Thanksgiving has come and gone in the US (and Brazil and elsewhere) and it was perhaps the strangest any of us have ever experienced – or maybe the most meaningful. Though all of us have had moments of deep despair in 2020, it’s not trite to note that there are also many reasons to be thankful and appreciate what we have all the more. I believe the human spirit is indomitable.


Steve Guttenberg: the Audiophiliac, Part One

FRANKLY SPEAKING
Written by Frank Doris

Steve Guttenberg is the host of The Audiophiliac Daily Show, a popular YouTube channel with more than 157,000 subscribers. Steve has written for numerous audio and mainstream publications and websites including CNET, The Absolute Sound, Home Theater, E-Town and many more, was a projectionist in Times Square and worked as a salesperson at Sound by Singer. Following is Part One of our talk.

Frank Doris: What is your first memory of hearing music?

Steve Guttenberg: It was a cowboy record or something. I was maybe four years old and it was a yellow 78, a children's record. I played it over and over and over and over. One day I took a nap as young children do. I woke up and thought, “let me hear the record again!” And my mother said, “oh, it's broken!” She broke my 78 because it was driving her crazy. So held up the pieces and said, “oh, Steve, we can't play this anymore.” And it was a childhood trauma that I’ve never recovered from. And that’s what started me in looking for that sound, that lost sound.

FD: I bet you treat your records with great care now! (laughter)

SG: But when I was older, like 10 or something, my parents had a big jukebox and I would just lay on the floor in front of the jukebox and feel the bass rolling over me. This was, huge for me, a really visceral physical experience of listening to music.

I also had one of those little six-transistor radios, and I’d hold it up to my ear and listen to it. But I would also tune between the AM stations and listen to the static, and I could modulate the static by mis-tuning in different directions and stuff. So I was always very aware of sound and it’s been a huge part of my life. And I have very poor vision. So my sound obsession was sort of making up for my lack of visual acuity. I’m aurally interactive!

FD: Was there a specific experience with audio that like kind of made the light bulb go off and made
you realize how good a high-end audio system could sound?

**SG:** An epiphany came when I met (recording engineer) Bob Katz at a New York Audio Show. I had just met Bob and he started to tell me about his system. This is about 1976 and he had Dahlquist DQ-10 speakers, an Ampzilla amp, a Linn turntable and so on. He invited me to his apartment and I sat down and listened and it was life-changing. Everything started with that moment. I can nail it to that. Bob and I became friends and that led to me working on sessions at Chesky Records for a long time.

I was also a movie theater projectionist in Times Square. So I had theater-sized sound systems at my disposal for decades! Really, really big speakers that I got to play with before the audience was there.

**FD:** The bad old days of Times Square...

**SG:** Hey! I worked in Times Square in the bad old days. That’s a video for another time! I’m actually slowly, extremely slowly, writing my biography of my 25 years as a projectionist. It was a big part of my life, but it ended 21 years ago.

But having big sound systems that I could play before the audience was in the theater was something I did. I would make a recording on reel-to-reel, then later on cassette, maybe even sometimes on an 8-track. I had this music that I knew well, and then would play it over a 600-seat movie theater sound system. And when you do that, when you play music you know really well over a big system in a theater-size room, you know what happens? It sounds more real. That’s because the space, the theater-sized space is more appropriately sized for the music, and you can just crank it. It doesn’t sound literally like a band, but it sounds more like a band than it does in your living room.

**FD:** I sometimes play music through a PA system (like the kind a rock band would use) to get the same effect. Let me hear what Nirvana sounds like at ungodly volume. You’d never call it high-fidelity, but man!
SG: In terms of feeling, you know?

FD: Yeah.

SG: One of my closest friends, Gene, is a musician. In the late seventies he had Klipsch Heresy [home audio speakers] as his PA speakers when he played in small clubs and those Heresies were also his home speakers. And one day we listened to Exile On Main St. at freaking loud volume in his West Village apartment. And it was another one of those moments of, wow, that sounds so good. Not “audiophile” good but just thrilling good.

FD: A whole generation listening on their iPhones and earbuds is literally missing that. They're the lost generation! Hopefully we can bring them back.

SG: I try to bring younger listeners into audio every day.

FD: How do we get younger people into audio?

