The music world has lost an icon with the passing of Eddie Van Halen at 65. The man was one of the greatest and most influential rock guitarists of all time and burst upon the scene with his technical brilliance, swagger, oft-overlooked sense of rhythm and swing, influencing generations to come. Tom Methans and Jay Jay French offer tributes.

Our Name That Column Contest goes through October 31. We’ll be running a new column about PS Audio’s Octave Records label, and we need a name. The winner will receive a 16 x 24 photo on canvas of Copper photographer James Schrimpf’s photo of musicians Dale Watson and Chris Crepps, used as Issue 105’s Parting Shot. Please submit your suggestions for the column name to letters@psaudio.com.

In this issue: Larry Schenbeck returns! Have things changed for him? John Seetoo review’s Neil Young and Phil Baker’s book about the rise and fall of the Pono hi-res music player. Tom Methans and Jay Jay French remember Eddie Van Halen. We have interviews with Krell Industries’ Walter Schofield (Part One) and Eikon Audio’s Gayle Sanders (Part Two; these guys have a lot to say). Anne E. Johnson looks at the career of Dame Ethel Smyth and deep cuts from Echo & the Bunnymen. Ken Sander gets big attitude from Little Esther.

Tom Gibbs covers new releases from Roger Waters, Drive-By Truckers and Sufjan Stevens. Wayne Robins goes crate digging...for MP3s? Steven Bryan Bieler has fond musical memories of his dad. Roy Hall visits a dude ranch and WL Woodward revisits Frank Zappa. J.I. Agnew ponders the dynamic range of records. Ray Chelstowski has an inside look at the making of Bob Seger’s Against the Wind (he had some unexpected help). Rudy Radelic offers some suggested demo recordings. Readers Adrian Wu and Stuart Marvin tell us about an Olympian listening experience and a close
encounter with the Rolling Stones. Our audio/visual department encounters a hair-raising experience, gets testy with tubes and visits the Badlands.
I.

It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving in 2016. My phone rang. "Hi, this is Robert. Have you heard of the VOX Olympian?"

Robert started his career working for Mark Levinson (the man). After he returned to Hong Kong in the 1980s, he became a fixture at high-end showrooms around town. He must have worked for every high-end dealer in town at one time or another. Gregarious and loquacious to the extreme, people either love him or find him insufferable. I vacillate between the two extremes depending on the day. He had been a free agent in the past few years, earning commissions by introducing clients to dealers.

"Jonathan wants bring a pair to Hong Kong. He is looking for investors."

I have known Jonathan for quite a few years. He first set foot in Hong Kong in the 1970s as an adventurous young law school graduate from Manchester. He was hired by an English law firm and worked his way up. With the looks of Richard Gere and double the charm (and wiliness), he eventually became their go-to defense attorney for white collar criminals.

One of his clients was looking at doing at least five years of jail time for fraud, until Jonathan got him off the hook. After the trial ended, he called Jonathan.

"Jonathan, I would like to send you a little something to show my gratitude. You saved my life. I know the Ferrari dealer very well and I can get you any model you want."

"That's really very sweet," replied Jonathan, "but I don't like driving, especially in Hong Kong."
However, I do like music..."

Some days later, a complete Kondo audio system landed at Jonathan’s doorstep. Guilty or not, can’t say the guy didn’t have taste. Jonathan was completely enamored by the little present, and invited many friends and clients to share his enthusiasm. Soon, some of them also wanted one for themselves. Being the helpful chap that he was, Jonathan contacted Kondo-san in Japan, who was more than happy to sell Jonathan what he needed.

After six months, Kondo-san made him an offer. “You’ve bought more equipment in the past six months than my Hong Kong distributor did in the past five years. Would you like to become my distributor instead?”

And thus, Audio Evidence, official distributor for Kondo, was born. With his power of persuasion honed by decades of convincing judges of his clients’ innocence, convincing people that they needed Kondo equipment was child’s play for Jonathan. He managed to sell over US$1 million of gear in his first year with minimal effort.

As his late partner, the brilliant trial lawyer Alex King once told me, lawyers go to work every morning counting the number of days until retirement. (Sadly, Alex never made it to retirement.)

Jonathan realized that working in high-end audio might just be his ticket out of the drudgery. He started to take it more seriously and began attending the important trade shows. It was at one of these shows that he first met Kevin Scott and became the distributor for Living Voice.

Kevin was a mental health professional in his previous career, but his real passion had always been audio. Once he gained enough confidence, he left his job at the National Health Service and started Living Voice. The company became very successful in the UK market, producing beautifully built, reasonably priced and eminently musical mid-priced speakers. However, Kevin’s ultimate goal was to build the best horn speaker possible. He realized at the time that there was little demand in the consumer market for horn speakers, so he started building professional monitors and doing custom installations. The system at the high-end whiskey bar and music venue Spiritland at King’s Cross, London, is one of his masterpieces. When the time was right, he unleashed upon the world his magnum opus, the VOX Olympian.

The VOX Olympian is a fully horn-loaded four-way speaker. The 15-inch bass driver and 3-inch compression midrange are built by the venerable British firm Vitavox. The compression tweeter was made by TAD in Japan specifically for this project. Only 20 pairs were produced, thus making the VOX Olympian a limited edition. The distinctive brass trumpet on the tweeter took more than a year of trial and error to arrive at the perfect balance between loading and dispersion. The super tweeter is the rare and famous TAD ET-703.

The cabinet is the work of a top English furniture maker. The curved surfaces of the bass horn are apparently extremely difficult to make, and it takes seven months to build one pair of speakers. Here is a loudspeaker that looks as good as it sounds; most of the time, it is one or the other. Since the bass horn rolls off below 70 Hz, the speakers are usually mated with the Elysian sub-bass units. The Elysian is a pair of gigantic folded horns, each one driven by two ultrafast 12-inch drivers. The frequency response is flat down to 20 Hz. Each one weighs 500 pounds and is driven by its own solid state amplifier.

The whole system had a list price of £750,000 retail in 2016, and Jonathan wanted to share the financial risk. Besides, selling it wouldn’t be easy and getting more people involved might help.
Hong Kong has the most expensive real estate in the world, which is more than twice as expensive as Singapore, in second place. Most people live in tiny apartments. Bloomberg Businessweek once published an article about a new development where a Tesla model S wouldn’t even fit inside some of the apartments. People call them nano-apartments. We therefore asked ourselves whether it was realistic to try and sell the whole system here, given the space required to do it justice.

I agreed to invest a 20 percent share in the speakers. Robert reassured us that he had clients with lots of spare cash who lived in big houses in mainland China. According to him, these people compete with each other to have the most expensive and exotic audio system, as if their manhood depends on it. Besides, he had already lined up two investors in the US. (As a horn fanatic, I would dearly love to own this system, albeit only 20% of it, but the sum was already more than what I had spent on my entire audio system.)

The next question was, where would we house the system? Most dealer showrooms would be too small, and they might be reluctant to remove their own speakers to make way for the VOX Olympian. Jonathan had a friend who owned an art gallery in an industrial building. The gallery had a private kitchen, run by a chef from Tuscany. Clients of the gallery hire the place for parties from time to time. Jonathan thought that putting the speakers there would generate some buzz in the right circles. The owner was also happy for us to bring people in for demonstrations. The idea was to keep the system for several months, play with it, promote it, sell it, reinvest the profit on the next system and repeat. With all these problems solved, we wired the money to the UK and waited.

II.

The system finally arrived in the summer, one month before the Hong Kong High End Audio Visual Show, accompanied by Kevin and his wife. The speakers were transported disassembled and needed to be put back together again. The crossover and the positioning of the tweeters and super tweeters all needed to be adjusted to the listening environment, a process that would be expertly performed by Kevin. He had sold his last system in Vietnam, and the two before that in Thailand, so he had been busy flying back and forth to Asia. When a Living Voice system was sold to a client, Kevin would come out to install the system in the client’s home. Kevin and his wife were warm, easygoing and down to earth folks, with a great sense of humor and very passionate about their craft.

It took almost two days to uncrate everything and install all the drivers. The acoustics of the gallery left a lot to be desired, as it had a bare concrete ceiling, walls and floor. So off went Jonathan’s wife to pick up rugs, acoustic panels and other sundries to try and improve the situation. Then, when Jonathan looked closely at the unbelievably fine finish of the speakers, he was instantly hit with a panic attack. What if some drunken guest decided to get up close and personal? What if they put their dirty paws all over the lovely finish or, God forbid, placed a drink on top of it? So off went Jonathan’s wife to have covers made for the four units, and stands and ropes to cordon off the area. But Jonathan was still worried. He decided that whenever there would be a party, one of the three of us would stand guard. We would do a demonstration for the guests early in the evening, then cover up the system (including the Kondo electronics) while the guests were having dinner, and then just hang around to make sure nobody went near the system until the end of the evening.

I began to feel that I had bitten off more than I could chew. I had never sold hi-fi before, but I guess there is always a first time. Jonathan was also worried that Robert might actually offend some of the guests, but I reassured him that Robert would do just fine – before he could suggest that I should take Robert’s place also.
Fortunately we had little to worry about at first, as business was not brisk for the gallery and there were only a handful of parties over the next three months. However, trying to explain the system to a group of complete strangers (in fact, I was lucky I didn’t run into any patients of mine) who were probably not in the least bit interested in hi-fi was daunting. And trying to do a demonstration while people were eating canapés, drinking champagne and trying to talk over the music was frustrating.

I found out that it is in fact harder to persuade people to buy a million-dollar speaker system than to convince them to have their organs surgically removed. I came closest with a real estate developer. He told me that he was building a house (more like a palace by Hong Kong standards) for himself and his family. I arranged for him to have dinner with my friend James, the acoustic architect who designed my living room (see Issue 121). James managed to convince him that he really needed to have a dedicated listening room in his new home (with the VOX system in it). The developer came back twice to listen to the system, and even met up with James to go over his building plans. At the end, he came back and told us that his wife overruled him. I guess she wanted the room for her ballroom dancing or something.

During the Hong Kong High End Show, I spent the days going around the venue looking for mainland Chinese people. And not any mainlander, but mainland Chinese media people. I managed to find several reporters for online magazines — each claiming that his/her site had the largest readership. They seemed enthusiastic and agreed to report on the VOX system. Unfortunately, nothing came out of it. Jonathan didn’t have much luck either. The closest he came to making a sale was with a client of his who had an ownership interest in a high-end dealership with several showrooms on the mainland. He felt it would bring tremendous prestige to his dealership if he could demo the VOX in his showrooms. Unfortunately, his business partners vetoed his idea.

After three months, the gallery owner decided that he wanted to rearrange his gallery and we had to pack our bags. A dealer friendly with Jonathan agreed to host the VOX Olympian in his showroom. We could just about squeeze them in. As he was the Hong Kong distributor for FM Acoustics, we could not use the Kondo electronics. The powerful FM amplifier, while very fine in its own right, was not the right match for these ultra-sensitive horns. I managed to coax the dealer into setting up his top Lamm Industries tube system for a demonstration for an important prospective buyer. He agreed to let us use the Lamm ML3 Signature single-ended amplifiers and the LL1.1 Signature preamplifier. I must say it was jaw-droppingly good.

I actually preferred this to Jonathan’s Kondo setup. The Kondo had a lot of finesse and harmonic richness, but the Lamm electronics had massive scale, speed, and at the same time delivered a holographic image. They seemed to be tonally more neutral than the Kondo, and gave a very realistic portrayal of the acoustic space. The sound was alive. Unfortunately, the prospective buyer insisted on spending most of his time listening to a recording of Japanese Kodo drums. Luckily, we didn't have any recordings of trains, garage doors or pneumatic drills in the showroom.

Everyone continued their efforts to find prospective buyers, but the size of the VOX Olympian system was always an issue. It is difficult to find someone with the musical sensibility (which I found to be a rare trait amongst the audiophiles I knew) to appreciate the qualities of the system, the financial means to afford it, and the space to do it justice. Then came the protests and riots of last year, and visitors just evaporated. This was obvious at last year’s Hong Kong High End Show.

After more than two years, we felt we had outlived our host’s hospitality. The Elysians were returned to their crates and put into storage. The Olympians went into Jonathan's listening room. He has to
look after them for now, bless him. They actually do work rather well in a smaller space, and sound really lovely with the Kondo Kageki 2A3 amp. A perfect partner for Jonathan during the lonely days of COVID-19 confinement. As for me, I still own the best horn speakers in the world (well, 20 percent of them anyway). If anyone is interested in a VOX Olympian system, please let me know!
Tube Tester

AUDIO ANTHROPOLOGY

Written by Frank Doris
I'm afraid to even turn this thing on. Jennings Model J-1005 high voltage voltmeter.
A true classic and recommended reading for anyone into vacuum tubes.
A classic of a different kind; one of the first digital audio blockbusters. Dig that futuro-bank-check typeface! From *Audio*, September 1979.
Has anyone ever heard or even seen one of these? From *Audio*, September 1956.
The cure for rotten sound! (Read the third sentence.) From *Audio*, January 1980.
"AH... THAT NEW PSU UPGRADE REALLY HITS THE SPOT!"
"AH... THAT NEW PSU UPGRADE REALLY HITS THE SPOT!"
It's 1977 and we are waiting on Doheny Drive in Beverly Hills for talent manager Irene Pinn when her partner Jim Kellem (one of the two Jims who I worked with at Creative Management Associates (CMA, later ICM Partners) points to a new Fiat Spider convertible pulling up. It is looking a little lopsided and tilting toward the driver's side. That can't be good, I say to Jim and he laughs while R&B singer “Little Esther” Phillips struggles her way out of the bucket seat in the low-to-the-ground sports car.

Inside the Doheny office of KP Productions Irene tells me the Esther Phillips tour is about six weeks long. The first leg will be an All-Star Jazz tour in Hamburg, Germany, then a gig in Cannes, France at the Midem music convention and on to Caracas, Venezuela for ten days in an upscale night club.

A week later we all meet up in Hamburg. Esther is about forty years old and is about five foot four and solid. She can sing, no misunderstanding about that, and she has had two major hit records and many on the charts. Her first hit was “Double Crossing Blues,” with the Johnny Otis Quintet and the Robins (a vocal group), which was released in 1950 by Savoy Records and reached number one on the Billboard R&B chart. She was 15 at the time, hence the name “Little Esther,” and she is a four-time Grammy nominee. Esther had a distinctive voice and was a Jazz singer with blues and soul influences, But she has lived a hard life – and has not always been the victim.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNCZPaSG2jM

She is the headliner of the German tour which means she closes the show. The day after we arrive in Hamburg we do a rehearsal at the concert hall, where the next night the first show of the tour begins.
The tour is called “The All-Star Jazz Tour” and includes musicians like jazz greats Gerry Mulligan, Nat Adderley and Buddy Rich. We are all on the bus zig-zagging across West Germany. It is a tiresome tour, with overnight bus trips sometimes lasting 16 hours with only ten-minute bathroom breaks and vending machine food stops. We go from North to South and back North, West, East and every which way. That is the concert business, and it has to do with the availability of concert halls. Bookings are put together with the only restriction being that you will be able to make the travel in time for the show. This tour was worse than most, but that is the life, and no one complains; we all get it.

It is the afternoon of the first show and the promoter tells me to have Esther back at the hall at 9:30 pm that night. While driving back to the hotel I tell her that, and her boyfriend says, “that’s bullsh*t! We don’t have to be back at the hall till eleven that night.” I repeat myself and they both are not buying it. I tell them that these are our instructions and Esther says, “fu*k them, I am not waiting around to go on stage for no one.” I am not winning this argument and I say to myself, screw it, I am only here to help. I call Jim Kellem in California, but it is like four in the morning in Los Angeles and he is sleeping. No answer.

We arrive at the concert hall at eleven and the promoter is frantic. The band has been ad-libbing and stalling for time. Esther is freaked out at this and her eyes are popping out of her head.

The promoter pushes her on stage. While she starts singing the promoter starts yelling at me. I tell him, “I told her over and over that we had to be there at 9:30 and her boyfriend said I was wrong.” We pulled him into our conversation and he tried to worm out of it. Esther can see the argument from the stage and she knows she is in for it.

She comes off stage and the promoter tells her she is fired from the tour. She starts crying and apologizing like crazy. I know she is not actually fired but that the German promoter wants to put the fear of God in her. “This is Germany; everyone here is on time, always,” he says, scolding her like she was caught shoplifting. “Please, I’m sorry, so sorry, sorry, please,” she pleads to me and the promoter in between sobs. The promoter knows he has her and keeps lecturing her for another five minutes.

In the car heading back to the hotel she is giving her boyfriend a bad time. He is squirming and I’m not minding it.

On the other hand the musicians are a very serious busload of jazz performers. There are no other road managers, so I make it a point to look after everyone. I am the youngest person on the bus and this will be the last time in my life I will ever be referred to as “The Kid.” I think I connected more with Nat Adderley than anyone else and late one night on the bus we were talking and he says, “you think Esther is difficult? you should do a tour with the Temptations. The Temps are first-rate hardasses and thankless MFs.” I guess so; I think to myself that he would know.

The bus is quiet for a tour bus and it is low-key and there is no friction between people. Everyone is cordial, but they are not best friends either; it is more like live and let live. Just professionals doing their job. I am sure the money was good for them.

Gerry Mulligan brought his wife along for the tour and sometimes the three of us would hang together for meals. Gerry was quiet and she and I did most of the talking. Every few minutes or so Gerry would hold his hands like he was playing the saxophone while pressing the invisible keys like he was working out a riff.

On the bus, I talked to everyone. Buddy Rich and I were chatting one afternoon about touring and
told me his next gig was in Toronto opening a new Hilton Inn. Some performers had a reputation for being difficult, but on this tour everyone played a part, and even though Esther was the headliner and closed the show that was in name only. There was no grandstanding or ego trips between performers. On stage, everyone fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Esther’s goodwill towards me lasts about three days and she starts getting testy again. Then she is either complaining about the tour or demanding something. There is also the boredom of the long bus rides and she has nothing better to do.

About a week into the tour we finally get to spend a night in a hotel. The overnight stop is a luxury because that day’s drive was only a few hours. She gets on the elevator with me and demands I give her a thousand dollars. Money that is the band’s pay. I tell her that the money I have on me is for the band, and she says, “fu*k that, give it to me!” I tell her no and she takes a roundhouse punch at me, barely missing my face. I didn’t react, just got off the elevator and it was never mentioned again. I was getting used to her, thinking, she is who she is and I had already decided that I would finish this tour and move on.

