that bore no resemblance to what they had done before. Six releases, from 1980’s Urgentissimo (Very Urgent) through 1989’s Non mettere le dita nel naso (Don’t Put Your Fingers in Your Nose) were disappointing to their original fans.

In an apparent attempt to regain their earlier fan base, Banco re-recorded their first two albums in 1991 with an abbreviated lineup. Gianni Nocenzi had left the band in 1983, and brother Vittorio played synth bass in lieu of a bassist. Piercarlo Penta added keyboards, and Tiziano Ricci (who bears an uncanny resemblance to Larry Fine of the Three Stooges) was among three backing vocalists. Ricci would later become the band’s bass player. He can be seen briefly in some of the visuals included in the live “Non mi rompete” video.

Eight live albums would follow, with no new studio recordings. They even played concerts in Japan. 2005’s Seguendo le tracce (“Following the Tracks”), which was recorded in Salerno, Italy, is considered their best live album. That lineup included the brief return of Gianni Nocenzi and original bassist Roberto D’Angelo.

Beloved vocalist Di Giacomo was killed in a car crash in 2014, and guitarist Maltese succumbed to illness the following year. In 2017, Vittorio Nocenzi put together a completely new Banco del Mutuo Soccorso with Tony D’Alessio on vocals, guitarists Filippo Marcheggiani and Nicola Di Gia,
Marco Capozi on bass, and drummer Fabio Moresco. They recorded *Transiberiana*, released in 2019. The album marks a return to the prog fold. D'Alessio has a nice enough voice, but without Di Giacomo, it’s not quite the same.

“La discesa dal treno” (The Descent from the Train) is one of the stronger tracks:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNfkjAsNT1k&list=PLbIN9DHtOfK-vhu3f2hVPJzeFQikbPzMy&index=3

Banco has a number of live concert videos on YouTube, and they are worth checking out.

GOBLIN:

The Italian prog band Goblin has also been around since the 1970s. Known primarily for their work providing the soundtrack music for numerous (mostly low-budget) horror films by the Italian director Dario Argento, their output is almost exclusively instrumental. The main knock I might put on them is that they tend to recycle some of their musical ideas, albeit with minor variations.

The members of Goblin came together out of several other Italian groups. Claudio Simonetti (keyboards) and Massimo Morante (guitar) founded a band called Oliver, with Carlo Bordini (from the band Cherry Five) on drums and bassist Fabio Pignatelli. They relocated to England, briefly using an English singer, and even had some recording sessions with noted Yes and ELP engineer Eddy Offord. Things didn’t work out, and they returned to Italy, changing singers.

Simonetti had done session work on soundtracks for the Italian label Cinevox, and that connection led to a recording contract for the band. Bordini apparently wouldn’t sign with the label, and he was replaced by drummer Walter Martino, who had played with Simonetti in Il Ritratto di Dorian Gray (“ritratto” means “portrait”).

Their first album was the instrumental soundtrack to an Argento movie called Profondo rosso (“Deep Red”), released in 1975. The title track features a piercing synthesizer line that, on the original pressing, caused many a phono cartridge to jump the groove.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lN5wpoNJDUk

Goblin’s second album, Roller, is one of their best, if not the best. Maurizio Guarini joined as a second keyboard player, and Agostino Marangolo took over on drums. It’s not soundtrack music (although one of the compositions, “Snip Snap,” did get recycled for the soundtrack to Patrick). “Aquaman” is a mostly atmospheric piece that opens and closes with the sound of dripping water (starting at 4:38 in this whole-album video):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqk8a4KdxgI

Another soundtrack album, Perche si uccidono (“Why They Kill Each Other”), was released under the band name Il Reale Impero Britannico (“The Royal British Empire”). This is considered the rarest album of their catalogue. It was actually recorded in 1974 (before Profondo rosso), with Edda dell’Orso and Cherry Five vocalist Tony Tartarini singing on one track each. Guglielmo “Willy”
Brezza is also credited as composer and conductor.

The title track has some nice Mellotron, guitar work, and backing vocals:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7iEl4NaIu0&list=PLRP0XWzCyGEEuYmdSjmW63BXOvCMyp1ZA&index=9

Their next soundtrack was for the 1977 movie Suspiria. If you listen carefully to this track, “Black Forest,” you can clearly hear phrases and tonal bits from “Profondo rosso” and “Snip Snap” above:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mpG9LgQDdw&list=PLD2FA56FDAD32BBDF&index=6

Goblin’s only release to feature vocals throughout was 1978’s Il fantastico viaggio del “bagarozzo” Mark (“The Fantastic Journey of the ‘Bagarozzo’ Mark”), a concept album about a flying insect named Mark. The opening track has a cool organ solo and some fine guitar, but strange vocals by guitarist Morante. It’s not a bad record, but to my ears, it serves to show that they were right to focus on instrumentals. The whole album can be found here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OqK0mwd9Xk

Following that studio album, they proceeded to compose and perform twelve more movie soundtracks through 2001, with the exception of 1982’s Volo (“Flight”) and 1989’s La chiesa (“The Church”). The latter album was a compilation of sorts, and included tracks by Keith Emerson, Martin Goldray, and Definitive Gaze. Leader Simonetti took a brief hiatus from the band in the early 1980s.