SG: Turntables, ironically, are one of the main ways to bring them into it, turntables and headphones.

FD: How did you get started as a writer? It doesn't seem like you had an epiphany when you were two years old, reading a book or something. How did you go from being a projectionist to writing?

SG: I was also working at Sound by Singer [in Manhattan] selling high-end audio from about 1978 to around 1994.

FD: No pressure there! Working for Andy Singer selling to Manhattan audiophiles.

SG: But it was the golden age for you at The Absolute Sound. And for me, at Sound By Singer and some of that period overlapping with my working as a record producer at Chesky Records. But how I came to write was, I loved reading The Absolute Sound. I loved Stereophile. I loved all the other audio magazines. The Audio Critic was huge in its influence, like today what we call what I do. I'm an influencer. [Editor] Peter Aczel, this was around 1980 or so, was a massive influencer. Harry Pearson was probably the most influential of them all.

FD: Peter Aczel and Harry Pearson would really go at each other in print, really nasty stuff, and then they'd see each other at a party and it would be, “hey, Peter, how are you doing?” I thought they hated each other from reading their magazines but it was just the opposite.

SG: Anyway, I wrote a piece called, “Are We Not Audiophiles?” for Positive Feedback. That was the first thing I ever wrote. It was based on audiophiles denying the fact that they were audiophiles. I was at a party and a lot of audiophiles were there. I walked up to each one and I just asked them, “are you an audiophile?” And maybe four out of five of them would say, “no, no, I'm not! I like music...” And this one guy at the party, David, he had a big Rockport [Technologies] turntable, you know, even then it was a $30,000 or $40,000 turntable. And I said, “David, you know you don't need to own a $40,000 turntable to play records. But apparently what your records sound like is really important. So I guess, maybe, maybe, you're an audiophile. And he said, “no, no, no, no. I just like music!”

So it got to be a thing for me, which continues to this day, about audiophiles hating that word “audiophile.” And many of them, most of them, deny that they're audiophiles. Maybe they just don't like being called that; they think it's too nerdy, they think it's too introverted. It's too something or
other. And they're just not comfortable using that word to describe themselves.

Anyway, I was working for David and Norman Chesky [at Chesky Records] and they had a new record coming out, a classical re-issue. And David said to me, “why don't you go out to Sea Cliff and see Harry and bring the record to them and just hang out?” And I agreed. In fact, you were my contact. I went out, and you met me at the train station and picked me up. This had to have been around 1987?

It was the only day I ever spent with Harry where things went well. No, there was one other day.

At one point Harry he said to me, “would you like to write for the magazine?” And I said, “yeah. Wow, thanks. That's incredible!” But then Harry being Harry, he asked the best follow-up question: “what do you want to write about?” And I said, “I want to write about new LPs that are coming out,” because vinyl was going downhill at that point. And he said OK, and it was the start of the “Vinyl Rules” column.

The thing that was great about the “Vinyl Rules” column was that it wasn't actually writing. It was basically making a list and going around to record stores in Manhattan to see what was happening. I wrote down interesting titles and the name of the band and stuff. And that was kind of it.

And then you called me one day and said, “do you want to interview Gavin Bryars?” He had a hip avant-garde record called The Sinking Of The Titanic. So we had this phone call and we really hit it off. I was kind of intimidated by him, but it was a fun interview. So I recorded the interview and now I had about an hour and a half or two hours of me talking to Gavin Bryars. And I started to do a word-for-word transcription of that interview. Then I realized that it didn't actually work as a word-for-word transcription. So I had to make it read better. As I was doing that, I was basically learning how to write.

It really all started with going to see Harry and delivering these records and hitting it off with him.

FD: After that you wrote for many other people and really got established. We're fast-forwarding decades now, but you got to the point where you are now, doing YouTube videos. I was actually a little surprised when I'd heard you had given up working for CNET in favor of doing nothing but YouTube. You're almost a pioneer of that.