Finally, that leg of Esther’s tour ended – but there seemed to be a problem. Her boyfriend had been playing backgammon for money with Nat Adderley in the back of the bus. He had lost a lot of money and owed Nat big time. Esther was beside herself. But hey, it was not my problem. I do not know how it got resolved but I did know that Nat was not a gentleman you wanted to owe money to.
After Germany, we flew into Nice and were driven down to Cannes for Midem, the world’s biggest music business convention. It is a big deal with record companies, music publishers, distributors and such from all over the world. This is early February and the time and place where deals between these companies are made.

Esther is there to perform at one of the big evening affairs; so big that Anthony Quinn is hosting the event. It’s on a pier in the harbor that is filled with these tremendous yachts. Monte Carlo is just up the road past the Nice airport.
Irene has flown in and she and Esther are staying at the Hotel Barrière Le Majestic, a beautiful five-star international hotel across the main road from the harbor. The band and I stay in a three-star hotel on a hill overlooking the Marina. It was just so French, and not touristic, and the food was out of this world. So we did not mind the different hotel arrangements.

A few days later we fly to Madrid and transfer to a Pan Am jet to Caracas with a refueling stop in San Juan. We flew through the night and landed in San Juan at about three in the morning. They made us depart the plane and put us in a special area, so we did not have to clear US Customs. Around five am we re-boarded the plane and headed out for Caracas. In the dawn light flying over the Caribbean waters, the colors were remarkable. The light greens, turquoise, light and dark blues were so beautiful I was mesmerized.

We were staying at the Caracas Hilton and Raquel Welsh was performing there. Man, I had hoped to run into her but alas, it was not to be. We were doing a show a night at a high-end club. Ticket sales were so-so, with just over a half-full house every night, but still, things were OK. Sometimes at night after our show, I would go with some of the locals, club employees, to these after-hours night clubs and they were so lavish, but also wild with booze and drugs. There would be shows with dancing girls and salsa bands; it was like the old days at the Copacabana with photographers and cigarette girls, a real scene that would go on till dawn.

Still, Esther continued to cause problems. One night before she went on stage she deliberately stomped on her microphone breaking it and tried to blame me. I was not fazed. Then she wanted to have a picnic pig roast for the band and the new friends she had made in Caracas, but they didn’t allow enough time for the preparation and it was inedible. Esther wanted to blame me even for that.

Finally, we were finished with the tour and I was glad to go home. The morning that we were supposed to leave, I went to Esther’s room to get her and boyfriend’s luggage and to get them downstairs to the taxis. Everyone but me was going to Los Angeles, me to New York. Always one to surprise me, Esther had one more trick up her sleeve. She said she did not want to leave that day and maybe she would be up to it tomorrow.

That was a new one. I had never had a tour end like that. I called Jim Kellem and told him the situation, and he was okay with me leaving her there. I gave her and her boyfriend their tickets and money for the taxi to Caracas airport and said, goodbye and good luck.
I had gotten over being bothered by Esther’s stunts, but I was done. It was fine; the experience was already in my rearview mirror.

The next day at home in NY Irene calls me, exasperated, and fumes, “how could I leave Esther in Caracas?” I told Irene that Esther refused to leave – and the tour was over I also told Irene that I was finished. Although, she knew that already because I had told Kellem, but she played dumb and then told me, “in ten days we have a bus tour in Italy opening for Gloria Gaynor.”

Oh boy, I could not even consider being on another bus tour with Esther.

Next day Irene calls again and asks me some follow-up questions about the tour, which I answer and clarify.

Then she calls me again the day after and starts talking about Italy, and I say, “Irene I told you, I quit!”

What a difference a day makes.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJX5L-IFV5o
As music lovers, we all have our most favorite concert experiences. A lot goes into deciding which shows were the best, including the venue, the sound, the seat location, and, of course, the artist’s performance. Other variables include where the listener and artist are in their respective musical arcs and stages in life. When an artist’s performance dovetails with or exceeds a listener’s expectation, it is the perfect union.

Concerts to me are like special occasions. Not all special occasions are the same. Like weddings, birthdays, etc., some are more memorable and historic than others. As a music aficionado, I’ve attended over a hundred concerts. My three most favorite are, in ascending order: The Allman Brothers with Duane Allman at Stony Brook University (1970); Led Zeppelin for $2.50 in Central Park (1969) – and the Rolling Stones at Madison Square Garden for their *Exile on Main Street* tour (1972). I experienced all as a highly impressionable teen, a time in my life that no doubt contributed to the deep resonance these shows had for me.

Why I’ve ranked the Stones’ *Exile* concert number one is partly because of what unexpectedly happened to me the evening of the performance. In allotting the tickets to the Stones’ four shows at Madison Square Garden, the promoter introduced a then-novel concept: a postcard lottery system. The fear was that ticket demand would be so strong it would swamp both the box office and the widely used and unreliable Ticketron computer system, a precursor to today’s Ticketmaster. The lottery required that fans mail in a postcard, and if their postcard was randomly selected they could purchase up to four tickets to a show.

The promoter received over 500,000 mail-in postcards. There were so many, they literally had to store them in massive bins, and then stir each with a shovel prior to selection. This was no senior citizen bingo game!

I mailed in a ton of postcards and luckily two were selected. It was like winning Lotto! I sold off a
few tickets and went to the July 24, 1972 show with friends. Our assigned seats were horrible, halfway up the venue’s highest tier. Back then the upper-tier in Madison Square Garden was called “the blues,” because of the section’s seat color, though a more apt explanation is that you were so far away, that’s how being there made you feel. Although disappointed, still, I was grateful to be in the building.

The opening act on the Stones’ *Exile* tour was the great, even-then legendary Stevie Wonder. He delivered an incredibly good set, not surprising, but the sound from our vantage point was piss-poor. As the roadies began re-setting the stage for the Stones, I told my friends, “I’m gonna take a walk.” 

Like the sun’s gravitational pull, I immediately was drawn to the venue’s lowest and best seats. Now venue security in 1972 was not nearly as tight as today’s concert experience, though certainly challenging the closer one got to the stage. Like many venues, security at Madison Square Garden is entrusted to these massively large, burly guys. They could steamroll their way through an aisle just via their natural gait. As I weaved my way down to the first row front of stage, I realized, once the house lights dimmed, security was going to clear the aisles up and down orchestra level. I also knew that once the lights dimmed, everyone was going to stand.

As the house lights went down, and before anyone’s eyes could fully adjust, I did what any positively rock-crazed, insane teen would do. I impulsively dove under the seats in the first row, as the patrons in those seats stood in anticipation. Yup, I was literally down on the floor in the dark, with the gunk, grime, grease and whatever else lived down below. I’m not sure antibiotics could kill what likely was growing there. But I knew I had to withstand this horror show only for a minute or two.

When the security guards and their size 14 shoes sauntered past me in their aisle sweep, I realized I was home free. I popped up like a jack-in-the-box and moved to dead center. As everyone else was standing, nobody paid mind to who did or didn’t have a seat.

The next thing I heard was the voice of legendary announcer “Chip” Monck of Woodstock fame: “Ladies and Gentlemen, The Rolling Stones.” As Keith Richards hit the opening notes to “Brown Sugar,” Jagger began to prance across the stage. I was so close I could see the glitter painted around his eyes. Right away, you could feel the tightness of the band, living up to its reputation as “the world’s greatest rock n’ roll band.” You could tell the boys were really enjoying themselves, and the sound was just the way I like it, loud. Keith Richards was wrinkle free. (Yes, there was a time.) He could have starred in a Neutrogena skincare commercial.

This would be the last US tour for Mick Taylor on lead guitar. Mick seemingly never quite fully blended in with the group, fame and adulation likely not his thing, though musically he arguably was the group’s most skilled guitarist and I say that with the deep respect for Keith, Ron Wood and Brian Jones. Rounding out the band was expressionless Bill Wyman on bass, Charlie Watts on drums, (yes, “Charlie was good tonight”), Bobby Keys and Jim Price on horns, and Nicky Hopkins on keyboards. Not too shabby a rhythm section.

When you’re that close to the stage, it’s easy to judge how into a performance an artist is by their body language, facial expressions, and how they engage with everyone else on stage. I could easily see how excited the Stones were to be playing in the “World’s Most Famous Arena,” and the energy they exhibited was infectious, easily spilling over to the audience. The concert was a “pinch me” type moment, exceeding any and all expectations.

The set list for the evening consisted of (6) tracks from *Exile*, (3) *Let It Bleed*, (2) *Sticky Fingers* and (1) *Beggar’s Banquet*, in my opinion the lads’ finest LP. The set did not include “Sympathy For the
Devil,” a song some have stated, incorrectly, that the Stones were playing at the infamous 1969 Altamont Speedway concert while an attendee was killed by a Hell’s Angels member who was working security. “Sympathy” was performed earlier in the concert. For some time, the song and the tragedy at Altamont were inextricably linked.

Upon further reflection, a few additional things stand out: New York City was the last stop on a grueling 32-city tour. The show I attended was opening night, with a top ticket price of $6.50. For a little modern-day perspective, I recently saw a used ticket stub for that exact NYC concert selling for $125 on eBay, and that stub was for a lousier seat than the one I was assigned! The tour grossed a then-record $4 million, certainly not chump change, but a far cry from the now-record $776 million set by Ed Sheeran on his recent Divide tour.

The 1972 tour was infamously named the “Stones Touring Party” cause that’s what it was, one big party. There was a film crew covering the tour for a soon-to-be-made documentary. Rumor has it, when Jagger screened a rough cut of the documentary he allegedly said, “I love it, but you can’t release it.” Why? It was too realistic, accurately covering all the drugs and debauchery. (I have a bootleg copy of the film, and that is a very apt description.)

Now if you’re still with me, this is where the story gets real interesting. I reconnected with my friends after the concert, who were concerned about my whereabouts, though I never gave serious thought to vacating my first row “seat.” Some of them believed my story while others did not. And there were no smartphones or digital cameras to corroborate my story.

Then a few years ago while surfing the internet one late evening, I amazingly discovered a picture with me in it. Click on this link and you’ll see me, dead center first row, both arms leaning over the railing in front of Mick. Irrefutable evidence shot 48 years ago. Complete vindication.

So, without further ado, the defense requests for an immediate dismissal on any and all charges of fraud or deception in the telling of this tale.

Neil Young and Phil Baker’s To Feel the Music

BOOK REVIEW

Written by John Seetoo
NEIL YOUNG AND PHIL BAKER

to Feel the Music

A SONGWRITER’S MISSION TO
SAVE HIGH-QUALITY AUDIO
Many if not most Copper readers are audiophiles, and one can safely presume we’re all music lovers. As such, I think we can surely identify with the passion expressed by Neil Young for music reproduction that can be felt, and not just heard. Hence, the reason Young and many other audio enthusiasts prefer music from analog or high-resolution digital sources over digitally-compressed and other lower-res formats.

To Feel the Music: a Songwriter’s Mission to Save High-Quality Audio is a book written by Neil Young and Phil Baker. It’s the behind-the-scenes story of the inception, creation, development and ultimate downfall of the failed Pono high-resolution digital music player that Neil Young famously funded and promoted starting in 2012. Given that the ideas for so many groundbreaking audiophile products are often inspired by a similar passion, I thought it especially appropriate to review To Feel The Music, a fascinating look at the challenges that a company faces in the 21st century in launching a new product, particularly an audiophile one.
**The Initial Vision**

To help create Pono Neil Young partnered with the book's co-author Phil Baker, a consumer electronics product designer with an impressive track record of iconic devices from Apple, Polaroid, Seiko, Barnes and Noble, and others.

*To Feel the Music’s* story is told in alternate chapters by Young and Baker. Young’s love of music and his mission to keep artists’ work from being degraded through digital compression is laudable. Young is also on a crusade to preserve classic recordings in high resolution before the analog masters have degraded beyond recovery.

While Pono was Neil Young’s idea, the task fell upon Baker to coordinate with Young’s manager, the late Elliot Roberts, to assemble the team required to make Pono a reality. This involved a host of concerns that the layman would never dream about, yet are probably everyday chores for every audio industry product entrepreneur.

From the very beginning, Pono was conceived to be a handheld player of hi-res downloaded digital music files, thus competing as a super-high-quality alternative to the soon to be defunct iPod and to cellphones and other low-res audio sources.

In creating an all-new product Baker had a panoply of immediate concerns including the Pono’s industrial design, user interface and screen, DAC and internal circuitry and software. Baker called in colleagues from his days of creating the Nook eBook reader for Barnes and Noble and other products to work on various aspects of the Pono. Neil Young was still funding it from his own pockets at this stage, and his loose, informal business approach would soon create Pono’s first hurdle. (Later Young would take on private investors.)

After initial prototypes of the hardware were ready and promotion for the Pono had already gone public, the designer for the proprietary software tried to hold back the code in a last-minute renegotiation for a bigger slice of the equity pie. Rather than succumb, Young, Baker, and their new CEO (see Section II following) were able to get another hardware designer to redo the circuitry to deliver high-res audio without needing the proprietary software, while keeping the additional cost incurred to a minimum.

Along with designing the actual device, the other immediate concern was being able to obtain high-res audio content to play on the Pono, at a low-enough cost to ensure Pono’s viability. In order to ensure the content was truly high-resolution, a scrupulous forensic effort was required to ensure that the high-resolution content met Pono’s standards. This task was often made difficult by poor record-keeping on the part of some record labels.

**Financing and Management**

Since Neil Young was focused on his own recording and live performance career, getting Pono off the ground required full-time management in order to become an actual audio company and not just a rich rock star’s hobby. Start-up tech companies are a very different animal than record and other entertainment companies, and the skill sets required are very different. Finding the right CEO proved elusive. Once Pono found John Hamm, an investor and consultant to many successful tech start-ups and a dedicated audiophile, they had someone solid at the helm. Software engineers (to create an online store), a business development manager, a marketing director and other personnel were hired soon after to make Pono an actual business.

Hamm’s financial expertise became crucial when development costs required an additional several
million dollars that Young and his pool of private investors could not supply. It was decided to deploy an innovative Kickstarter campaign. Aided by the ability to purchase signed Pono players from a host of like-minded musician friends like Willie Nelson, The Eagles and Crosby, Stills and Nash, the Pono Kickstarter campaign raised $6.2 million – a 2014 crowdfunding record for the second-highest-grossing Kickstarter hardware campaign and the third-highest Kickstarter campaign ever.

However, the success of the crowdfunding created increased expectations for delivering the first 15,000 Pono players on the stated availability date of within months, which put a time crunch on the quality control testing and product debugging stages that still had to take place.

Manufacturing and Sales Platforms

Baker concluded from the start that production of the Pono would need to be done in China. Luckily, his vast previous experience in electronic products sourcing led him to the right facilities in that country. The Pono units, complete with a Neil Young-designed reusable bamboo box and shrink wrap, were manufactured and packaged at the Chinese factory. However, a quality control issue occurred in about 20 percent of the initial units with the discovery of a loose screw rattle that had to be addressed. Additionally, bamboo products required quarantine in Israel and a few other nations, which necessitated repackaging units for those destinations. The factory quickly handled all of these concerns.

Setting up access to the music catalog would prove to be the more daunting task. Pono was attempting to re-create an iTunes-like site from scratch, along with a point-of-sale component. It might have been impossible to create an entire infrastructure, but fortunately Pono was able to modify a resource that had already been created by software giant Salesforce.com, thanks to Neil Young’s relationship with Marc Benioff, Salesforce.com’s CEO. (In fact, the Pono workaround later became the model for the direct-to-consumer platform currently used by Salesforce.com. Pono also made a deal with cloud-based music services provider Omnifone (now out of business) for the use of its back-end and sales collection services.

Initial Public Reception and Growth Obstacles

Given that Neil Young’s objective for Pono was to make high-resolution audio an accepted consumer format, the challenge was to convince the millions of mp3 and streaming listeners what high-resolution audio was and why it should be important to them.
Upon Pono’s launch, audiophiles and reviewers in high-end audio publications praised Pono for its excellent sound. However, other tech reviewers and influencers who had never experienced high-resolution audio would use iPod earbuds and other inadequate methods to audition Pono and, as a result, would be unable to discern a significant sonic difference. This led to a slew of accusations that the whole idea behind Pono was “snake oil,” and some outright refusals by a number of influencers to admit to their inexperience in evaluating high-performance audio, along with their reluctance to eschew the convenience of inferior-quality sound.

To his own frustration, Neil Young found that many tech heads’ love of digital gadgetry outweighed the ability for them to recognize the fundamental problems with digital audio that had made listening to anything other than high-res audio quality a clinically painful experience for him, complete with headaches and pain in his ears. And as a collector of antique cars, Young thought that car stereo systems might be an inviting market for Pono, but he would find out otherwise.

In discussions with Ford Motor Company’s Lincoln brand about installing Pono as a standard feature in Lincoln vehicles, Young was rebuffed when, during the evaluation process, Lincoln engineers insisted on feeding the signal from a Pono through lower-quality DACs into a collection of run-of-the-mill car speakers. To Young’s amusement, the engineers also mixed in an audio loop of engine rumble during the evaluations.

In another automotive industry meeting with Elon Musk, Young’s request to audition Pono in a Tesla with a simple wire-plug connection to an analog amp was met with sneers for not being a wireless technology, and a refusal by Musk to even consider the possibility that Pono would sound better than the digital processing used in the standard Tesla audio system. A possible distribution deal with audio giant Harman International also fell by the wayside.

When Pono required a further investment of $4 million, an investor was identified who wanted the usual seat on the corporation’s board, which would be commensurate with this person’s proportionate investment relative to Pono’s valuation. This met with resistance from a board member who also was a lawyer for several other board members. A power play ensued, resulting in the CEO’s dismissal. Young, Baker and Roberts all concluded, in retrospect, that this was one of the worst moves Pono had made. The company would subsequently falter for the remainder of its lifespan and never recover.

The straw that broke Pono’s back happened when Omnifone was taken over by Apple. Apple immediately shut down all of Omnifone’s business dealings with outside parties, including Pono, who was also a competitor. Pono eventually went out of business in 2017.

Yet Pono remains a reference standard for portable high-resolution audio devices. It was and is an excellent-sounding player, and received Stereophile’s Products of 2015 Digital Component of the Year award. Both Young and Baker have continued their collaborations with the Neil Young Archives and its Xstream service, aimed at Young’s desire to have his collected works made available to listeners in a format that enables his music to be heard in studio-quality sound as Young originally intended.