Probably their best-known soundtrack work was for George Romero’s Dawn of the Dead (released as Zombi in Italy). The other soundtracks (with release dates) were:

1979 Amo non amo (“I Love You, I Love You Not”)
1979 Squadra antigangsters (“Antigangsters Team”)
1979 Patrick
1980 Contamination
1982 Tenebre (“Darkness”)
1983 Notturno (“Night”)
1985 Phenomena
1997 Buio omega (“Dark Omega”)
1999 La via della droga (“The Drug Route”)
2001 Non ho sonno (“I’m Not Sleepy”)

A lineup consisting of Morante, Guarini, Pignatelli, and Marangolo put out an album called Back to the Goblin 2005. Although primarily instrumental, one track (“Hitches”) does feature a child’s wordless singing. This is one of the strongest efforts by any Goblin incarnation, despite the absence of founder Simonetti. Check out “Lost in the Universe”:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o3Vaup1Q0
The same musicians also released *Four of a Kind* in 2015 under the Goblin name. This one is recommended as well. "Uneven Times" is the leadoff track:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Snk-7kq3Cbg&list=OLAK5uy_kcSO8Cb3hf9a8OUK5sO2YOnlFOCKm39Q0

Just prior to that album, Simonetti had put together a band with Bruno Previtali on guitar and bouzouki, bassist Federico Amorosi, and drummer Titta Tani. Billed as Claudio Simonetti’s Goblin, their album *The Murder Collection* was a re-recording of tracks from the Goblin soundtrack repertoire.

The past fifteen years or so have seen a number of other incarnations as New Goblin, Goblin World, Goblin Rebirth, and Goblin Keys, with varying lineups. There have even been a couple of tours of the U.S. in that time.

**THE WATCH:**

Until now, I have been concentrating on bands from the 1970s, but here is a more contemporary outfit with a decidedly retro sound – The Watch. Unapologetically inspired by classic Peter Gabriel-era Genesis (and they have also performed as a Genesis tribute band), they began in 1997 as The Night Watch. Leader and sole remaining original member Simone Rossetti sings and plays flute (as did Gabriel), but also adds keyboards. Other members in this first lineup were Francesco Zago (guitar), Giovanni Alessi (keyboards), Antonio Mauri (bass), and drummer Diego Donadio.

Their only album as The Night Watch was Twilight. Right out of the gate, “My Ivory Soul,” establishes the clear connection to the past:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsuVUD9wLmY

In 2000, the band broke up and Rossetti rebuilt it with the shortened name. The next two albums (*Ghost* and *Vacuum*) utilized guitarist Ettore Salati, keyboard player Gabriele Manzini, bassist/guitarist Marco Schembri, and drummer Roberto Leoni, with keyboard assistance from Sergio Taglioni. Both albums could almost pass for Genesis outtakes, and are highly recommended, solid prog.

*Ghost* features long tracks (only one is shorter than six and a half minutes) full of trademark Genesis elements – multiple acoustic guitars, massive Mellotron-like keyboards, and odd time signatures. The whole album is linked here. The one short track (“Riding the Elephant”) is the only departure from the Genesis sound, and you can find it at 33:17.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxZ-tFkZsKo

Unlike most Italian progressive vocalists, Rossetti sings with no discernible accent, sounding uncannily like Gabriel most of the time, with all of the vocal quirks and mannerisms. On *Vacuum*, he also reminds me of early Tim Finn (Split Enz), who himself was clearly influenced by Gabriel.
“Wonderland,” starting at 8:44, is an example of that.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaJBrp-9dNY

Everything about this abbreviated clip of “Damage Mode” from Vacuum is pure Gabriel-era Genesis (including face makeup):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxmb5_NmKlg

Fabio Mancini and Sergio Tagioni replaced Manzini on keyboards for the 2007 album Primitive. This is the title track:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXkaMrh4wus

Another wholesale rebuild of the group came in 2008 for the next album, 2010’s Planet Earth? This time, he recruited Giorgio Gabriel on guitars, keyboard player Valerio De Vittorio, bassist Guglielmo Mariotti, and drummer Marco Fabbri. Rossetti has a knack for finding competent and compatible bandmates. Despite the replacement of players, the sound remained remarkably consistent (and true to original Genesis) as this example shows:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dP8PFzjoWhg

The next record, 2011’s Timeless, featured the same roster, including another guest appearance by Genesis guitarist Steve Hackett’s brother John on flute on one track. That song, “Let Us Now Make Love,” is a Genesis composition from the early days of Trespass that didn’t make it onto the album. It’s a pretty song, here given a somewhat heavier treatment:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0svGeaUIqU

This is a fine solo piano version by original Genesis guitarist Anthony Phillips:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpO8Tvx2JxI

Timeless also contains another Genesis cover, “In the Wilderness,” that was on from genesis to revelation (their first album).

Mariotti was replaced on bass by Simone’s son, Mattia Rossetti, for 2014’s Tracks From the Alps as well as 2017’s Seven. That most recent album features Steve Hackett guesting on “The Hermit,” a track from his first solo album, Voyage of the Acolyte.

For anyone wishing that Gabriel hadn’t left Genesis, The Watch provides the next best thing.
There are literally hundreds of other Italian progressive rock bands. Some of the better-known ones (to fans of the genre) are: **Alphataurus, Il Balletto di Bronzo, Celeste, Latte e Miele, Museo Rosenbach, New Trolls, Osanna, Perigeo, Reale Accademia di Musica, Semiramis, The Trip, and Riccardo Zappa** (no relation to Frank).

For more information, the following two websites are invaluable:

http://www.italianprog.com/index.htm
http://www.progarchives.com

Header image of The Watch courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Mattia Rossetti.
After the Fire

PARTING SHOT

Taken by Rich Isaacs

Taken on the Mendocino coast of California, March 2008 with a Canon PowerShot A710 IS. This is an unprocessed color shot, not black and white.