SG: I had my CNET blog, The Audiophiliac, for 12 years. When I started it, there were, I don't know, 30 other blogs at the same time because blogs were a thing. And one by one, those blogs dropped away because the people writing the blogs just ran out of things to say, and there I am chugging away year after year, year after year.
At one point one of the big shots at CNET said “we’re going to kill all the blogs.” And I said, “oh, well, that’s sad; I like doing the blog.” And then he said, “oh, Steve, not you! We call your blog a ‘personality blog’ because it’s not about the product or the thing you’re writing about that day. It’s more about Steve talking about or expressing interest or being excited about those things. So when people read it, it might not because you’ll have something interesting to say that day; it’s just, they want to hear from you. You’re their daily friend or something like that.” And that’s kind of what my YouTube channel is. I wanted to do exactly what I was doing for CNET but on video.

And I would make pilot episodes for CNET that never went anywhere. Then I said, screw it. I’ll just start my YouTube channel, make a bunch of videos really fast and then show them to CNET and then they would understand what I wanted to do. Maybe two months into doing that, I realized I didn’t want to do that for CNET; I wanted to do it for myself so I would have control over what I was doing.

FD: And now you have more than 150,000 subscribers. (starts laughing): I'm laughing now because my pug is now snoring very loudly.

SG: I put him to sleep! Well, I have that effect on people. People tell me my voice is very relaxing and I guess dogs find that relaxing too.

FD: Do you like to wrangle with tweaking and trying to get the ultimate amount of performance out of a piece of gear?

SG: No! No, I don’t. I’m not a tweaker per se.

FD: System tweaking is a tough one. I’ve heard tweaks work. I’ve heard them do absolutely nothing. I’ve heard them degrade the sound. A lot of time it really defies conventional “audiophile wisdom.” Art Dudley [the late editor for Stereophile] was a proponent of taking all the tweaks out of your system with the goal of having it sound better.

SG: Personally, I think reviewers using tweaks and stuff is kind of misleading. Let’s say you’re reviewing a preamplifier. But then you use it with a power conditioner on it and you put special feet underneath it, and then you do all these other things. And then you say you’re reviewing the Product X Preamp. Well, how do I know whether what you're describing is the sound of the preamp or it’s the sound of the preamp or the power conditioner or the feet? Or if you’re describing the sound of some
other thing that you've done?

So maybe it just makes sense for a reviewer to use a few or no tweaks, so that you’re actually doing your best to hear the thing itself. Otherwise it’s kind of muddying the waters. It’s hard enough to describe the sound of something with words!

*Part Two of our interview will appear in Issue 126.*
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SOS

THE RUN-OUT GROOVE

Written by James Whitworth
"NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES I CLEAN MY 'ABBA'S HITS PLAYED ON PANPIPES' LP IT STILL SOUNDS AWFUL."
"No matter how many times I clean my 'Abba's Hits Played on Panpipes' LP, it still sounds awful."
The 'wow and flutter' thing began when my mother sang off-key while shaking the pram... the turntable pitch now never seems right.
The "wow and flutter" thing began when my mother sang off-key while shaking the prom... the turntable pitch now never seems right.
In Issue 124 Ken wrote about the beginning of the Split Enz 1980 US/Canada tour, encounters with Iggy Pop and Cynthia Plaster Caster and more. The story continues here.

On November 3 we flew United Airlines to Seattle. Again A&M Records had a bunch of afternoon interviews scheduled for Neil and Tim Finn before the night’s performance. The show that night was wild, with almost a New Year’s Eve vibe. A&M was there in force, and after the show the club closed but we all stayed and had an impromptu party. My new friend Jacqueline taught me how to properly ingest tequila shots, Acapulco style. Party we did, the band, crew, A&M people, club management and employees - about 40 people. And it got loud. At one point we convinced the Finn brothers to get on stage and do an acoustic version of, “I Got You.” it was a wonderful intimate moment and we celebrated until four in the morning when the cleaning crew came in and kicked everyone out.

Next day, we piled into rental cars and drove north to Vancouver, Canada. The route was spectacular, the scenery something to behold. This must be one of the America’s great drives. Getting through Canadian customs was a breeze this time, and the drive into Vancouver was short. It was my first time there and driving into this attractive city surrounded by snow-capped Mountains was awesome. We were staying at Century Plaza on Burrard St., quite an upscale hotel. That afternoon the Finns had two radio call-in interviews.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51ib_El-yh4

Just after dark we drove over to the Commodore Ballroom for the gig. The first thing I noticed about the downtown area was the large population of homeless people. In 1980 there were more than I have ever seen in a city before. We got inside the Commodore and tonight we were co-headlining with Iggy Pop. (We had to share a dressing room with him and his guys, but no problem; it was a big room, easily 15,000 square feet.)
He went on first and I went out to watch. High energy, raw with a punch. The house was standing only, no seats. Those standing up in front were spitting on him. He did not flinch or even look bothered, like he was used to it. I was amazed, speechless, I could not believe it.