My personal perspective on the Pono saga is colored by the fact that my day job is as a project and corporate finance consultant, predicated on a prior 15-year tenure on Wall Street as a trader and investment banker. As such, I am well-aware of the kinds of considerations Young and Baker had to deal with behind the scenes.

The challenges faced by Young and Baker are not uncommon. To Feel The Music does an excellent
job of giving readers an intimate look into the struggles of contemporary small business entrepreneurs (defined as under $15 million valuation). In particular, Pono’s various technological and logistical obstacles seemed to pale in comparison to the internal financial and political ones, something that happens across all industrial sectors.

*To Feel The Music* left me with a deeper respect for Neil Young, whose music I have always loved, if not his self-indulgences at times. I think any audiophile will come away with a much greater appreciation for the dedication, hard work, and vision of those inventors who ceaselessly strive to ascend to greater heights in the quest for high-quality sound. And most of them accomplish this without a rock star sitting on their board of directors.
Crate-Digging for MP3s? No Joke

WAYNE'S WORDS

Written by Wayne Robins

Like many of us, I've been looking for bargain records, new or used, at record stores, highway antique shops, second hand emporiums, dilapidated book depositories and surprisingly well-organized Goodwill buildings for a long time. The pastime became known as crate-digging, because we weren't shopping for anything in particular, but looking through the crates or cartons of albums in the dollar bins on the floor looking for a cheap thrill, or just killing time.

It's not a totally archaic endeavor: a few years ago in upstate New York, in a second hand book shop, I spent one dollar on a mint vinyl copy of the original soundtrack album to the 1956 science fiction movie Forbidden Planet, considered one of the first electronic albums, played by the composers
There was a time when grand bargains could be had at a series of stores on West Eighth Street between Sixth Avenue and University Place in Greenwich Village. One specialized almost entirely of new jazz overstock from Atlantic, Riverside, Verve, Blue Note, Impulse and other major labels. Everything was cheap enough (three albums for $5, say), that you could take a chance of judging a record by its cover, and invest wisely in The Complete Yusef Lateef, swinging Latin jazz by Cal Tjader, or Pharaoh Sanders' Tauhid on Impulse: an impulse buy that more than delivered.

The problem with crate digging these days, even if you can find a record store or even a second hand store like Goodwill in your area, is that most people did not take care of their vinyl as well as you or I did. Goodwill stores are a good place to browse: there is always something. But most often that something is a Jim Nabors Christmas album, or an Andy Williams Christmas album, or a Connie Francis Christmas album. Or any Jim Nabors album, seemingly the vinyl of choice for those who give to Goodwill. It's hard to understand: a few years ago, while doing renovations, we called Goodwill offering a mint condition dining room set a few decades old, and they refused to even haul it away for free. But they'll take endless amounts of your Jim Nabors albums. It makes no sense to me.

I love my vinyl collection and my CD collection, but like many people, I suffer from the not-unpleasant minor malady of having too many choices, now that music is a nearly free utility that spouts from our phones to our speakers, headphones, ear buds or car audio. Too many choices; sometimes it’s just easiest to turn on the radio or the playlist shuffle and let the music out of the spout.
But I still like looking for music, a pleasurably addictive habit, so I crate dig for MP3s. It sounds ridiculous. How would you even do that? What I do is continue my subscription to eMusic.com, which sells downloads from an ever-shrinking music catalogue.

I have been a monthly subscriber since 2007. I am nothing if not loyal. I pay $11.99 a month, and for my loyalty I am given another few dollars of music purchase credits, so figure that for $12 I’m getting about $14 worth of purchases, which I must use each month: you can only carry over a balance to another month if it is less than 49 cents, which is the smallest amount a song may be sold for. (Single tracks might go up to 89 cents.) I would guess that a majority of the catalog sells for 49 cents a song. And the few people I know who’ve ever subscribed like to buy by the track, which is perfectly sensible if you make playlists for exercise, commuting, long drives, cooking, cleaning...all the activities in which music augments our lives.

But if you count that out in terms of albums, I have $14 a month to play with and can buy two albums, every month, at about $6.99 each. These prices are invariably a few dollars less than what the same albums would cost on Amazon or the Apple Music store. Subscribing forces me to buy two albums every month, and since I am stubborn and still think of the album as the proper means of taking measure of the art of popular music, I tend to look for albums. I also download some singles to round out my monthly purchase requirement.

Sometimes I can get considerably more than two albums if they are older jazz albums, which might consist of five or six longer tracks to constitute a 30-minute plus LP. Those tracks might be available individually at 49 cents each, so a jazz improv album with five or six longer tracks might cost $2.49 or $2.99. (Prices are also listed in euros, since eMusic is available in the EU.)

You download to your desktop, open the .zip file, and install it in your music library. I use what used
to be called iTunes. [I still have it on some of my devices as I stubbornly haven’t upgraded the OS on my Apple devices. – Ed.] The recording appears promptly with album art, and plays on all the devices I have access to my Apple playlist: phone, laptop, iPad, and desktop computer, where I do most of my work.

The eMusic service started in 1998. It has gone through many evolutions and iterations, but its initial purpose was to focus on selling indie music at a discount. In its earlier days (and again, I’ve been with it since 2007), it had quite a few of the larger indie labels except for a handful: no Sub Pop, no Matador. The technology was glitchy, downloads sometimes did not work, and the audio quality was minimal to basic.

In mid-2010s, eMusic made arrangements with major labels, and for a short period it was indeed a well-stocked virtual record store. But indie fans didn’t like the majors, the majors did not like their renumeration, and the overhead was high because eMusic had added plentiful and excellent features and reviews under the leadership of editor J. Edward Keyes. (I wrote for eMusic.com, rebranded as Wondering Sound, and curated both its classic rock and modern rock inside-the-app radio playlists.)

Since 2018, eMusic has lost many of its labels, and finding worthwhile music has become time-consuming. But gems pop up. A "lost" album, A Step Ahead by 1970s Stockton, CA soul-funk band The 9th Creation, recently surfaced on the Past Due label of Beat Caffeine blogger T. J. Gorton. Think a less-slick Earth, Wind & Fire, and since it has been awhile since this music has been in fashion (at least in my house), it's fresh.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lfAEeUXEY4

I also copped a Graham Parker and the Rumour concert set a few months ago, via a company called Enterprise Music and Distribution. It has a substantial number of concert discs in its "Legends Live" series of classic rock acts, but there's almost no information about when and where these recordings were made or which iteration of a band is performing. But with a selection from Blue Öyster Cult to Hall & Oates, you might want to take a shot.

Strange things show up on the HHO label: one of eMusic's most popular offerings of the last few months has been David Crosby and Graham Nash's Wind on the Water album. HHO also has
everything from Captain Beefheart's *Safe as Milk* to Doc Watson bluegrass, Duke Pearson bop, Soft Machine electronic rock, and Merle Haggard country. There is little about the personnel or sessions or even the labels themselves (many are based in Europe, and do their own compilations from various sources). I don't want to sell you off-brand or re-recorded material, but you can listen to 30- or 60-second samples before you buy in the eMusic app before you buy.

Some of my best jazz purchases have come from Nagel Heyer records, a German jazz label based in Hamburg. There are about 300 Nagel Heyer album downloads at this writing, including *Night Tide* by Lou Donaldson, a 16-track compilation of Blue Note tracks circa 1962. Tracks, including "Watusi Jump" and "Spaceman Twist," are so much better than their titles, and feature the likes of Grant Green on guitar and the underappreciated Big John Patton on organ. ($6.49 for the album, 49 cents a track.) For the same price, there's a 22-track Eric Dolphy collection called *Sugar*. I was on the fence about it until a little research showed that six of the cuts represent the whole 1961 New Jazz label album *Caribé* by the Latin Jazz Quintet and Eric Dolphy. It's not considered a Dolphy masterpiece, but it's an interesting session if you just want to do a web search for the particular tracks and buy them for 49 cents each.

Blue Moon Music, another international distributor, has 135 classic jazz albums in its collection, including titles by Charles Mingus, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock and others, but again, smart shoppers will want to try to do a search to find out the provenance of some of these sessions. The UK's Trunk Records label has hundreds of albums to download, and specializes in "lost film scores, unreleased TV music...sexploitation and kitsch," but poke around and you'll find the outstanding Miles Davis soundtrack to the 1958 French movie *L'ascenseur pour l'échafaud (Elevator to the Gallows)*, amid oddities from Basil Kirchen and a collection of British flexidisc tracks.

Rolling Tide music carries just about the whole Steve Forbert catalog, including a 19-track "Best of"
for $6.99, an outstanding discount since individual song downloads are 89 cents. And Willie Nile has a good selection of his catalog albums in the same price category, including his excellent 2013 album *American Ride*. Ani DiFranco's Righteous Babe Records is still on the roster.

All these selections could be temporary; labels, especially those dedicated to individual artists, disappear without notice. Sonic Youth's catalog was here one day, gone the next, as has Acony Records, Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings' label. It does take more time each month to find how to make the best use of my $14, but I don't mind the hours of browsing. That's the fun of crate-digging, even for MP3s.
Gayle Sanders of Eikon and MartinLogan, Part Two

FRANKLY SPEAKING

Written by Frank Doris

In Part One, Gayle talked about his formative years in audio and the founding of electrostatic loudspeaker company MartinLogan...and left us with a cliffhanger as all of the company's CLS loudspeakers began failing in the field. The story continues here.

Gayle Sanders: It was 2:00 am in the morning. In the darkness, hours before the dawn, I was facing my reality. I had failed. I had tried time and time again to fix the problem with the CLS, where the tension of the diaphragm would change over time and create an unwanted resonance and buzzing. I tried everything from power supply changes, grounding reconfigurations, structural mods, diaphragm conditioning, to even invoking sorcery...to no avail. This buzz on all of our CLS speakers was also growing into a rattle that raised its ugly head on each and every speaker out in the field. And I could not fix it.

I stood in the middle of the MartinLogan production floor, stared out into the space of our production area and began to weep. I thought, when the sun comes up, I have to call it quits, call all of our retailers and let them know I’m out of business and have to shut the doors. All of the years, all of the work, all of the trust...gone.

As I wept, the dark corner of an earlier project sitting against a white pillar caught my eye. What was that? Oh yeah, it’s a transducer I had tried early on in development.

I had abandoned it because it had a flat section on the edge of both sides of the diaphragm. It was not a perfect curvilinear line source (hence the name for the CLS loudspeaker), and because of the flat sections on the sides it had a slight high-frequency beaming off-axis. Barely noticeable, but if you
listened carefully as you walked by you could hear a slight increase of high frequencies on axis with those sections – it was like a slight shhhh to SHHHHH as you engaged that specific spot. But I also remembered it as having superb bass.

I had abandoned this design in my perfection-fixated, myopic focus on creating the perfect transducer. (You know, the one that reproduces all frequencies with no crossover in a seamless distribution pattern...) Staring at the transducer now, I thought, “It’s not perfect but what have I got to lose?! Build a pair and test them out!”

I quickly put together a prototype assembly rig and fabricated a pair of the “not quite perfect” transducers. The clock was ticking. The MartinLogan team was coming to work in a few hours... and I had to get this thing right...NOW!

By configuring the central area of the transducer in the signature CLS (curved) format I retained the superb dispersion of the CLS. By then creating asymmetric woofer panels on either side, that tuning rendered a very linear, high-excursion bottom end to a usable 50 Hz with a nice suggestion of deep bass at 35 Hz. Whoa dude! Bottom end! Great dispersion! Yes, there was a slight increase of high-frequency energy at the periphery but it was negligible. What remained was that magnificent transparency that only a completely pure, super-low mass, superbly linear, crossoverless transducer can reveal...pure magic.

During the design process for the CLS, I was also ultra-fixated on making sure that the shipping box for that transducer could be shipped via UPS. The transducer was big – It was 2 feet wide by 4 feet high and it took a great deal of creative design effort to fit that monster into a box that was UPS-able. It was literally 1/4-inch under the maximum UPS height-girth dimension. But now I knew that work was going to pay off.

The morning came. The sun rose. And as morning light flowed onto our production floor, the entire MartinLogan team focused on building this modified transducer. We set to work 24/7. At our expense we sent replacement transducers to each and every dealer and customer in the field – No questions asked. If you had a problem we sent new transducers for free.

Weeks passed. The phone rang off the hook. Everyone was overjoyed. And a small miracle occurred. All of that suffering, not just mine but of everyone who had suffered along with me, created a community and a comradeship. A deep bond began to form. Together we had made it through a very difficult time and had come out of it successfully.

Those of us at MartinLogan, our retailers and our customers became a passionate community that had prevailed and succeeded together! What a wonderful feeling. I learned a big lesson. Rather than known as that company of broken electrostatic speakers, MartinLogan became known as that company you can trust. A company that loves their customers, admits their mistakes and solves your problems, and man did that pay off in the long run.

FD: I never knew that. Let’s shift gears completely now! I remember the first time you came out to *The Absolute Sound* to visit Harry Pearson and myself. Harry kept strong-arming you to have sushi. You’d never had it, were reluctant to try it and he insisted, “you have to get sushi-fied!” Finally we went and you enjoyed it. Actually, we all got sake-fied a little too much and you wound up crashing at Harry’s house. The next morning you’d left, and left a note that said, “I’ve been sushi-fied!” Harry was charmed (and more than a little hung over). What was it like for you to meet Harry that night?

GS: Harry was an icon (no pun intended) in the industry. But to be reviewed by him was a double
edged sword! Remember those days Frank? To submit a product to Harry was a bit like heaven and hell...in those days, the high-end audio industry was defined by Harry. To get a rave review would put your company on the map. To get a bad review meant you would then then die on your sword. So, it was with trepidation that I first met Harry.

But that was a great night and it still brings such great memories. From that moment on, I sushi-fied all my friends. As a matter of fact a few years later I ended up in the hinterlands of Japan and as we wandered into a sushi-house we found out we were the first non-Japanese to ever walk through their doors. By the end of the night, they had tried everything on me, and the owner and I were trading songs and singing late into the night.

**FD:** What made you decide to leave MartinLogan, a company you co-founded?

**GS:** I thought it was just time to move on. I had spent 30 years in the industry and felt it was time to look at other things in my life. But after a few diversions I realized that audio was my true love. Once it’s in your blood it’s there to stay. And I love it. It’s where I live. It’s what gets me up in the morning...and I found out that I wasn’t done.

In the beginning [right after leaving MartinLogan] I just relaxed. My wife Deborah and I moved to California and just enjoyed life. I supported a few small startups, one of which was in the health food industry. It was great fun but involved even more steps in the market distribution of the products than in the audio industry. As much fun as we had, at the end I decided to sell our company in that there were just too many steps in the distribution chain for anyone to be profitable.

During that time, I was able to look at our industry from a different viewpoint, and could see that the future of how we experience sound was going through a dramatic transformative change. Yes, I think the audiophile world as we know it will still be around for those that love to assemble their own systems and evaluate the sonic changes. In so many ways, I’m that person and I love the process of discovery. And sharing that with other members of our community [is extremely rewarding].

But the future is changing and the advancing digital technology, as Moore’s Law drives more and more performance, creates new solutions for an engineer’s palette. The convergence of digital advances in DACs, digitally-enabled amps, DSP and on and on, the ability to stream studio-quality music at your fingertips from streaming services like Tidal and Qobuz, along with the Internet of Things – all of this brings powerful tools to advance how we experience high-definition sound in our lives. So I began developing technology to advance our industry into that new and exciting world by integrating those disciplines. This led to the beginning of Eikon Audio and the development of the Image1 system.

*The Eikon Image1 system is comprised of two 4-way active loudspeakers, and the Eikontrol preamplifier with DSP including room correction. – Ed.*

These new digital technologies allowed me to finally explore solutions that weren’t available in the MartinLogan days. A new world of possibilities was now available. In our loudspeakers I can now throw away the passive crossover components, use dedicated amplification to drive each transducer directly, and tailor the frequency response and time coherence of each driver with surgically precise filters. We can also control the wave front in the time domain. In addition, we can reduce the size of the speaker enclosure to 1/4-normal size yet retain bone-crushing, subterranean bass extension, at incredible sound pressure levels.
We can direct bass energy away from destructive wall reflections and focus it into the room. In addition, with our wavelet technology we can correct room problems dramatically beyond the classic passive and active room treatment schemes.

And that’s just for starters. Not to mention that we can tailor the system to different recording schemes, have control of the system from a phone, and create multi-room whole-house solutions, all without compromising performance.

With this technology Eikon can achieve the precision and resolution of electrostatic loudspeaker panels in a compact system with incredible dynamics and slam. [Because the speakers are able to have a smaller form factor, we can] also begin to really integrate sculpture and art into these incredible feats of engineering.

Let’s talk about crossovers. Since the beginning of multiple-driver systems we have used capacitors, resistors, and inductors to filter the audio spectrum, shaping the frequencies that are handled by tweeters, midrange, and woofers. When we use crossovers after the amplifier, it’s a passive crossover. When we use them in front of the amplifier it’s an analog electronic crossover. But no matter what, we have used these crossovers to attenuate high, midrange or lower frequencies, and then try to blend the drivers together in the hopes they can sing together in order to sound as one.

But in designing a loudspeaker, we are trying to create a speaker that delivers as pure a signal as possible, so the ideal situation is to have nothing in the signal path between the amplifier and the driver itself. Putting capacitors, inductors and resistors in the path can only degrade the performance. It’s embarrassing to think that we spend thousands of dollars on cables to connect our amplifier and speakers, and then drive the signal through inductors, resistors and caps. They are rather crude devices at best for shaping the frequency spectrum. And they are even more limiting when we try to adjust performance in the time domain [and have the low, midrange and high-frequencies arrive at our ears at the same time]. That’s why you see designers literally physically positioning the drivers on the baffle board to get them to even come close to some semblance of time alignment. But that just aligns the drivers themselves, not necessarily the complete audio wave launch.

Inductors can suffer from a host of inherent problems ranging from saturation, to hysteresis, to cross-induction. Even the best inductors are problematic. Capacitors are just as problematic. They are inherently storage devices and can easily become nonlinear. They store voltage and then release that energy, and they can suffer from dielectric absorption and hysteresis among other problems – in the best of worlds.

So what is the ideal situation? Purify the signal! Throw away the lossy, destructive passive analog crossover components. Get them out of the signal path and directly connect the amp to each individual driver. Now that we find ourselves in the digital world and have processing power at blazing speeds, the logical place to apply crossover filtering is in the digital domain. Once we impose filters in the digital domain we have supreme control over surgically-precise sonic tailoring. Furthermore, we have control in microseconds over the entire bandwidth of the entire system.

FD: Who did the industrial design? It’s striking. I’m sure you get this a lot, but after seeing pictures of the Eikon I expected the speakers to be bigger.

GS: Thanks Frank – back in the MartinLogan days, elegant design became our identity. We were not only technology-driven but we were also committed to setting standards design-wise. But back then, if you had a beautiful design it almost worked against you. Remember? It had to be ugly to sound
good! Hah. But I came from the architectural design world and excellence in design was a significant part of who we were. The same is true with Eikon.

The Image1 is still my work. [The design] was developed over two years, at the same time we were engineering the system, using the classic “old school” design method. Starting with pencil sketches, moving to clay models, working through physical construction...I developed three complete prototypes before the final design. We started with a simple straight-sided enclosure to laminated, curved sides, to the final bevel-cut system you see now. We have a young, talented team supporting my efforts with 3D and advanced virtual reality CAD (computer-aided design) and rendering.

And yes, the speakers’ diminutive size is deceiving. By integrating DSP, driver, and cabinet design we are able to dramatically shrink the box size without compromising depth of bass or output.

When designing a traditional passive stand-alone speaker, the engineer is handcuffed by the electro-mechanical alignment requirements of the driver/box relationship. The physics require a very large box to create extended bottom end. If you shrink the box size, the bass will roll off and you are left with vanishing or, at least, anemic bass and extension. This is one of the strengths of our system design orientation. When you integrate every aspect of the system, that is, DSP, amplification, and driver/box design, you have an open palette [that allows you] to shrink the box size and offset that bass rolloff with an equal amount of opposing EQ. It’s not quite that simple but, with the right digital and electro-mechanical engineering and amplification, one can then shrink the box dramatically yet still retain the same bass extension. Very cool.

And so the Image1 is at least half the size of a passive speaker yet has bottom end equal to or beyond in both extension and output, down to 25 Hz.

**FD:** The “Eikontrol” control unit – how did you come up with that name? - offers user-defined sonic “Personality Maps.” How does that work? It also seems to fly in the face of conventional wisdom, which decrees that there would be only one “accurate” sound for an audio system.

**GS:** One night we were trying to figure out what to call our master control box and Eikontrol just fell out as we were chatting, and you know you have the right name when it keeps being repeated by everyone.

Ah, the Personality Maps...yes there we go again, flying in the face of conventional wisdom. Of course, our goal in creating a reference system is perfection when reproducing the signal, but as you know, that’s far from what happens when you’re in the recording studio. Otherwise we would all be listening to that favorite Stones album when we do a system demo.

How many times [as manufacturers and audiophiles] are we forced to demo with less-than-great music because the great music we really want to listen to has been poorly mixed or EQ’d etc. The Personality Maps allow you to set specific compensation to offset that issue – “opening up” a host of recordings that were almost unlistenable before. I mean. that’s the future of high-performance audio. Not just some narrow version of what to listen to but to open up the palette of opportunity without compromising performance!

So, it’s about accommodating the realities of compromised recordings and broadening the user experience. As a matter of fact, in the future, we intend to publish specific sonic “maps” for our Eikon community for those recordings of great music that are almost unlistenable on conventional reference systems.
FD: Tell us about your in-home demo program. With fewer dealers, this aspect seems more important than it might have been a few years ago. Also, how are you handling it in light of COVID-19, and how has the pandemic affected your company in other ways?

GS: To tell you the truth, it’s been a big challenge for us. Our main launch happened right at the same time COVID-19 hit. Robert Harley had just given the Image1 an extensive review in the April 2020 issue of *The Absolute Sound*, and we were ready to exhibit at AXPONA (which was canceled). So it’s been an uphill battle. But we have great supporters and our team is growing by leaps and bounds, so we are surviving and even thriving in many ways. “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” We are [getting better] at our unique abilities to create a reference-quality listening experience. And I strongly feel we have superior solutions for the high-end user.

FD: Without spilling any secrets (or spill them here if you want – editors love exclusives), what can we expect to hear from Eikon in the future?

GS: There’s more to come – getting crazy sonic magic out of ever-shrinking boxes. Creating a Master Signature series. We are envisioning new products for the custom-installation world too. That space is also going through dramatic changes and [many] suppliers are locked into the old world, while our technology and design orientation can bring radical new product solutions to that [market] as well.

As they say: “stay tuned!”
I was talking with singer/songwriter Ryan Hamilton the other day about his thoughts on the music of the 1970s and early 1980s. A celebrated musician within the world of Americana, Hamilton has just followed up last year’s award-winning release, *This Is the Sound*, with his latest album, *Nowhere to Go but Everywhere*.

Ryan and I talked about his early influences. He admitted that the music his Dad loved from that era continues to inspire him to this day, because what musicians were making sounded so new, and there was something really “free” about their creative process. When he mentioned that Bob Seger was one of his influences from that period I relayed a story I thought Hamilton would appreciate, especially because he is on Steve Van Zandt’s Wicked Cool label and Steve is Bruce Springsteen’s consigliere...

Whenever I am in Los Angeles I prefer to stay at the Sunset Marquis hotel in West Hollywood. It has a rich history rooted in rock and roll. Nestled below the Sunset Strip at 1200 Alta Loma Road, it’s located within a neighborhood and would go completely unnoticed if you didn’t know it was there. The hotel is set up in an oval around a large patio and pool and includes a sprinkling of private bungalows that dot the property’s perimeter. But the standout feature of any stay here is their bar. Named Bar 1200, it’s a small, quiet, dark room that is rarely filled with patrons but overflows with...
There I have found myself alone on many a weekday night after a full day of meetings and kept company with only the bartender and a random guest like, oh I don’t know, Julian Lennon. Stars pop in and out of the Marquis bar quietly but sitting there ringside I have had many conversations with boldfaced names, talking about a range of topics as wide as music, guitars, watches, and tequila. The stories I hold most dear are those that involve the respect musicians have for other musicians and the collaborative spirit that once was the industry norm, not the exception. Because of this, a picture of the bar sits framed in my house and remains a steady reminder of some really terrific nights. As a famous and anonymous person once said of Bar 1200: “Don’t make it too popular or I’ll stop coming back!” Well said indeed.

My favorite story about Bar 1200 was one that I didn’t actually hear at the hotel. Instead I heard it thousands of miles away at the midtown Manhattan offices of *Rolling Stone*. I was there one day a few years ago while having lunch with Bob Seger, *Rolling Stone* founder Jann Wenner and some members of the editorial team, we spoke to Bob about heading back out on the road behind what would become his second-to-last studio record. That night Seger was performing at Madison Square Garden and to most of us it was a surprise to hear that he still would get the jitters on stage. As a result he always tried to open with up-tempo tracks like “Hollywood Nights” to shake off his nerves. After all of those years of performing live and being known for delivering white-hot concerts it was stunning to learn that even “Boppin Bob” gets butterflies in front of an audience.

But the story that stopped me in my tracks was one he told about the Sunset Marquis. The year was 1980 and Bob was recording his masterpiece, *Against the Wind*.

This year a 40th anniversary edition of the record was remastered, but the packaging remained the same as the original release. There was no bonus material in the 40th anniversary release other than a 45-RPM single and B-side that came in a deluxe colored-vinyl version. So there was no forum like added liner notes or a booklet or anything like that in which to tell this fantastic tale.

It turns out that Bob was staying at the Sunset Marquis during the *Against the Wind* sessions. It also turns out that Bruce Springsteen was in town at that time mixing *The River*. As fate would have it, Bruce had decided to stay at the Sunset Marquis as well.

Bob Seger told us that he and Bruce Springsteen by this point had become close friends. In fact, Seger had been wrestling with the song “Night Moves” for a long time, not quite finding a way to knit what he had written together in a manner that wasn’t clunky or forced. According to Seger, it was Bruce who told him that it was OK to add more than one bridge to a song. As Bob told it, Bruce kind of “gave permission” to do what Seger had considered unorthodox. Seger made the change and the rest is history. Not only did Bob say that we would never otherwise have heard “Night Moves,” but even if we did it would not have become the hit that it did without Bruce’s important contribution.

The story then moves back to the hotel. Apparently during their time at the Sunset Marquis, Bruce and Bob would huddle at the bar every night and have dinner together. There they would run
through their recording studio developments of that day. Bob would offer Bruce his thoughts on mixing, but in return, Bruce would give his track-by-track-input for *Against the Wind*. Bob began to rattle off, track by track, the suggestions that Springsteen had made. Each dinner engagement was a working session that went into the night. None of us had ever had any idea that Springsteen had such an influence on Seger – and vice versa.

The following mornings they would stand outside the hotel, each waiting for their car to take them back to the studio. There Springsteen would use the moment to run through the changes they had discussed the night before, one last time. This went on for something like two weeks, where Seger at one point described the two of them to be something like an old married couple, making suggestions at Bar 1200 as to what the other should order for dinner based upon how they had “reacted” to the dishes they’d had the night or two prior. That time they spent they further deepened their now life-long bond and, let’s face it, resulted in two fantastic records that will outlive us all in relevance and relatability.

For a lot of performers, getting this much direction from a peer might have been hard on the ego if not simply difficult to process. But Bob Seger is arguably one of the most humble folks you might ever meet. He rarely takes credit for any of his success, instead feeling more comfortable passing that along to others.

Later in the lunch he told us about the time he walked through a diner in his native Detroit with his family after finishing breakfast. It was an early Saturday morning and as he passed through the booths, an unemployed auto worker who Bob had nodded “hello” to responded by asking Bob why he hadn’t done anything to help the ‘Big Three” automakers (General Motors, Chrysler and Ford) bounce back from the recession the industry had fallen into. Bob stopped and spoke with the auto worker and his friends, leaving the diner determined to do something.

Through his team, he made his song “Like A Rock” available to Campbell Ewald, Chevrolet’s then-advertising agency of record. The song was the title track of his just-released 1986 album and really was about how your late teens are the best years of your life. But Campbell Ewald cast the song as being about toughness, and kept it as the Chevy truck theme song for 12 years. During that time the company sold millions of trucks, and when they retired the song from being used in commercials, Chevy truck sales took a downward slide. The impact “Like A Rock” made on Chevy truck sales ties right back to that auto worker who stopped him at a diner to say his piece. That’s who Bob Seger is.  

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMIJuuk1SFs

And that’s who people like Ryan Hamilton and I admire so greatly. They made music we will carry with us through our lives and hopefully pass on to our kids, and then they’ll pass the music on to their kids. But such artists are also creators of great character who live their lives with purpose, putting others ahead of themselves and also placing the highest value on the friendships they have forged. At the Sunset Marquis in 1980, the friendship between Bob Seger and Bruce Springsteen birthed some great music, and a story that always makes me smile.
Dear Reader,

Hi there! Yes, I’m back from a self-imposed sabbatical. Wish I could say it cleared my head, sharpened my hearing, lifted my spirits. Probably did, a little. But my overall experience of the last six months and counting may have been like yours, which is to say: Groundhog Day. The takeaway? It helps to just keep going.

One thing I learned (over and over again) was to balance the quotidian and the transcendent. Sometimes a little peanut butter (crunchy, please) on a cracker (preferably a Keebler Toasted) means a lot. But so does Mahler; so does Bill Frisell. (For me, quotidian pleasures tend to get more specific than the transcendent ones.) I promise not to strain for too much transcendence in this space, nor deny any. We’ll see how that goes.

Recently I’ve developed a special affection for the sound of the viola, the alto/tenor member of the violin family. It’s pitched a fifth lower than the violin, so acoustically its body should be half again as large, but it isn’t. Any such instrument would be impossible to play as violins are played, at the shoulder. You will hear a wide range of individual viola sounds on recordings; typically the highest string produces a more nasal, piercing sound than the warmer, less assertive tones of the G and D middle strings. The ultimate test of a well-designed viola is just how beautiful yet resonant a tone you can produce on C, its lowest string.*
Good composers take these anomalies into account. In Ralph Vaughan Williams’s genial Suite for Viola and Orchestra (1934), sounds from the viola’s mellow middle register introduce our soloist and predominate thereafter. Here’s the first movement:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OivR-b5eSvI&list=PLSNKFkwo1plF8X5QAfUbd_S3evPo_XcLi

The music begins with more than a hint of Bach’s WTC but soon progresses to the pastoral lyricism more often associated with this composer. The YouTube link above offers a sequence of six tracks from violist Timothy Ridout’s excellent new album; the first four are drawn from Vaughan Williams’ Suite. It’s lovely, inviting music.

Vaughan Williams was himself a violist, as were two other composers represented on Ridout’s collection, Paul Hindemith and Benjamin Britten. The album’s weightiest music, however, comes from Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959), whose two-movement Rhapsody-Concerto (1952) will satisfy anyone craving a dose of Romantic High Drama. Like RVW, Martinů pointed to folk music (Czech, in his case) and English madrigals as strong influences. (The Rhapsody-Concerto’s first movement is No. 5 in the YouTube sequence above.)

In terms of sheer viola output, Hindemith (1895–1963) easily surpasses RVW and Britten put together. His dual career as a composer and viola soloist may account for this — after all, he’s often credited as founder of a whole movement: Gebrauchsmusik, “music that’s needed.” By 1935 he had written several viola concertos including Der Schwanendreher, based on melancholy folk songs that reference departure, loneliness, and grief. That was no accident: two years earlier, the cultural masters of the Third Reich had turned fully against him, and he could no longer obtain performances or commissions in his native Germany.

In January 1936 the composer arrived in London, where he had been engaged to play Schwanendreher with the BBC Symphony. Then George V died. Musical life in Great Britain came to a standstill, but the Brits made an unusual request. As Hindemith told his wife,

*They did not want to do without me and so I wrote a piece of funereal music for string orchestra and solo viola. It is not really that original but as I had to do it quickly, I could not go on voyages of discovery.*

The resulting Trauermusik ended with a Bach chorale well-known in England, Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit. It was broadcast with great success and became a staple of the viola repertoire, causing Hindemith to joke that “I’m now going to specialize in corpses.” (It’s No. 6 in our YouTube sequence.)
For a partial update to Ridout’s astutely assembled 20th-century Viola Club, I suggest a new piece by Pēteris Vasks (b. 1946), my personal nominee for Grand Old Man of Latvian music (do other candidates even exist?). Prolific Mr. Pēteris had already contributed two cello concertos and several works for violin and orchestra to the repertoire (I like his second cello concerto, *Klātbūtne*), so it was high time he came up with something viola-centric; violist/conductor Maxim Rysanov obliged with a commission. We can hear the result of their successful collaboration on a new album from BIS; it also features one of Vasks’s most celebrated earlier works, the *Symphony for Strings*.

Vasks regards the viola as “a particularly melancholic instrument,” therefore “a very suitable one to talk about the time we are living in.” Its four movements make use of two concepts, *chant* (song) and *monologue* (conversation). In this case it’s a conversation “with oneself” and “about our time.” Dāvis Ēņģelis, who wrote the liner notes, tells us that for Vasks,

> in every piece there has to be something that leads the listener towards the light; in the Viola Concerto this path is more strenuous than in any other of his works.

I hope you find the four movements of this concerto so beautifully varied, so passionate, that their cathartic impact more than justifies the struggle they so forcefully express. To that end, I’m offering just the first four minutes of the third-movement Andante. In it, grief is still fully evident, that elusive ray of hope not yet in sight:

And now to slip down a notch on the string-family scale.

Several years ago in this spot I praised a big orchestral piece, *Night Ferry*, by Anna Clyne (b. 1980). The composer describes it as

> music of voyages, from stormy darkness to enchanted worlds, music of the conjurer and setter of tides, [a] guide through the “ungovernable and dangerous.” . . . [These] threads of ideas and imagery . . . stem from Riccardo Muti’s suggestion that I look to Schubert for inspiration.
(You can read more of her thoughts about this astonishing music here.) A glance at Clyne’s catalog reveals that she has written over two dozen pieces since then, many of them major works commissioned by distinguished soloists or ensembles. One of them is DANCE. It’s now gotten a first-rate recording from cellist Inbal Segev, who commissioned it, and the London Philharmonic, here conducted by longtime Clyne advocate Marin Alsop:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La22CjPFbIY&list=PL7ZfGHjjuXtuV56wwOF8kzeE5dm70XhIY

DANCE sounds wildly different from Night Ferry. That was no accident: Clyne was inspired by a poem of Rumi, which consists of five brief lines, each of which becomes a separate movement.

Dance, when you’re broken open.
Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you’re perfectly free.

If you listen closely, you’ll discover patches of complex, sensitive orchestral scoring not dissimilar to the phantasmagorical textures in Night Ferry. A bigger difference lies in this work’s striking — and strikingly accessible — succession of moods, which the gifted Segev delivers faultlessly. Her album is filled out with a work written exactly a hundred years earlier, the Elgar Cello Concerto. Honestly, even in such august company Clyne’s music more than holds its own. Impressive playing by the LPO, strong leadership from the podium.

*Thanks to David Boyden, New Grove 1980, for the straight dope on viola DNA.

Header: Viola by Antonio & Girolamo Amati, Cremona, 1617; held by Kim Kashkashian.
The Legacy of Eddie Van Halen

TWISTED SYSTEMS
Written by Jay Jay French

There are millions of guitar players.
There are thousands of really good guitar players.
There are hundreds of really great guitar players.

And then there is an elite group very near the top whose style is so unique that you know who they are immediately when you hear them. Santana, B.B. King, Duane Eddy, Chuck Berry, Keith Richards, Jeff Beck and Albert King come to mind.

But, at the very top of Mount Olympus, where Zeus resides, there exist the most astonishing guitar players of all.

This select group created a musical language and pathways that did not exist before they took their first breath of life.

This group consists of Django Reinhardt, Andres Segovia, Jimi Hendrix and Eddie Van Halen.

Like athletes who break world records, these special guitar players have shown us where we can go when we thought that there was nowhere else to go.

These players broke the rules by steamrolling over them.

These giants gave us a new language.
There is no higher recognition that can be given.

Eddie Van Halen now resides with the Gods of Guitar.