Later, after his set and before ours I walked in the dressing room and Iggy smiled at me and started singing the jingle for Jordache Jeans. “You got the look, you got the look, you got the Jordache look.” Yes, I was wearing Jordache jeans. We both had a laugh and I said, “you got me. How was your set, was the sound OK?” “Yep, not bad; I could hear myself so the monitors were set up correctly.” Then I said, “I have to ask you, what is with the spitting?” He said that it was the audience showing appreciation. “Doesn’t it bother you?” “No, not at all, its sexual.” (He actually said something else which we cannot publish.) “What about the dry cleaning bill?” I asked. “Ha ha, that’s why I wear tee shirts!”

Right about then somebody walked into the dressing room and announced that Ronald Reagan had just won the election. This was November 4th, 1980, Election Day. Iggy said, “there goes the neighborhood,” and the Americans in the room laughed.

Toward the end of the Enz show Jacqueline and her friend Audrey walked into the backstage area. They looked beautiful all dressed up. I asked Jacqueline why she was so late. “Customs gave us the third degree. They thought we were working girls and kept us there, asking us questions and accusing us for three hours. We thought they would not let us into Canada. Finally, they let us cross the border, but they said they didn’t believe us.”

I felt so bad for the girls. I told them I would have never even thought that could happen and Audrey said it never crossed our minds either. Then Audrey went off to the side of the stage to meet up with drummer Malcolm Green when he came off stage. I grabbed Jacqueline’s hand and gave her a soft kiss and she visibly relaxed as I held her softly.

I felt her tension release and she smiled. She was annoyed that she came so late and missed most of the show but she felt better. It is a shame, but she said, “we both must work tomorrow so we can only stay for a couple of hours and then we have to go back to Seattle.” Okay; back at the hotel we had a tequila and a quick bite at the bar and then went up to my room to hang out until about one in the morning. At that point she calls Audrey in Malcom’s room on the house phone, and arranges to meet up in the hotel lobby in 15 minutes for the drive back to the US.

After Jacqueline left, I thought about what happened to the girls. The custom officials were first-class jerks for hassling them. The fact that they said they did not believe them but still let them into Canada proved the point. I make that statement because the whole experience was apparently pointless and just an excuse to mess with those girls. What a lousy experience for them. Imagine two girls in their early to mid-twenties dressed to the nines, driving to Vancouver to see a show and meet some friends and then that happens.

The next day was a travel day and we flew to Edmonton, a large northern city that is more than 600 miles north of the US/Canadian border, way up north. On the flight Noel Crombie (vocals, miscellaneous noises and percussion) got into a loud argument with the man sitting next to him, a dignified looking senior gentleman. Noel was playing with his handheld video game, and the game was emitting dinging and pinging sounds every few seconds. It was probably quite annoying to everyone in the surrounding seats. After an hour into the flight the gentleman could not take the noise anymore and asked Noel if he would he mind quieting the game. Noel freaked out; “this is a ridiculous request!” he exclaimed in a nasty tone of voice. This was back when portable video games
had just appeared and hardly anyone had them. No one wore headphones and proper etiquette for playing noisy games in public had not been thought out or even considered. It was uncharted territory so to speak.

But seriously, how could Noel have been so oblivious to his surroundings and even think that other passengers would not be bothered by the constant noise assault? And now he got all huffy as if he was the injured party. Oh I get it, miscellaneous noises, that is what he does. He gets paid for that so from his point of view it is all good. I tried but could not broker a peaceful settlement. Fortunately, the stewardess then announced we were coming in for landing and that put an end to it.

After landing we rented cars and while driving into Edmonton, I noticed the scenery and that it reminded me of the plains of Wyoming. This was cowboy country, I mused to myself as we passed corralled horses and open plains and ranches until we reached Edmonton and were back in a city environment. The Finns had one local telephone radio interview which they did from their hotel room, and then the band did a concert in an old vaudeville theatre, then back to the hotel, err, corral. The next day we traveled to Winnipeg and the Enz did an early concert at the city social center. The facility was like a big school auditorium; no booze or beer, but the audience was thrilled with the band. It was a younger crowd with parents bringing their kids.