*Header image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons/Abby Gillardi](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eddie_Van_Halen_by_Abbey_Gillard.jpg).*
“Great recovery Roy,” yelled the wrangler as I tightly pulled back on the reins of my horse whose front legs had collapsed on the steep downward slope.

This happened on the last day of our two-week vacation at a dude ranch near Buena Vista, Colorado.

After a trip to Cairo, Egypt and a ride around the pyramids on a very placid horse, I fancied myself a rider and with my wife’s approval we booked a trip to a dude ranch. The brochure boasted a western experience with riding every day.

The ranch was rustic but very comfortable, with one caveat – it was 8,000 feet up a mountain.

Situated near an abandoned silver mine in the middle of a national forest, we reached it after a 10-mile drive on a dirt road. At the time we visited in 1991, the ranch had no direct telephone line, only an emergency communication system. They had also just been given an official street address so they could receive parcels via UPS. This was good because I sent a case of wine before our arrival.

The accommodation was very comfortable but we were on the second floor and as I was not acclimated to the elevation, it was one staircase too much. Wheezing and panting, I struggled up the
15 steps to collapse on my bed.

That evening after a copious dinner of meat and potatoes, (every night there were delicious versions of that theme) we had orientation. This started out as silly games and jokes to relax everyone. Then came the long list of safety rules and the schedule for the next few days. Weary from the travel and the altitude, I forced my way up the never-ending staircase to my bed.

“Riding every day.” This turned out to be a curse as I wasn’t to the saddle born. The first day, we were assigned horses according to individual skill and experience. Mine was a placid stallion that seemed to be gentle. We were taught how to push away from aspen trees because the horses loved to unseat their riders by scraping along the side of them. Forewarned and very nervous I saddled up and we took off up the mountain.

At first the trail was easy but at one point we trotted onto the edge of a cliff. The drop must have been thousands of feet. I then realized that my life depended on the sure-footedness of a 1,000 lb. nag. I tensed up, shut my eyes and hoped to survive. Apparently, I didn’t die as we started slowly to descend. The whole ride took an hour or so and after we returned, I found upon dismounting that my legs were frozen in the same position as they were on the horse. For 45 minutes I couldn’t straighten my legs, then slowly I managed to crawl on all fours to my room.

Every day we rode, and slowly, while I learned how to control my horse, my breathing started to ease. One morning we all rose early and rode up the mountain. When we arrived at a clearing, the biggest frying pan I had ever seen was already on a fire cooking bacon and eggs. That delicious breakfast, eaten in the pure mountain air while gazing at the Rockies, framed by aspen trees, was magical.

With my western boots, Wrangler jeans and Stetson, I was turning into a facsimile of a cowboy.

Some days, when we chose not to ride, were fun. We went white water rafting in the Arkansas river, which was exciting and a little dangerous. A road trip to Aspen via the 12,000-foot-high Independence Pass was hair-raising as one of our wranglers drove a van at high speed on this two-lane road with sheer drops, no barriers and hairpin bends. We briefly stopped at the summit and if 8,000 feet makes you short of breath, don’t go higher. Aspen was lovely if a little twee.

Back at the ranch, I tried my hand at skeet shooting, mostly missing the target and discovering that my eyes weren’t as good as they used to be.

Fishing was abundant as the ranch had a pond that was well stocked with trout. But even better were the pools built by beavers. Sometimes (I guess before their lunch) these pools were also well-stocked. One day my son Ilan caught a large trout. To put it out of its misery I, as my father had taught me, grabbed it by the tail and smashed its head against a rock. Nine-year-old Ilan was mortified by this and refused to eat it that night when it was served whole roasted on a plate.

Meals were “good and plenty.” The wranglers ate with us. They were a great crew, typically young, from all over the West. Most of them had been riding since childhood and they really kept an eye on us on the trail. For the guests, dinner was a time to schmooze and relax. Not so for the wranglers. They shoveled the food into their mouths and hurriedly left. Maybe they had chores to do or as I suspected, the less time they had to spend with us, the better.

The ranch had a pig who ate the leftovers from the diners every night. From time to time, the ranch would buy a young pig, fatten him up, then butcher him. The owner told us that the pig always got agitated when she approached with the leftovers, but what really freaked the owner out were the
times when the leftovers were pork. This caused the pig to grunt gleefully with anticipation before devouring his cousins.

On the first day of our second week, a new group of guests arrived. The following day a man in his fifties sat opposite me for breakfast. He was resplendent in his brand-new, squeaky-clean, Orvis Outfitters, fly-fishing gear. Without knowing him, I said, “You look like you should be wearing a suit.”

He glowered at me, stood up and moved to another table. Later on, I discovered that he was a Wall Street banker.

As I mentioned earlier, orientation on the first night consisted of silly games and so on. On the beginning of the second week, the owners suggested that I shouldn’t attend as it would be boring for me. Nevertheless, I went.

To break the ice, the owner asked the group a question, “What was your most embarrassing moment?” As he spoke, he turned, looked at me and said, “Roy?”

My answer?

“This is my second week.”

Header image of the Double Diamond Dude Ranch courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/National Park Service.
When his Liverpool-based band called the Crucial Three broke up in 1978, singer Ian McCulloch formed a trio with guitarist Will Sergeant and Les Pattinson on bass. Echo & the Bunnymen was among a list of preposterous band names suggested by a friend. The joke has turned into over 50 years of serious success.

Among McCulloch’s early influences was his Crucial Three bandmate Julian Cope, who helped define the sound and spirit of British post-punk music and culture. The first time Echo & the Bunnymen played in public, it was to open for Cope’s new band, The Teardrop Explodes. The Bunnymen just riffed on one song for 20 minutes, true to the middle-finger-raising musical tenets of post-punk.

Their debut, Crocodiles (1980), was the first album released on Warner Records-owned Korova Records, established specifically for this genre and appropriately named after the Korova Milk Bar in Anthony Burgess’ proto-punk novel A Clockwork Orange. The main producers were Teardrop Explodes keyboardist David Balfe and cultural iconoclast Bill Drummond, who was also the Bunnymen’s manager. One track was produced by Ian Broudie (of late 1970s British band Big in Japan). The influential British music magazine NME described the album as full of “sorrow, horror and despair.”

The title song “Crocodiles,” with writing credits to the whole band, ends Side A. The message seems to be that life is inevitably horrible, so you might as well keep pressing forward instead of worrying about what’s coming up behind you. Up to this point, the trio had used a drum machine, but for this album they brought in Pete de Freitas, and his drumming is the best thing about this track.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3pRtC55HOQ
The band’s reputation grew quickly, and the next album, *Heaven Up Here* (1981), stayed on the UK charts for 16 weeks. And now America was starting to show some interest. This time the Bunnymen themselves wanted to be involved in producing, which they did under the guidance of Hugh Jones. Jones was making a name for himself in the post-punk scene, also working with bands like Modern English (“I Melt With You”) and The Damned.

The song called “The Disease” exists in a wobbly synth atmosphere with simple strummed guitar chords pick out the details of a sonic hellscape. As one commenter wrote on YouTube, “Very apt in 2020.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2rNPwbkn-I

In 1983, the album *Porcupine* reached the No. 2 spot on the UK charts and entered the US Billboard 200. But it had not been an easy album to make. The members of the group were not getting along, and once they finally thought they’d finished the album, Warner rejected it as unmarketable. Back into the studio they went, this time with a highly marketable result.

One of *Porcupine’s* distinguishing features is a guest appearance by Indian violinist Shankar. He plays eerie electronic string sounds on “My White Devil,” among other tracks. De Freitas contributes pitched percussion to the complex texture, and McCullough’s slow-moving vocal line cuts through the sound traffic.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MryQ6qlZvMU

Although they made it through the recording of *Ocean Rain* (1984), friction among band members had worsened by the time they tried to record *Echo & the Bunnymen* (1987). McCulloch’s drinking was out of control. De Freitas had announced his resignation, so they proceeded without him – and got nowhere. Fortunately, he returned; this would be his last album before being killed in a motorcycle crash.

On *Echo & the Bunnymen*, Laurie Latham produced, a man known for working with more mainstream artists like Paul Young and Squeeze. It was that mainstream background that caused problems with both critics and fans, who found the record tame and too sweet. Ironic that the album’s biggest single, and maybe the Bunnymen’s most recognized song, was “Lips Like Sugar.”

You can hear the smoothness of the sound in “Blue Blue Ocean,” quite reminiscent of Cure’s *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me*, from the same year.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lZDhqrsgy8

It wasn’t just the death of De Freitas that changed the Bunnymen’s personnel. McCulloch quit, thinking the band was about to break up anyway. But instead, they found a new singer, Noel Burke, previously of the group St. Vitus Dance. Insulted, McCulloch reportedly began referring to his creation as “Echo & the Bogusmen.”
Drummer Damon Reece and keyboardist Jake Brockman were brought on to record *Reverberation* (1990), which was produced by Geoff Emerick, known for his work with The Beatles and Elvis Costello. The biggest stylistic change with the new lineup was the influence of psychedelia. This is especially pronounced on the track “Freaks Dwell,” with its jangly timbres and minor modes.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duuh0M4yfSM

The new group didn’t last. In 1993, the Bunnymen officially split. But that didn’t last either. The original three – McCulloch, Sergeant, and Pattinson -- reformed a few years later to self-produce *Evergreen* (1997). Their sound was supplemented by session musicians, including the solid and experienced drummer Michael Lee, who had recorded with Led Zeppelin. To enrich the sound (in a way that would have been unthinkable in their early years), they brought in the strings of the London Metropolitan Orchestra.

The album closes with “Forgiven,” which features an attractive cello line and a surprisingly introspective McCullough.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5AvNlm0cxQ

Pattinson was the next to rock to boat. They had just begun studio work on *What Are You Going to Do with Your Life?* (1999) when he quit. So, session bassist Guy Pratt -- a veteran of recordings with The Smiths, Pink Floyd, Tears for Fears, and many others – played on all but one track. The string orchestra returned, and now there was even a hip-hop element: The group Fun Lovin’ Criminals participated in the single “Get in the Car.”

McCulloch doubled down on his wistful songwriting phase with the quiet, stripped-down “History Chimes” for voice and simple piano accompaniment.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddzIwWstb0k

Every four or five years since 2000, McCulloch and Sergeant have put out a new album under the Bunnymen name. The most recent is *The Stars, The Oceans & The Moon* (2018), containing new arrangements of older Bunnymen songs plus two new pieces. The orchestrations are lush and easygoing.

One of the new songs is “The Somnambulist.” This poetic vision by McCulloch describes a fantastical sub-oceanic being, perhaps as a metaphor for finding one’s own path in life. The rage and defiance of those early post-punk years may have cooled, but the beacon of individualism that inspired those youngsters in 1970s Liverpool still has a strong pull.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YUsY0HJ7KM
In this article, I shall attempt to shed light on an often misunderstood concept: loudness.

Let us begin from the very basics. Three folks are playing a tenor sax, a bass and a drumkit in a room. If someone holds an SPL (Sound Pressure Level) meter in that room, a reading in dB SPL will be obtained. This is the measured loudness of the performance in that room.

Now, let us take a recording of that performance, take off the lab coat, pour a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon and enjoy life a little bit in the comfort of our own living room, a different space at a different time. Ah, the miracle of sound recording and reproduction.

But how loud is it now? Where did I put that SPL meter? Given that most domestic listening systems will offer some means of arbitrarily adjusting the listening level (commonly the volume control knob), the loudness of the reproduced sound in our living room may or may not bear any resemblance to the loudness of the original performance. The reproduction can therefore be scaled up or down, depending on our mood, preferences, and neighbors.

In the process of getting to the recording and reproduction of a performance, there are several important relationships between the various representations of amplitude of the original acoustic sound waves.

We usually start by sneaking some microphones into the room. These convert the air pressure variations (sound in the room created by the musicians) into electrical signals. This way, dB SPL becomes volts.

These volts can be used to drive an amplifier and loudspeakers, converting the volts back into dB SPL (sound). This is what happens in public address and sound reinforcement systems. But to achieve the recording of sound in a manner which would allow its reproduction at a later time, we need to convert the electrical signals generated by the microphones into something that can be stored on a practical storage medium.

In the case of a vinyl record, the storage medium is a flat disk onto which modulated grooves are
cut. As such, the vinyl records in your collection do not contain air pressure variations and they do not contain electrical signals either. They only contain a spiral groove on each side. When rotating and reproduced, the phono cartridge converts the stylus motion back into an electrical signal, which can then be eventually converted by the loudspeakers back into sound.

The electrical signal coming from the playback cartridge is too weak to move the loudspeaker cones directly. It is usually first amplified from the millivolt range into the volt range by means of an audio system’s phono stage. But the volt-range signal is still not adequate to really drive the loudspeakers. This is because the loudspeakers need power to do the work it takes to produce sound. The volt-range electrical signals running through your interconnect cables are still only in the milliwatt range in terms of power. The power amplifier is tasked with converting these milliwatts to several watts of power to be able to drive the loudspeakers.

So how loud will those watts sound? This depends on a huge number of factors, including the sensitivity of your loudspeakers, given as dB SPL per watt measured at one meter from the loudspeaker (dB/W/m), in anechoic conditions. In other words, not in the typical conditions encountered in your living room, unless you’re seriously weird (honey, I’ve just built an anechoic living room for the family!). As such, the actual room acoustics play a very important role in the sound pressure level we will end up with in the living room for a given amount of electrical power.

But let us go back to records.

When cutting a record, the electrical signal (volts) get amplified into watts (power) by a cutting amplifier which drives a cutter head. The cutter head responds by moving its cutting stylus, modulating the groove as it is being cut. The volts become watts and the watts become stylus velocity. This is why reference levels on test records are given in cm/s (velocity). You could even convert it to miles per hour, but the numbers would not be as convenient. Somewhat confusingly, when the record stops spinning and becomes an inanimate object on a shelf, there can be no velocity, since nothing moves. In storage, what remains is groove excursion. But since inanimate records on shelves do not produce sound (phew!), it is the velocity which becomes the most important component of motion. Loudness is directly proportional to velocity.

Upon reproduction, the higher the playback stylus velocity, the higher the voltage it generates. This relationship is often given as the sensitivity of the cartridge, in mV/cm/s, or more commonly, in mV for a 5 cm/s RMS velocity at 1 kHz.

But how loud will that sound? As loud as you set your volume control knob. Unlike some professional audio systems used in mastering and broadcasting facilities, most consumer listening systems are not calibrated end-to-end. There are no absolutes there; the level is only relative. As in, adjust to taste.

So, how loud is one record compared to another record?

This is where things get complicated. Apparent loudness is often achieved at the expense of dynamics. By intentionally restricting (compressing/limiting) the dynamics, the average loudness can be pushed higher. But the transient impact lives in these dynamics. So the instantaneous (transient) loudness goes down as the average loudness goes up, within our available dynamic range. It is called apparent loudness because, for example, if you compare two records at the same volume control setting, the one that appears to be louder will be the one with the highest average velocity, not the one with the highest peak velocity. Yet, it is the one with the highest peak velocity that uses up more of the available dynamic range of the medium.
In fact, if we were to calculate the theoretical dynamic range potential of the storage medium alone, we would end up with a mindblowingly high number, which could never be achieved in practice. The same holds true with any theoretical dynamic range calculation for any medium. But unlike other formats, the vinyl record does not actually have any hard ceiling of maximum loudness. Which is why mastering records is so complicated and why it can make such a huge difference in the sound of the final product, depending on how it was done.

Since there is no clearly defined hard upper limit, designing a phono stage that can really cope with the full practically-achievable dynamic potential of the medium becomes extremely challenging.

This is no longer about loudness, but about impact, transients and dynamics. This is one of the biggest secrets to realistic sound reproduction. The commonly achievable dynamic range of the vinyl record already far exceeds what can be heard in a typical domestic listening room and even challenges professional studio systems. We could even cut a wider dynamic range than that on a record, but very few playback cartridges would be able to reproduce it.

For decades, as a direct consequence of the loudness wars, a lot of technological development in disk mastering systems was concerned with increasing the apparent loudness. Yet, the ability to capture the sharp transients (instantaneous loudness), which depends more on the skill of the engineer, was there all along! Which beautifully explains why many audiophile records, known for their excellent sound, were cut using very early, bare-basics, manually operated disk mastering lathes.
This article originally appeared in Issue 18. We decided to run it again, in edited and updated form, as a prelude to WL’s upcoming review of the new movie, ZAPPA, to be released in theaters and on demand on November 27. And because WL and I are huge Zappa fans. – Ed.

Two of my kids have a cat with decidedly un-cat-like characteristics. Having known a few cats in my time, the strangest thing about Jeter is that the kids can take him to anyone’s house and he’s as cool as an iceman’s handshake. Very weird. Because the kids are at our place a lot, our home is a second one to the little guy. So we naturally keep a cat bowl and food, and a litter box downstairs in front of the furnace.

A few weeks ago Diane called to get the furnace cleaned. She took the guy down to the furnace. Dwayne scoped the job and told Di she has to keep the cat away for a while.

My wife: “We don’t have a cat.”

Pause, then Dwayne says, “OK...then keep your husband away for a while.”

Confusion and cat pee drove Frank Zappa to some of the most barbequed nebulae and tire shredding blarps since Edgard Varese went to a Barbie reunion with Spike Jones. If you started listening to Zappa when you were still living with your parents, you waited until they weren’t home, closed the door, and prayed yer Mom didn’t come up the stairs while you were listening to Crew Slut. If she listened enough and got the drift they’d send you to West Point. If she heard this they’d put you in a...
“What the hell was that?!"

“It’s a song from Burnt Weeny Sandwich.”

Pack yer bags, Johnny. We’re going for a ride.

Dad complained early on that the music I was listening to, like Hendrix, Deep Purple, and Led Zeppelin, was nothing but worthless noise. When I started listening to Zappa, he was flummoxed, had no word for it. He’d gone to the superlative with “worthless noise” and had nowhere to go. That was worth the price of an album right there.

Zappa fell in love with Edgard Varèse at an early age, early enough that for his 15th birthday his mom let him call Varèse’s home on the opposite coast as a present. Edgard wasn’t home. That’ll crap on your day. Point is that Frank at an age like 13 or 14 was not just listening to guys like Varèse but was hungry for it. You can’t talk about Frank Zappa without Edgard Varèse, an early 20th century composer who pioneered and composed music with a focus that led in a host of directions. He took concepts of music in space, the floating of notes, the organized noise of music that fed spatial frames and waited for something to come back. That appeals to a very interesting group.