Flying into Minneapolis/St. Paul we had to pass through US Customs. They pulled me out of line and took me in a room to pat me down. Then the customs official told me to take off my clothes and get undressed. I took my shirt off and handed it to them. Then I gave them my shoes, one by one, which they carefully inspected. Then I started pulling my Jordache jeans down, had one pant leg removed and sat on a bench to remove the other leg when they stopped me and said, “okay, that’s good, get dressed.” Jeez, what was that? That was the first and only time in my life anything like that happened.
That night we played Duffy's and after the show we all went to a bar near the hotel and had an end of tour party. We were all drinking, smoking, and joking; it was a good tour, enjoyable for me and Split Enz and I was glad that none of us got spit on. We still were talking about that show with Iggy Pop – all of us were amazed and none of us understood it. The next morning everyone said goodbye to me at the airport because we were going in different directions.

A few years later Split Enz were playing Irving Plaza, which was two blocks from my apartment, so I stopped by to say hello and see their show. I went backstage and the Finn brothers were happy to see me. During the show, Neil told the audience that their former road manager was in the house and that they wanted to thank Ken Sander for all he had done for them. Wow! That was so thoughtful and really unexpected. I was touched, especially considering that maybe only 25 people out of probably 1,300 people in Irving Plaza knew who I was. I had never got a shout out like that before. That is the kind of person Neil Finn is.

Split Enz would go on to have more hits such as “History Never Repeats,” and in 1985 Neil Finn would become the front man for Crowded House and write their smash hit, “Don’t Dream It’s Over.” His brother Tim joined Crowded House months after the band formed. Like Split Enz, Crowded House also had a good run of successful tours. Currently Neil is with Fleetwood Mac, who, along with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’ guitarist Mike Campbell, replaced Lindsey Buckingham in the group and learned the benefits of drinking cranberry juice.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9gKyRmic20
There is a *Saturday Night Live* sketch from 1996 in which then Prime Minister John Major (Mike Myers) partakes in the traditional 15 minutes of questions in the House of Commons. He has policy differences with many of the members but one, Michael Shersby (Will Ferrell), is a particular thorn. M.P. Shersby has a singular obsession: Britain's most popular band, Oasis.

The speaker, Betty Boothroyd (Molly Shannon) reprimands him, in the official transcript of the episode reprinted here:

"Mr. Shersby!! You’ve been warned **seven** times this **month** to **stop** bringing up Oasis!"

Shersby: "But is **not** Oasis the **greatest** British band since the Beatles? Can we **not** vote on **this**?!"

Emphatically not. But later, Shersby gets another turn at a question for the Prime Minister:

"What steps has the Prime Minister...taken to prevent Liam Gallagher from leaving?"

    **John Major:** Uh...yes. what exactly is the right gentleman talking about, and **who** is Liam Gallagher?!

    **Michael Shersby:** He is the lead singer of Oasis! And if he leaves, it will be bloody awful! [the crowd grows rowdy again ]

    **John Major:** Sit down! sit down! Ghastly man, sit down!"

Some perplexed American viewers might have commiserated with the Prime Minister. Who, indeed, is Liam Gallagher? And as one of *SNL*’s most peculiar skits, and Will Ferrell’s most obscure characters, we’d ask: Why would anyone watching care so much about Oasis? They certainly had their fans in the United States, but singer Liam and songwriter/guitarist Noel Gallagher were leaders of the band that was the greatest phenomenon in British pop since the Beatles.
The absurdity of the skit underlined the distinctive ways with which the Manchester band was viewed on either side of the pond. In England, the mid-1990s were the peak of Britpop, the charts and airwaves dominated by Oasis, as well as Blur, Pulp, and Suede. They sang with proud local accents about their own local and national concerns.

Having dropped out of music in 1994 to write about food for a few years, I never had to deal with Oasis or their Britpop brethren. I recall a lot of sarcasm from my fellow US critics, who found the whole scene irrelevant or derivative: grunge and gangsta rap rocked their world, not to mention Alanis Morissette, whose *Jagged Little Pill* was also released in 1995. And the British press was obsessed with the war between the Gallagher brothers, who may still be estranged. If you didn't know their music, you knew they hated each other. Nothing new to see here: Sibling rivalry runs through rock history, from the Everly Brothers, to the Kinks, to the Blasters.