Varèse did have nominal success in his lifetime. One of his successes, albeit without knowing it, was a teenage Zappa going into a Sam Goody music store in California and purchasing Complete Works of Edgard Varèse, Volume 1. This was the end of a yearlong search for Varèse’s music. He had read an article in LOOK magazine that described the percussion sequences on Varese’s Ionisation as “a weird jumble of drums and other unpleasant sounds.” He had to have it.

A young Zappa found a mentor and new purpose to his music. The fact that his mom allowed him a long distance phone call to Varèse for his 15th birthday places a bookmark on his development and an insight into just how early Zappa was working with really avant-garde ideas. When I was 15 I had just started dating my future wife and she was all I could think about. Frank was dating guys like Varèse, Stravinsky and Schoenberg.

So consider this notion as you read on: FZ had no formal training. He did take theory classes in high school and some short-lived junior college classes, but for all intents was self-taught using training books and an amazing ear. He was composing in high school and had a few teachers who allowed him to conduct in band, but even at that early age, found trouble finding kids who could play his music and teachers who could fathom what he was up to. By the time Zappa graduated from high school he was composing and conducting avant-garde pieces with the school orchestra. His primary instrument was drums, and with indulgence of his mom was playing in R&B bands in the San Diego area. Later, he switched to guitar.

In 1963 he incongruously got onto The Steve Allen Show. I haven’t found a good explanation for this; Zappa was 22 and unknown. Probably he’d gotten the attention of one of Allen’s minions and was put on the show as a foil for Allen, and in fact Allen treated Zappa like a backwards relative. After all, Allen was a classically-trained musician, and Zappa came on the show to play a bicycle. Yep. Check it out. The sounds created here are incredibly prescient of later works.
By the early 1960s FZ was performing with bands around San Diego and LA. He was the guitar player for a trio called the Muthers, and in 1965 they got the attention of Tom Wilson, a well-known producer, who was able to get them a record contract with Verve. Verve insisted they change the name to the Mothers of Invention. Here we go. They released their debut album *Freak Out!* in 1966. This was only the second rock double album after Dylan’s *Blonde on Blonde*, and being a debut album that was amazing enough, but on top of that the album was an eclectic collection of rock, doo-wop, and musical giraffes.

The album had an 11-minute closing track called "Return of the Son of Monster Magnet." Session musicians brought in for the album (a small studio orchestra was also used) were shocked to discover that Zappa had the stuff all on sheet music and the musicians were expected to be able to sight read. The release of the album established FZ as an important artist in the freak subculture. Good on ya Verve.

Zappa and the Mothers continued releasing albums in the late 1960s like *Absolutely Free* and *We’re Only In It for the Money*. FZ was experimenting heavily with taped sounds and strictly-produced live recordings. His live performances were so heavily structured in key, time and signature that he was able to use the live recordings as samples in the studio. His live performances became such studies in composition and strict timing that he had to employ the best musicians, even if the result sounded like dropping a drum kit down a well.

My brother Jim saw Zappa in Hartford in the 1970s. At one point during the performance Frank was conducting a particularly complex composition with a 20-piece band, when a fight broke out in the orchestra pit. Zappa stopped the band on a dime with his hand, and proceeded to tell these two
clowns that they were disturbing people who had paid money to see them, and suggested they move their bullsh*t outside. Then he turned back to the band, and with a wave of his hand the band was perfectly back on the next note.

It was one of Zappa’s drummers, Terry Bozzio or maybe Aynsley Dunbar, who talked about Zappa’s printed-out drum music looking like a black sheet of paper. In fact, FZ was concerned enough with the possibility of walking into a studio with a composition that was impossible to play that he decided to exorcise that demon by writing a percussive piece called "The Black Page." Originally played by Bozzio, it contained some of the most complex percussive passages ever written.

Yet Zappa had a superficial reputation for writing potty songs, and did have some famous sexual and plastic banana lyrics that led to songs like "Don’t Eat the Yellow Snow," "Montana" and "Catholic Girls." These were really a lot of fun. Many people loved the raunch that got FM airplay and were disappointed when they’d pick up an album like Burnt Weeny Sandwich and couldn’t figure out what was going on. Frank wasn’t above making money with the whack tunes but always used that money to fund his deepening journey into musical black holes. This was no Spike Jones. This was a genius, and as a genius he was certainly misunderstood and hounded by the censors his entire career.

But Zappa was no saint. He was a tyrant in life, in studio and on stage, and believed absolutely in his version of the world and music with high disdain for anyone who couldn’t see it. He in fact treated fans like dolts, especially if they tried to discuss his music. In 1967 the Mothers were doing an extended stint in New York at the Garrick Theater. During an Easter show he somehow convinced some US Marines from the audience onto the stage. Frank had put a large baby doll on stage, then asked the soldiers to attack the doll as if it were the enemy (this was during the Vietnam War). They dismembered the doll while Zappa played an antiwar composition. That was black, man. He thought of this as satire. With genius comes fear.
Zappa was infamous for looking down upon drug use and had no patience for this in his musicians, who were some of the heaviest drug users in the industry. We were always amazed by this because listening to his music you’d think these guys, including Zappa, were higher than Icarus. But to me, there was an obvious example of a period in FZ’s life where he had to be using something. He despised most of the rock that was going on, considered bands like the Beatles insignificant pop. But he loved the Monkees. A quote from one of FZ’s bios states, “Zappa had respect for what the Monkees were doing.” This really was odd because what all we thought they were doing was becoming the first boy band. Only Mike Nesmith and Peter Tork could play an instrument and the band was always backed by studio musicians. In fact, Tork was a better guitar player than Nesmith but was switched to bass because he looked goofy. Zappa appeared in two episodes of the TV show and even did a cameo in their first movie, *Head*. Zappa, incredibly, offered Micky Dolenz a job in the Mothers but RCA/Columbia/Colgems wouldn’t allow Dolenz out of his contract. We knew Frank was weird but this was truly a departure from reality and smacks of running into Castaneda out in the desert. I call this his LSD Period.

Zappa released more than 60 albums during his lifetime, including some of the most complex music ever written. What a nut. The discipline he needed and demanded required the best of the studio musicians of his day. The list is amazing. Ian Underwood, Vinnie Colaiuta, Dunbar and Bozzio, Flo and Eddie (aka Howard Kaylan and Mark Volman of the Turtles), Ruth Underwood, Stevie Vai, George Duke, Eddie Jobson, the Brecker Brothers, Patrick O’Hearn (bass!), Chester Thompson, Jean-Luc (I want a hyphen in my name) Ponty and Don “Sugarcane” Harris. Zappa himself was featured in *Rolling Stone*’s 100 Best Guitarists list at #22. And I think that ranking is too low.

Here’s a pic of Frank in concert in 1977. You can see the concentration on not only his instrument, but everything going on around him. OK, forget about the schnozz, I’m trying to make a point here. Geez, you guys are sick.

Frank Zappa did a lot for us, but especially this. OK so he did it for himself. Zappa stated once his ambition was to replicate the sound of squeezing a giraffe filled with whipped cream. I don’t know if he ever felt he’d achieved that. No one could know but Zappa himself.

Here’s a cut from 1979’s *Sleep Dirt* called *The Ocean is the Ultimate Solution*. My favorite song title. With Patrick O’Hearn on bass.

http://youtu.be/zCNRgfkeWXs

That Zappa. He organized our noise.

*Header image: original LP fold-out cover for We’re Only In It for the Money, 1968.*
In 1922, when she became the first female composer ever to be knighted by the British crown, Dame Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) solidified a reputation she’d fought for her whole career. The knighthood was official acknowledgment that she was equal to her male countrymen. Recent recordings of some of Smyth’s instrumental and vocal works give us plenty of proof to back that claim.

Smyth defied her wealthy parents’ wishes by going to Leipzig Conservatory; they did not want their daughter to be a musician. While she wasn’t happy at the school and dropped out after only a year, she remained in that vibrantly musical city, taking private lessons in theory and counterpoint and rubbing elbows with the likes of Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, and Clara Wieck Schumann. She impressed Tchaikovsky so much that he mentioned her admiringly in his memoir. For ten more years, she exercised her compositional and networking skills all over Europe, finally returning to England in 1890, where she began to get noticed in the London music scene.

Those who were threatened by Smyth’s musical prowess were no more comfortable with her activism as a suffragette. In 1912 she was arrested during a voting-rights riot. Reportedly, she spent her time in prison organizing the other hundred or so feminist detainees into a choir.

Although in the UK she became known for large-scale works like her Mass in D and her operas – particularly The Wreckers, an eerie story about a village that survives only by causing ships to crash near their shores so they can be looted – she also composed a fair amount of chamber music. That output includes six string quartets, two string quintets, and a handful of trios and duo sonatas.

You can hear in this opening Allegro moderato movement that Smyth was solidly trained in all the harmonic and contrapuntal techniques you might expect in the music of the Schumanns or Brahms (whom she also knew). She was still in Leipzig when she composed this in 1887, so those influences were thick around her. The movement revels in deep sonorities and interesting twists and wanderings. Little and Lenehan attack its challenges with gusto.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOVqzXt7iXY

Smyth constructed her four-movement work with the scherzo before the slow movement, typical of the Romantic approach, allowing a dramatic buildup to the finale. That crucial dramatic pivot movement is marked “Romanze: Andante grazioso.” Little’s playing is unabashedly emotional, even if its effect is somewhat undercut by her relentlessly tight vibrato. A stronger commitment to rhythmic clarity in certain passages would have made for better contrast with the sweeping freer sections.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLiWn4YribU

Not surprising, given her era and the amount of time she spent in Europe, Smyth wrote a number of art-song cycles for solo voice. Pieces like these would often have been performed for friends in the homes of educated Germans, who viewed such salon recitals as a mark of civility. None of Smyth’s songs were originally in English – her texts come from a range of European poets in French and German - but she prepared English versions during her lifetime. This is largely what contralto Lucy Stevens has recorded on her new album, *Ethel Smyth: Songs and Ballads*, on the British indie label SOMM Recordings.

Pianist Elizabeth Marcus accompanies Stevens for the 5 Songs and Ballads, Op. 3, and the Lieder, Op. 4, with the former sung in English translation and the latter in the original German. “The Lost Hunter,” from Op. 3, sets a text by the great German Romantic poet Eichendorff. Stevens’ voice is as rich as Marcus’ playing is lush. These beautiful songs should be performed more often.

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

It’s interesting to compare that Op. 3 collection with Smyth’s 4 Songs (no opus number), written 20 years later. Not only is there a maturation of style, but the accompaniment is scored for ensemble rather than piano. The instruments are played here by the Berkeley Ensemble under the direction of Odaline de la Martinez. The second song, called “The Dance,” uses a poem by Henri de Régnier, an important French Symbolist. The flute and tambourine dominate the orchestration as the text conjures sultry and exotic images:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VnSqP_qf9I
Despite creating a large corpus of intimate works, Smyth was (and is) mostly celebrated for her large pieces for voices and orchestra. These include six operas and a dozen pieces for chorus, both sacred and secular. The last of the secular oratorios – in fact, the final orchestral work Smyth completed – is *The Prison*, which until 2020 had never before been recorded. Premiered in 1931, it has finally been released on Chandos by the Experiential Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by American maestro James Blachly. The soloists are soprano Sarah Brailey and baritone Dashon Burton.

Smyth referred to this piece as a choral symphony. Setting the words of philosopher Henry Bennett Brewster, *The Prison* deals with the experiences of a solitary man contemplating death. Burton represents the man (called The Prisoner) and Brailey voices His Soul. In this clip you can hear the delicate interplay between Burton’s searching lines and the wide-ranging colors of the orchestra. One can see why a master orchestrator like Tchaikovsky saw enormous potential in this composer when she was young.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76Md8_HGXqw

The writing for chorus is intensely dark and beautifully sung. This next excerpt showcases some exquisite choices in orchestration, including the pairing of French horn with the baritone’s voice. I hope that Experiental’s skillful, ethereal recording helps to establish this stunning work as a standard part of the choral repertoire.

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

Smyth is without question a composer who deserves more attention. But her fan base is growing. Lately I find it instructive to check in on how COVID-19 is affecting various composers’ footprints on YouTube. Smyth is among those making surprising headway, thanks to her stirring choral composition “The March of the Women.” The text is by fellow suffragist Cecily Hamilton, and its newfound popularity marks the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote. Here’s a recent, socially distanced performance as part of the Allison Charney: Season of Hope series:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IGUl0MVxIk

*Portrait of Dame Ethel Smyth by John Singer Sargent.*
Three Great New Records...and Waters Can Still Play Pink Floyd

TO BE DETERMINED

Written by Tom Gibbs
Roger Waters - *Us + Them*

*Us + Them* documents Roger Waters’ recently released concert film of the same name; it offers highlights from the 2017 – 2018 *Us + Them* tour. There was a planned theatrical release, but it was scrapped due to the pandemic, along with another large-scale world tour that was to be titled *This Is Not A Drill*; Waters insists that the tour will eventually go on, though perhaps not at the same scale as previously imagined. The *Us + Them* release offers a number of choices, from a double-CD package, three 180-gram LPs, your choice of BluRay or DVD, and the audio tracks are also available on all the major streaming services. Each incarnation includes a few additional songs that didn’t appear in the original theatrical film, as well as behind-the-scenes and bonus footage included in the video releases. Most of the footage contained in the original film and videos — and most of the music in the soundtrack — is sourced from an Amsterdam date that was near the end of the tour.

In my way of seeing things, most current Pink Floyd fans fall into two camps: those who believe that Roger Waters was the principal reason for the existence of the band, and those who believe that the sum of the group was much greater than the individual parts. I definitely fall into the latter camp. With all the public squabbling between Waters and David Gilmour, it didn’t make for a particularly nice transition for fans in the aftermath of Waters’ split from the band, some of whom are probably really torn between supporting the “purity” of Roger Waters’ musical vision sans-Floyd, and those who believe that Pink Floyd minus Roger Waters is still a viable musical commodity. Both Waters
and the Gilmour-led Pink Floyd (now essentially retired?) have sold a decent number of records in the decades since the breakup, and both have maintained a reasonably respectable creative and artistic vision with regard to their own (or the band’s) musical vision.

https://youtu.be/gV0_C4dN-kk

And who can blame Roger Waters, who, despite seemingly doing everything possible to distance himself from the Pink Floyd brand, has still occasionally felt the need to trot out and showcase his remarkable legacy of contributions to the band - and to generally rabid audience reception. All that said, I’m not a particularly huge fan of this album. It mostly consists of Waters’ rehashing of Floyd classics stretching all the way back to Meddle (“One Of These Days”), with a generous helping from The Dark Side Of The Moon, Wish You Were Here, Animals, and of course, The Wall. And a smattering of songs from his own latest release, 2017’s Is This The Life We Really Want? All played to an ocean of screaming, adoring fans.

Waters isn’t in particularly great voice here – he is, after all, 77 years old – and not all the renditions of Floyd classics are note-perfect or spot-on, and there aren’t many interesting embellishments to the songs that sometimes make the live concert version preferable to the studio recording. If someone gave me a ticket to the show, I’d probably go, but otherwise I’d probably be completely oblivious to the fact that Waters was even touring at all. YMMV - if you’re a Pink Floyd or Roger Waters completist, this is probably a required acquisition, and I’ve heard that the concert movie is quite the visual spectacle. Personally, I prefer the David Gilmour version of Pink Floyd music post-Waters; the concert films like Delicate Sound of Thunder and Pulse are truly outstanding, and remarkable documents of Pink Floyd's legacy. And there’s a whole lot more interesting new music out there I’d rather be digging into.

Columbia/Legacy, 2 CD/3 LP (download/streaming [24/48] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon Music, Google Play Music, Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music, Pandora, Deezer, TuneIn)
Drive-By Truckers – The New OK

Drive-By Truckers have worked really hard to develop a reputation as skillful purveyors of new Southern rock, but they’re pretty much still mostly known for being the band that Jason Isbell got kicked out of. That said, principal songwriters Mike Cooley and Patterson Hood have cobbled out a respectable string of good albums, even sans Isbell. And The New OK, which is the band’s 13th studio album, is the band’s second release in 2020, following on the heels of DBT’s excellent record The Unraveling, which dropped in mid-January. Patterson Hood recently remarked that in light of the continuing pandemic, making a new record was “all that we can do.” He’s taken advantage of the time off and written a prolific number of new songs, many of which made their way onto The New OK. Both Hood and Cooley have expressed their distaste for “desktop concerts,” where you’re basically playing live into a computer screen; each of them have done enough of that this summer to last a lifetime.

The Unraveling documented what Hood and Cooley both saw as a strange new reality, with a seriously troubling decline in civility in our country, and a sobering refocusing of our overall worldview. Patterson Hood has also stated that he’s been battling depression during this very long year, and he’s had a difficult time hiding that fact from his family and kids. Writing new music was a way of combating his unhappiness, and hopefully the new songs will make that abundantly clear to the fans of Drive-By Truckers. Hood lives in his adopted hometown of Portland, Oregon, and much of
the material from this bounty of new songs stems from his participation in and observation of the Black Lives Matter protests and riots that took place over the course of the summer. While The Unraveling was a record of despair and dystopian portrayals of what Hood sees as Trumpian reality, The New OK is more of an angst-fueled statement of a new found defiance, and serves as a companion to the previous album’s message of dissonance and depression.

https://youtu.be/MLRnsO8NtUQ

In the title track, “The New OK,” Hood chronicles his experiences in the Portland riots. “Smashing medics and the once-free press...Goons with guns coming out to play / It’s a battle for the very soul of the USA.” Probably the most lighthearted moment on the entire album is Mike Cooley’s sole contribution, “Sarah’s Flame,” a tongue-in-cheek depiction of Sarah Palin’s influence on the leanings of the current administration. Some of the songs here were part of a planned follow-up to The Unraveling, and were ready to go; the remaining tracks were assembled remotely. Where the taped contributions of the various group members were shuttled back and forth across the country, with each member of the band laying down their parts prior to the final mixing of the album. It’s actually almost more like an EP, clocking in at only 36 minutes; 18 songs were completed, but the songs chosen for release were selected to maintain the continuity of the overall mood of The New OK. And the album finishes up with a rousing cover of the Ramones’ “The KKK Took My Baby Away” – another obvious reference to the troubling protests and riots from an already difficult year.

My listening was done via Qobuz’s excellent digital stream, although CDs and LPs are also being made available for purchase. While The New OK isn’t an entirely uplifting listen, it’s still nonetheless very highly recommended.

ATO Records, CD/LP (download/streaming [16/44.1] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Pandora, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, TuneIn)
Sufjan Stevens – The Ascension

My first experience with the music of Sufjan Stevens came a number of years ago at Christmas while visiting my then twenty-something daughter; when my wife suggested that perhaps we should put on some holiday music, my daughter exclaimed that she had the perfect record. She then put on Stevens’ 2006 release, Songs for Christmas, which elicited something of a WTF!?! expression of understated surprise from the pair of us; we were baffled by what we were hearing, but we didn’t want to upset my daughter with our disapproval of her, shall we say, unusual choice of holiday entertainment. Both of us are more into the Johnny Mathis-influenced, more traditional vein of classic holiday music — that Christmas was definitely an eye-opening learning experience, to say the least.

Fast-forward to the present; in the years that have passed since that experience, I’ve been building a music server that mostly consists of rips of my CD library, and I’m constantly on the hunt for new and offbeat music choices. And with CDs available often for as little as $.25 to a dollar at thrift stores, I’ll sometimes take chances on the more adventurous, unusual titles that I’ve come across. Which happens to include two of Sufjan Stevens’ more notable releases, Michigan and Illinois(e), which have surprisingly grown on me over the last couple of years. I picked up an absolutely pristine copy of Michigan for only $.25 in a ramshackle roadside thrift store. So, shockingly, it didn’t come as too much of a stretch to consider reviewing Stevens’ new record, The Ascension.
My previous experiences with Stevens’ music have been mostly lo-fi, minimally accompanied outings. Not so with The Ascension, which offers layers of synths on top of layers of synths; that definitely took some getting used to. I mean, here’s the guy who was singing about serial killer John Wayne Gacy on Illinois(e), and now he’s playing semi-danceable synth-pop? Fortunately, there’s a lot to like here, and much of it is makes for surprisingly cerebral listening — along with being reasonably danceable. The record’s undeniable creative peak is on the introspective title track, “The Ascension,” where Stevens sings, “When I am dead, and the light leaves my breast...nothing to be told, nothing to confess...let the record show what I couldn’t quite confess...for by living for myself, I was living for unrest.” How true those words probably ring for so many of us, who maybe chose the road less traveled; this is perhaps Sufjan Stevens’ best song ever.

As usual, the 24-bit Qobuz files sounded absolutely superb; this is a long album, clocking in at just over 80 minutes; maybe not perfect for a single sitting, but there’s much to explore here. Highly recommended.

Asthmatic Kitty Records, CD/LP (download/streaming [24/44.1] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, TuneIn)
Thurston Moore - By The Fire

Sonic Youth played their last show over nine years ago; bassist Kim Gordon made it clear with her solo release from 2019, No Home Record – and its ensuing tour – that fans shouldn’t expect any kind of Sonic Youth reunion anytime soon. Fans craving more Sonic Youth magic shouldn’t lose too much heart, however; the band’s other principal writer and guitarist (and Kim Gordon’s ex), Thurston Moore, has continued to churn out a string of outstanding albums that explore his offbeat poetry and penchant for experimentalism with his guitar. His new release, By The Fire, offers a generously proportioned (83 minutes!) mix of the strangely affecting avant-garde melodic rock and industrial/noise drones that hearken back to the classic Sonic Youth sound.

Moore continues with the same core group of musicians who’ve teamed with him on his last few releases; guitarist James Sedwards and bassist Debbie Googe (My Bloody Valentine), along with Negativland’s Jon Leidecker handling the electronics and Jem Doulton behind the drum kit. It’s an amazingly effective ensemble; this group can really rock with concise precision, but they also allow Thurston Moore space to create a delectable melange of noise and feedback with extended experimental excursions. “Locomotives” is a perfect example of Moore’s mastery of assembling a lengthy drone with his guitar and effects that at nearly 17 minutes seems almost interminable, but still not nearly long enough - this is absolutely essential late-night listening. As the guitar and effects push the tune along with an intensity not unlike that of a locomotive, at about the nine-minute mark, the stranglehold of the dissonant drone is broken, and Moore begins to melodically sing “We are here, we come in peace.” There’s another seven minutes of noise interrupted with spurts of brilliant rock and roll, but the bottom line is that it’s still all about peace and love — it’s just that more noisy New York love, not the mellow California (where ex Kim Gordon has relocated to) love of the sixties.

https://youtu.be/D_1CYSPYkYM

Contrast that to the following tune, “Dreamers Work,” which offers a two minute intro of some of the most laid back, melodic guitar of Moore’s career, or the twelve-plus minutes of “Siren,” which lays a very fluid groundwork with guitars, bass, and drums – before spinning off into a crush of pounding drums awash with tons of feedback and electronic haze, then right back to the melody from whence it sprang to sum things up. There’s nothing groundbreaking here, but this album will be seriously welcome comfort food to the souls of Sonic Youth fans everywhere. Very highly recommended.


Header image of Sufjan Stevens courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Joe Lencioni.
A Talk With Walter Schofield of Krell Industries

THE COPPER INTERVIEW
Written by Don Lindich

Well-known industry veteran Walter Schofield has been part of the audio community for over 40 years, having worked at leading manufacturers such as Linn, the Harman Specialty Group, SVS, and Emotiva. Walter is currently serving as the COO of Krell after accepting the position in September of 2018. That year Walter was also inducted into the Class of 2018 CE Pro Masters, an electronics industry award sponsored by CE Pro magazine. Don Lindich interviewed Walter about his life, career and the future of high-end audio and video.

Don Lindich: Please tell us a little bit about yourself! Where are you from, where have you lived and where are you now? And what are your hobbies outside the audio field?

Walter Schofield: I’m from Arlington, Massachusetts, a burb a couple of towns away from Boston proper. Since leaving, I’ve lived in multiple locations in around the Boston area. I now reside in Wakefield, Massachusetts, about 10 miles north of Boston, and previously spent a few years in Atlanta and Nashville for a couple of positions I’ve held within the audio industry. Outside of audio, I am very much into the history and mechanics of horology, completely enamored by those little engines on your wrist that have a couple of hundred moving parts and keep time. To think that there are examples that are a couple hundred years old and still ticking fascinates me.

I also have a lifelong interest in feudal Japanese history, and specifically the concept known as Bushido which is the honor system implemented by the samurai.

DL: Most audiophiles have a moment in which they became an audiophile, or started down the path that led them to become one. For example, in my own case I was a college student visiting a photo
studio where a friend of mine was an assistant. The photographer was internationally known and quite wealthy, and had a high-end audio system in part of the studio. When my friend played it for me I was mesmerized by the sound, and as soon as I got back to school I started buying magazines, visiting hi-fi shops and buying equipment as I began what became a lifetime passion. Can you remember a moment or an experience that started you on your own path as an audiophile?

WS: My cousin Linda, who was about six years older than me, had a system and at age 10 or so she invited me to listen to Ten Years After’s *A Space in Time* album (featuring guitarist/vocalist Alvin Lee). I was amazed at how good the music sounded, and it was at that moment that I realized I needed to be associated with music in some way in my life.

That experience prompted me to buy a system at age 11, much to the consternation of my dad. I had worked a triple paper route over the prior few years and I had to convince dad that I should spend my hard-earned money on a stereo. He finally relented after my constant barrage, and we went to Tech Hifi and I purchased a Sansui receiver, KLH speakers and a Pioneer turntable. I drove my parents crazy for the next few years while listening to the system and I’m fairly sure my dad regretted his decision.

DL: What was the transition for you from audiophile hobbyist to audio professional?

WS: After working in audio retail for a bit at a Tech Hifi “Bargain Center,” a dear colleague of mine was purchasing a pair of Dahlquist DQ-10 loudspeakers and brought me to a high-end shop where I heard a Vandersteen/Audio Research/Linn system (speakers, electronics and turntable), and that trip cemented my journey into the high-performance audio world.

DL: Given that you work in an industry that revolves around music, do you play any instruments or perform in a band?

WS: One of the things that drove me to be involved in audio reproduction was the fact that I realized early on that I was a horrible musician. I dabbled a bit in a high school band, but I didn’t last long as I was truly not talented. Since I knew I needed to be around music, being in the audio business was my way to do so.

A few years ago I purchased an acoustic guitar and I’m trying to practice, but unfortunately, I just don’t have the time to dedicate to getting much better. I expect that in retirement, I’ll be one of those late bloomers with guitar in hand, driving everyone crazy with my obsession.

I’d love to make music, but I’m pleased to have the chance to provide the means to reproduce music with exceptional systems that bring people as close to the actual event as possible.

DL: You have held high-level positions in organizations from Asia, Europe and the United States, including the Harman Specialty Group, which at the time included Mark Levinson, Revel, Proceed, Lexicon and others. You have also been at SVS, Emotiva and Krell. As an American, what can you say about the cultural differences that arise in working in different cultures?

WS: I have had the pleasure of working with many different organizations, and I’m grateful to have had that exposure, which allowed me to better understand their cultural and business [perspectives]. At the end of the day, it is all about relationships, honesty, integrity and finding like-minded people to do business with. I’ve been blessed to find so many around the world that share that philosophy and we continue to seek like-minded partners for Krell.
DL: What are some of the favorite audio components you’ve owned? Do you have any that have remained in your system for an especially long time?

WS: Oh my, I’ve had so many wonderful components, it’s difficult to narrow it down. To name a few that have given me extreme joy, Conrad-Johnson and Audio Research electronics, Vandersteen speakers, an Oracle turntable and so many others. I have to say that the Krell components I’ve had throughout the years have been excellent, but of course I have to root for the home team!

The Krell KSA 250 amplifier [first introduced around 1990 – Ed.] is still in my system, having just been rebuilt about a year ago, and I can’t seem to part with it. The other component that resided in my system for years, but unfortunately has departed, was an Oracle Delphi turntable with an SME arm and John Marovskis MIT-1 cartridge. I worshiped at that altar of that turntable for many years, a great combination of incredible industrial design and sound quality. I currently use a VPI Classic Signature for analog and listen to digital through my Krell DAC.

DL: Are there any specific products you helped develop or bring to market that you are especially proud of?

WS: While at Mark Levinson from 2005 to 2008, our team developed a full product line and plan. That lineup was released, SKU by SKU, right up until just a couple years ago. There were many Mark Levinson products that came out of that plan that were exemplary performers, and one in particular that was amazing-sounding, the No. 532 power amplifier!

I don’t want to build this up bigger than it actually was, as I just fell into it timing-wise, but I had the privilege of visiting with our partners at Harman Japan while they were fine-tuning the first JBL Project Everest DD66000 loudspeaker (now superseded by the DD67000). I was able to offer observations sitting alongside Ken Yasuda, the person specifically tasked with the voicing and development of that speaker. We listened extensively and forwarded our notes to the JBL development team. I’m not sure how many of my observations were actually acted upon, but it was very humbling to observe and be close to the development of one of the best speakers that I’ve ever heard.

DL: With portable devices, earphones and Bluetooth speakers such a big part of the market now, how do we get younger generations interested in high-performance audio and component systems?

WS: This is a topic widely-discussed and constantly with many in the industry.

So many industries or segments of industries have done an incredible job in messaging as to why people should spend their disposable income on their products. Wristwatches, automobiles, furniture and home decor, kitchen cabinets, appliances, and so many more product categories have succeeded in convincing consumers they need to spend a lot of money on these things, but we have done a poor job in our industry convincing people that having the world’s music and movie libraries at your fingertips is important.

Almost everybody loves music and movies, being an integral part of so many lives, and that is why I believe our industry has a huge opportunity to deliver the message that having an immersive audio or theater experience is of significant value to one’s quality of life. Krell has been working on plans to reach the younger generations that have not experienced this. Stay tuned.

DL: Krell occupies a place in the top tier of specialty audio brands. Where do you see the high-end segment of the audio industry going in the future?
WS: As we continue to deliver the message to a wider audience that exceptional-quality high-performance audio can deliver immersive experiences in your home, I have great faith that our segment of the industry will grow. There’s a huge opportunity to [give this] message to people that do not even know that this option exists. [Before COVID-19 hit], we knew that younger generations are seeking these experiences as they purchase more and more concert tickets, movie tickets and participate in live events. A big part of this is because they have never been aware that those experiences can also be available in their homes. I believe our industry has an excellent future if we can reach out via multiple channels to let people know this is possible.

DL: You have been to many trade shows. Even before the pandemic, the high-performance audio presence at CES (the Consumer Electronics Show) was in steep decline and when the show eventually returns, high-performance audio may be gone from it for all practical purposes. There has also been a lot of controversy regarding the AXPONA 2020 audio show and the way the show cancellation and exhibitor deposits were handled. What do you see as the post-pandemic future of trade shows, and if you were in charge of the events, what would you do to make them better?

WS: During the pandemic, we have learned a lot relative to social and digital media, and I believe many will incorporate these avenues into their prior marketing and sales knowledge.

I believe tradeshows will come back as they were, since many more consumers now recognize the importance of home entertainment in their homes due to the pandemic confining them. It has resulted in record sales of audio components for many manufacturers, and I believe that once the shows return we will entice many more consumers to attend.

We in the industry are all looking forward to getting back to trade shows as well, and the resurgence in interest and in having immersive listening experiences in one’s home during said pandemic will result in that much more excitement at industry events.

Regarding what I think could be better about trade shows – I would like to see a show that has a separate area that marries manufacturers with distributors around the world. In this area you would display your equipment, and if you needed a distributor in a particular country or region, you would hope that someone from that area slides by your booth and is looking for a product like yours. It’s speed dating at its best.

I envision a large hall with distributors set up alphabetically by country, and where manufacturers could approach distributors to have a no-pressure conversation to determine if there is mutual interest.

DL: So unlike others who have bemoaned the decline of brick and mortar stores and are wondering about the future of audio shows, you’re optimistic about reaching a new generation of high-end audio and video enthusiasts.

WS: If we as an industry can collectively reach out to people who enjoy music and movies in their daily lives, I believe the opportunity and potential is there to grow the industry for decades to come.
Val and Eddie, Amy and Tom Revisited

FEATURED

Written by Tom Methans

Note: this article originally appeared in Copper Issue 74. In light of Eddie Van Halen’s passing, we felt it appropriate to run it again here in tribute, updated and with an added postscript. - Ed.

How would you react if you were suddenly face-to-face with one of your idols? I hope you’d be more prepared than I was on that day in 1984.

I remember the first time I laid eyes on Van Halen’s debut album in 1978. The front cover introduced Eddie and his Frankenstein Fender Strat, David “Diamond Dave” Lee Roth with his phallic mic and insanely hairy chest, and Alex Van Halen and Michael Anthony, practically blurred out. I found the album in a stack of records at my friend Bill Jr.’s house.

Bill was still into the Bay City Rollers, and his sister possessed even worse taste in music - all weepy singer-songwriters, so I could not figure out who owned that heavy Van Halen record. No one wanted it, and so they let me have it. As soon as I heard their version of the Kinks' "You Really Got Me" and its intro "Eruption," Eddie's solo shredding masterpiece, I was hooked.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4Czx8EWXb0

For the next six years, Van Halen supplied my summer soundtracks. Back then, when other kids went to sleep-away camp, I joined a bicycling program that took me all through New England, parts of Canada, and California and Oregon. We rode all day, ate outdoors, and slept at campgrounds. On occasion, the group would have a layover at an RV park, and those places had luxuries like laundry machines, pay showers with hot water, a snack bar, and a rec hall complete with a jukebox! Electronic entertainment was rare on the road, so a bit of television, a movie, or some current music was a treat.
Depending on the region, there might be a lot more Molly Hatchet and Lynyrd Skynyrd on the jukebox than New York Dolls and Ramones, but Van Halen was universal. I played "Dance the Night Away" (Van Halen II, 1979) during my trip to Vermont, "And the Cradle Will Rock" (Women and Children First, 1980) in Quebec, "Unchained" (Fair Warning, 1981) in Oregon, and multiple cuts off Diver Down (1982) in New Hampshire. With so many kick-ass tracks, including "Where Have all the Good Times Gone," "Cathedral," "Little Guitars," "Dancing in the Street," and "(Oh) Pretty Woman," Diver Down is one of my favorite Van Halen albums.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11mBDT5mpdw

In 1984, Van Halen released 1984, and it turned out to be their last with Roth until 2012. "Jump," "Panama" and "Hot for Teacher" were mainstream smash hits, as well as videos in heavy rotation on the then-nascent MTV channel.

One August day in 1984, I was walking my Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, and a young couple appeared accompanied by a man in a suit walking slightly behind them. They had matching blow-out 80s hairdos. The woman noticed my dog and squatted down, "Awww, what's your dog's name?" People always wanted to pet my dog. She was beautiful, but it got a little annoying after a while - especially when they talked to the dog as if she were walking me, but this lady was so friendly and pretty. "Amy," I answered, with a slight wince.

Then, I looked up and saw that big smile. "Hey," he said nonchalantly through a puff of smoke. My brain was straining to place these faces. I had seen them a thousand times, but I could not process their features fast enough. And by the time I was done being flummoxed, it was all over. I stood paralyzed as Eddie Van Halen and Valerie Bertinelli (aka Barbara Cooper, America's sweetheart from TV's One Day at a Time) walked away down 57th Street - likely towards one of the studios that were in that area. It was like starting the best dream of your life just to be robbed of it by the cruel alarm clock of reality.

"Was that really them?" I second-guessed myself. "It was. I can't believe I was standing right next to Eddie Van Halen and Valerie and I didn't say anything, not a single word except my dog's name! I don't think I even said "hi" back to Eddie. "What an idiot I am!" For the first time in my life, I was overwhelmed by celebrity.

I always regretted not being more engaging and quicker on my feet, but I was 18 and in a bad state. There was a fasting craze tearing through my school, and all I had ingested for a few days was black coffee and clove cigarettes. On top of that, my prom queen, also named Amy, broke up with me preemptively in preparation for college. I don't know what I could have said to Eddie anyway. In my depressed mood, I might have begged him never to leave Diamond Dave because of personality clashes and silly arguments over the use of keyboards on the new album. Like I kept trying to explain to Amy, if each party is fully committed, a loving couple can work through anything, even a long distance relationship from SUNY New Paltz. But Eddie and Dave couldn't make it work either and my youth came crashing to an end: the original Van Halen disbanded, high school was over, my girlfriend was moving away, and I was too old for bike camp.

When Van Halen reunited with Diamond Dave for a tour a five years ago, I was there. I never got a chance to see them in their prime, but despite the passage of thirty years, Eddie played seamlessly while smiling his way through the show. It's unbelievable how distant summer days came flooding back on that humid night at Jones Beach Amphitheater on August 13, 2015. As the less nimble David
Lee Roth sang, I was suddenly transported to 1978 and hanging out with Bill Jr., since deceased, awaiting each new Van Halen record, cycling around America carefree, and running into Eddie and Valerie. I told my concert mate the story, savoring the smallest details in retrospect. “You saw Valerie BER-TIN-ELLI up close; was she as hot in real life?! I’m just glad Kent wasn’t there to make a complete drooling fool of himself. And, yes, Kent, Valerie was positively gorgeous and enchanting.

I always wonder how I would react if I had it to do over again. Anything I can think of is so trite. The memory now is almost better because so little happened, or I could have been telling the story quite differently:

"...and outta nowhere, the dude in the suit hauls off and punches me right in the throat and twists my arm behind my back. And, I'm just joking around with Ed and Val! Turns out...that guy was their bodyguard."

Instead of regretting an embarrassing encounter for the last 36 years, I can simply appreciate how kind that Hollywood couple was to a random dog and star-struck teen on a New York City street. It was great to share one quick but unforgettable moment with them.

**Postscript: October 7, 2020**

For us metalheads, Eddie Van Halen was the king of shredders. Hard rock would have plodded along just fine with Iommi, Blackmore, and Page riffs, but when he brought his solos and string tapping technique to the masses, rock and roll turned to metal, and Eddie set the benchmark for future guitarists.

Yes, Eddie was adept at playing soft, slow, and sweet, but we couldn't wait for him to go loud, fast, and crunchy. Guys tried to play faster with as much to flash as they could muster, but even the deftest picking and fretboard gymnastics fell short of Eddie's virtuosity. Arena rock and the Los Angeles scene of the 1980s would have been a lot different without Van Halen. Not only did he heavily influence local musicians, but also Texas thrasher Darrell "Dimebag" Abbott of Pantera, San Francisco’s Metallica riff artist Kirk Hammett, and even Alice in Chain’s grunge rocker Jerry Cantrell up in Seattle, just to name a few.

Eddie Van Halen died on October 6, 2020, in Santa Monica, CA, at the age of 65, and it is truly the end of an era spanning thirteen albums and more than 40 years of touring. There will never be another Van Halen, and there certainly will never be another Eddie. Frankly, I'm not sure if there's much left to be done with the guitar after Eddie put it down for the last time.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwYN7mTi6HM
Irving Bieler was one step away from joining the Swinging Sixties.

He was standing in front of the Music Box on South Main Street in Fall River, Massachusetts. He had no idea what he was going to find inside. He was 37, a husband, a father of three, and a World War II veteran. It was 1964 and the world was changing in ways that this child of the Great Depression could not understand. Young men and women were saying and doing things it had never occurred to him to say or do.

But his oldest son, who was nine, had watched the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show and had been lobbying for music. Not the radio, not the television. His son wanted records.

This was another new thing. Irving had never had records to play or something to play them on. Music for him was whatever random songs came on the radio. But he was determined to give his children all the things he had never had. If his son wanted records, his son was going to get records. Period. Irving took a breath, put on his brightest smile, and pushed open the door.

He saw long lines of boxes holding records in paper and cardboard sleeves. There were labels everywhere for different artists, but Irving didn’t recognize the names. His musical tastes ran in narrow grooves: Hank Williams and novelty numbers such as Sheb Wooley’s “The Purple People Eater” and the Hollywood Argyles’ “Alley-Oop.”

The woman running the shop had long hair, but something about her made him nervous. He spotted
two teenage girls in one aisle. Irving liked talking with new people, and they looked friendly. He approached them and said, “Could you girls help me? I’m looking for records for my children but I’m not sure what to look for.”

The girls considered this. “How old are your kids?” one of them asked. “What kind of music do they like?”

“The two oldest are nine and six. My daughter is a baby.” Irving resisted the urge to pull out the baby pictures. “We saw the Beatles when they were on Ed Sullivan. My oldest likes that kind of music, so maybe the Beatles and bands like them. Also The Mickey Mouse Club. And Alvin and the Chipmunks. But mostly the Beatles. And they have to be those small records, not the albums. The 45s.”

The girls took Irving on a whirlwind tour of popular music. After much consultation between them, none of which Irving understood, they handed him a dozen records. Irving, dazed, walked to the counter and got the attention of the long-haired woman, who, he was shocked to see, was actually a man. He wasn’t a beatnik, but what was he with all that hair?

You spin me right round, baby, right round

Irving chose 45s because the only record player the family had was a machine that played 45s. He liked it because it was a solid brown box the size of a birthday cake with a speaker inside and a thick plastic pipe sticking up out of it. You fit the hole in the middle of your record over the pipe and plopped it down onto the turntable, and then you swung the arm over and clamped the tone arm firmly to the record. You clicked the Play lever and the record rotated while the needle mounted inside the tone arm plowed miniature furrows around the vinyl.

The kids couldn’t knock this thing over. Irving had come to prefer furniture and other objects that the kids couldn’t knock over, break, or chew.

When Irving brought this new music home, his nine-year-old son was thrilled. Until this point in his musical experience, all he had had to play were the records his younger aunts had abandoned in the attic of the old family house and that Irving had rescued. Things like Carmen Cavallaro playing “Chopsticks” from some movie that was too boring for a nine-year-old to watch, Don Robertson’s “The Happy Whistler” (of interest only to people who are new to whistling), and Manos Hatzidakis’ “Never on Sunday,” which his mom, Gloria, sang while she washed the dishes.

httpv://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUzAhlCxo-zA

Suddenly, the little boy had music from his own century, not from the dusty old one the grown-ups lived in. Records like these:

The Beatles, “She Loves You,” “Please Please Me,” “Twist and Shout,” “There’s a Place”
The Animals, “House of the Rising Sun”
The Dave Clark Five, “Glad All Over”
The Supremes, “Where Did Our Love Go?”
The Rooftop Singers, “Walk Right In”

httpv://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDUMImLjYss
Gloria was not happy when the music began to play. Neither was Irving. In fact, for the next 15 years, one of his most-used expressions was “Turn that down!” or, when truly distressed by the Who or Jimi Hendrix, he reverted to the fractured English of his parents and yelled “Make it stiller!” And yet he eventually replaced the indestructible old record player with a stereo console nestled in a deep box of fake wood. It was a big upgrade in sound quality, even after one of the speakers died.

I am the nine-year-old boy who grew up to be me, and I am writing this in loving memory of my father on the first anniversary of his death at age 92. Thank you, Dad, for venturing into that store, even if it meant dealing with a man with long hair. And thank you, girls, for understanding that a boy of nine would eventually grow into a song like “House of the Rising Sun.”
An Assortment of Favorite Demo Recordings

FEATURED
Written by Rudy Radelic

Many audiophile magazines and internet sites compile lists of what they consider definitive demonstration recordings that every audiophile should own, or at least use religiously when auditioning equipment. I rarely find those lists helpful for a few reasons – the music isn’t to my taste, the recordings are almost impossible to find or outrageously expensive, or I never found the sound to be all that impressive.

Demo recordings should reflect our own interests in music. It should be music that we are intimately familiar with and know every nuance of. Our demos should also convey the feel of the music – a perfect-sounding system that doesn’t convey the emotion is one that I am not comfortable listening to. (And I’ve heard many like this!)

I have my own selected recordings which I tend to pull out when I want to audition a new component, enjoy the components I already own, tweak my system, or demonstrate my system to
others. This list is in no particular order and evolves over time.

**Michael Franks: *Music in My Head* (2018, Shanachie Records)**

Franks’ latest recording, *Music in My Head*, recalls those early albums *The Art of Tea* and *Sleeping Gypsy*. It’s new yet still familiar, a well-produced recording to hear his voice with - “Bluebird Blue” places his breathy vocals dead center, with a jazz combo accompaniment. The rest of the tunes are typical of his style of songwriting - easygoing, with clever turns of lyrics and rhymes. The clean instrumentation is good for pinpointing resonances or colorations in components, and his voice is perfect for detecting unwanted “chestiness” in the speakers.

**Tears For Fears: *The Seeds of Love* (1989, Fontana)**

Despite the excellent *Songs from the Big Chair*, I find myself drawn to the lush, bigger-than-life acoustic sound from *The Seeds of Love*. The title track gives a nod towards the Beatles’ psychedelic era with a lot going on in the background. Other tunes lean towards soul and gospel, thanks to Oleta Adams, whose crystal-clear voice cuts through the multilayered sounds on this album. The sound of this album is full-bodied and clean. A system should allow me to pick out individual parts, as well as enjoy the music as a coherent whole.

**Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays: *As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls* (1981, ECM)**

While I enjoy the mood of the title track, it’s the following three tunes that bend genres and make the record interesting. That it’s recorded on ECM also means that like other albums from the label, this one was impeccably recorded. “Ozark” starts the run with a busy, folksy workout. “September Fifteenth” is the highlight for me; a quiet duo piece honoring pianist Bill Evans (who passed away during the recording of the album). “It’s for You” is sprightly and fun with Pat’s guitars and Lyle Mays’ piano accompaniment complementing each other. Nana Vasconcelos handles the percussion and occasional vocals throughout.
Nik Bärtsch’s Ronin: *Holon* (2008, ECM) and *Randori* (2001, Ronin Rhythm Records)

_Holon_ was my gateway to Swiss pianist and composer Nik Bärtsch’s entire catalog. (Dan Schwartz wrote about Nik Bärtsch in Issue 31.) What also strikes me beyond the disarmingly simple music was how clean and precise the sound is on this album, without it sounding sterile as many modern recordings do. Bärtsch’s groups are all acoustic. Listen for intricate percussion, very subtle cues on the piano, the whisper of Sha’s bass clarinet and sax (often played in a percussive rather than melodic role)—there is much to uncover here on the right system.

_Randori_ is an earlier album, more repetitive and simpler, but the way the instruments are recorded puts them in the forefront with crisp, clean attacks, especially the percussion, which will give your system a workout. If you’ve ever heard these instruments up close in person, these recordings should give you an idea of what your system can reveal.

Oregon: *Northwest Passage* (1997, Intuition)

This album features clean acoustic sounds, intricate percussion, and a strong bass, all demonstrated on tracks like “Claridade” and the spooky “Nightfall.”


There are some cases where you need the blips, bloops and buzzes of synthesized electronic music to test the “speed” of your system, and this one is my go-to since it’s also an engaging album musically. [Frank Doris wrote about this album and others from Kraftwerk in Issue 111.]

Burt Bacharach: *Casino Royale* (1966, Colgems, reissued by Classic Records)

An audiophile classic, the killer track by Dusty Springfield, “The Look of Love,” is enough to
recommend this one. That voice...breathy and seductive. Herb Alpert’s trumpet on the main title is also the most lifelike I’ve heard it on those 1960s recordings, and the orchestra that Bacharach employed in London is nicely reproduced throughout. The Classic Records HDAD/DVD-A disc is the definitive digital version.

Eiji Oue/Minnesota Orchestra – Stravinsky (*Song of the Nightingale/The Firebird Suite/The Rite of Spring*) (1996, Reference Recordings)

This recording sounds as though it is over-boosted in the highs and lows. The overbearing bass drum resonates too loudly throughout the house, even without subwoofers. The brass is overly bright. The performance, under the baton of Eiji Oue, also differs from other renditions of these pieces; I still find it engaging though, despite the sound. The exaggerated lows and highs easily tax a lesser system. An edgy system will be triggered even more so by the overly bright brass. Speakers with poorly-controlled bass will sound even worse with the bass drum, and power amps are easily taxed. The recording has attributes that can aggravate certain aspects of a system to reveal their flaws. There are a couple of other recordings on this label with Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra that sound much more balanced and musical.

Manfredo Fest: *Braziliana* (1987, dmp Records)

This is a naturally recorded digital CD from the 1980s. Fest re-records one of his better-known tunes here, “Brazilian Dorian Dream,” in an arrangement similar to the original from the 1970s. Only this time, it’s so cleanly recorded, by Tom Jung at dmp Records. There is plenty of percussion details to listen for throughout the album.

Debussy: *Nocturnes* - Bernard Haitink conducting the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (1979, Philips)
The recording dates from 1979 and has a nice sense of ambience and “being there.” I’m a fan of Haitink’s conducting, and the Debussy works here have been among my favorites for decades. Despite a little tape hiss, I get a very “you are there” feeling from this recording. (The 2011 SACD is my go-to version.)

**Henry Mancini: The Pink Panther (soundtrack) (1964, RCA, reissued by Analogue Productions)/Hatari! (1962, RCA, reissued by Analogue Productions)**

Here are two albums I grew up listening to. *The Pink Panther* soundtrack is lush and orchestral. But given Mancini’s penchant for jazz, there are plenty of intimate jazz solos throughout the album, oozing out from one speaker or the other as the strings and double bass back them up. Pour a martini!

*Hatari!* features a lot of African percussion, highlighting the film’s safari theme. The nearly seven-minute-long title track opens the film on an action sequence, starting with only light percussion and picking up steam as the horns and piano build to a driving climax. The crystal-clear sound on the hit “Baby Elephant Walk” is also one of RCA’s finest moments.

Both are available as 45 RPM, 2-LP sets from Analogue Productions (as is *The Music from Peter Gunn* album) which make them fantastic vinyl demo recordings, but there are SACD equivalents from AP that sound almost as good. The Hi-Res Audio reissues from BMG are also the best sonic versions I’ve heard yet from that company.

**Bill Evans: Sunday at the Village Vanguard (1961, Riverside, reissued by Analogue Productions)**

This may be a clichéd pick, but in recent years I have become a big fan of Bill Evans’ trio recordings. Of all of them, this one certainly is not the best sounding, but this album should transport me to the Village Vanguard where this was recorded, with the ambient sounds of the audience sprinkled throughout the background. The Analogue Productions SACD is the best sounding version I own.

A lifelong Burt Bacharach fan (my mother played his records often), this project seemed so utterly strange at first that I didn’t think it would work. But it does. Behind Costello’s voice and lyrics, the music is 100% bona fide Bacharach. The recording itself is rich and dynamic, with everything from intimate piano to full orchestral crescendos, Costello’s gravelly voice adding to what is a high-water mark for both performers. The original CD is an HDCD disc; I prefer that over the Mobile Fidelity SACD and vinyl (which are too bright to my ears).


Like my Tears for Fears pick, *Crazy Life* is a well-recorded multi-track pop album. Thanks to Joe Vannelli’s synthesizer bass, there are plenty of low notes throughout. The sparse production on many of the tracks is a far cry from his most popular albums--plenty of clean, clear percussion parts, various keyboards without too many cheesy 1970s synthesizers, and Gino’s multitracked voice. The CD is practically unobtainium; you can hear the album on Qobuz, or you might still be able to find a clean vinyl copy.

**Harry Belafonte: *Belafonte Sings the Blues* (1958, RCA, reissued by Impex Records)**

This album, reportedly one of Belafonte’s favorites and the first he recorded in stereo, features very low-key participation of the cream of west coast jazz musicians in what is a quiet and revealing album. The best version I’ve heard is the Impex 45 RPM/2-LP set that puts Belafonte and the musicians right in the room. The digital Hi-Res version is commendable although it lacks that last little bit that tips the vinyl version over the top. A quiet, intimate recording, it is good for revealing the intricacies of the musical accompaniment and is one of the best recordings of Belafonte’s voice.
**Bebel Gilberto: Bebel Gilberto (2004, Six Degrees)**

Isabel “Bebel” Gilberto is the daughter of Bossa Nova pioneer João Gilberto and singer Miucha. Her style brings bossa nova and *Música Popular Brasileira* (MPB) to the 21st century and updates it. Her most engaging work is this well-recorded self-titled second album. The sparse instrumentation frames the breathiness of her voice, making this album a good test for determining how well a system can reproduce vocals.

**Mel Tormé: Swings Shubert Alley (1960, Verve)**

A favorite album by a favorite vocalist. Tormé’s vocals are clear as day. This is another “feeling” album for me – a swingin’ good time from end to end. If I’m not feeling Marty Paich’s horn charts on here, or the band seems congested or muddy, then something is wrong. The recent Hi-Res version available from Verve is the best I’ve ever heard this album.

**Here are some links to give you a taste of the music.**

- Manfredo Fest: “Braziliana”
- Michael Franks: “Bluebird Blue”
- Bebel Gilberto: “Simplesmente”
- Harry Belafonte: “A Fool For You”
- Mel Tormé: “Whatever Lola Wants”
- Gino Vannelli: “Crazy Life”
- Oregon: “Claridade”
- Nik Bartsch’s Ronin: “Module 8_9 I”
- Henry Mancini: “Champagne and Quail”
- Henry Mancini: “The Sounds of Hatari”
Kraftwerk: “Pocket Calculator”
Elvis Costello & Burt Bacharach: “I Still Have That Other Girl”
Bernard Haitink/Concertgebouw: Debussy – Trois Nocturnes
Pat Metheny & Lyle Mays: “Ozark”
Dusty Springfield: “The Look of Love”

Here’s a Qobuz playlist, for those who want to experience the tracks for themselves:

https://open.qobuz.com/playlist/4476932

I gathered two tracks from each of the albums listed, with two exceptions. Belafonte Sings the Blues is not available on Qobuz, so I had to substitute two of that album's tracks from his 3-CD anthology. (I really wanted to include "A Fool For You" but it's not on the anthology.) Also, Bacharach's Casino Royale soundtrack was nowhere to be found; Herb's title track is on the TJB's Sounds Like album, but I could not find that soundtrack version of Dusty's "The Look of Love" on any of her anthologies. (They include a shorter version, a different performance, with a lot more reverb.) A bummer, since “The Look of Love” is one of my favorites and a standout demo track. I tried to pick Hi-Res Audio versions wherever possible.
Badlands National Park, South Dakota, July 2019. The nearby town of Wall is known for Wall Drug, more of a tourist gift shop than drugstore. Taken with a Sony A77-II camera with Minolta Maxxum 17 - 35mm wide-angle zoom lens, f/9, 1/125, ISO 100.