The 25th anniversary reissue in October of the quintessential second Oasis album, *What's the Story) Morning Glory?* (*WTSMG*) (reissued by Big Brother Recordings Ltd.) seemed like an opportunity to meet the band on its own terms. And it's a really enjoyable ride: the hits just keep on coming.

But you can't begin without acknowledging the numbers: the album had a short run in the United States and peaked at No. 4 on the *Billboard* albums chart in February 1996. By contrast, *WTSMG* was No 1 for 10 weeks on the UK Official Chart, and remained on that chart for 463 weeks, which if I've entered the numbers in my calculator correctly, is just shy of nine years.

Obviously, Oasis did a few things right in their quick, but lasting, ascent. They considered rock and roll the essential food group, but had their hearts broken too many times by promises of earlier movements to change the world. Their manifesto, if there was one, might be summed up by what Noel Gallagher said in a package of prepared press quotes.

"As a kid, you always believed the Sex Pistols were going to conquer the world and kill everybody in the process. Bands like The Clash just petered out. Punk rock was supposed to be the revolution but
what did it do? F*ck all. The Manchester thing [dance and rock of Joy Division, the Smiths, New Order, Stone Roses, Happy Mondays] was going to be the greatest movement on earth but it was F*ck all. When we started we decided we weren't going to do anything for anybody, we just thought we'd leave a bunch of great songs. And that they did.

The 1994 debut album *Definitely Maybe* was an immediate UK hit, a smartly derivative distillation of the British rock foundation (Beatles/Stones/Kinks/Who). But the second album, *What's the Story Morning Glory?* was their studio masterpiece, going deeper into rock Britannia and landing everywhere from *Revolver* in its production sounds to the glam stomp of Slade, which gets a shout-out with the bonus track of Oasis covering "Cum On Feel the Noize."

Every song is good, half a dozen are great, and two, both mid-tempo, "Wonderwall" and "Champagne Supernova," belong on the playlist with "Hey Jude," "A Day in the Life," and "A Whiter Shade of Pale." I mention the Procol Harum song because it was the surprise answer to a 2009 BBC 2 survey: what is the most played song in (UK) public places for the last 75 years? Surely these two Oasis songs are closing ground on Procol's monument.

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

The Beatles effect is tattooed on every available piece of skin on *Morning Glory*. Why deny it when you can revel in it? When Liam's natural singing Mancunian voice would make him an ideal leader for a John Lennon cover band? The song "Morning Glory," addressed to a drug user "chained to the mirror and the razor blade," calls for them to wake up: "Walking to the sound of my favorite tune, 'Tomorrow Never Knows' what it doesn't know too soon." (The quotations and capitalization are mine, but the reference to the song on *Revolver*, this album's ground zero of Beatlebrainia, seems obvious.)

And Beatles connections are intentional, as a song called "Wishing Stone" became "Wonderwall" after Noel listened to *Wonderwall Music*, George Harrison's soundtrack to a 1968 British movie that became the first Beatles solo record and the first LP on their Apple label.

"Wonderwall" is a little more self-consciously arty than other Oasis hits: It's like the Beatles' "I Am the Walrus," its DNA reconfigured to be part of the pop core curriculum rather than an outlier. Salient point: many Oasis concerts ended with "I Am the Walrus."

Some of the songs on *Morning Glory*, though brilliant in their pop craft, are too long. "Hey Now!," a rocker easy to underestimate, goes on for nearly six minutes, when three and a half would have had fiercer impact. "Cast No Shadow," which begins with a sweet acoustic guitar riff and lovely backing vocals that could pace it as part of the *Abbey Road* side two medley, could have its maximum effect if two minutes were trimmed.

"Champagne Supernova," by contrast, is the fastest seven and a half minutes in pop music. It engages immediately, you can make of it what you want. Think literally of shaking up a jeroboam of champagne, then popping cork: Boom! A champagne supernova! I can understand why teens in mid-1990s Britain were drawn to the song forever: The refrain, "Where were you when we were getting high?" is not really a question. It's more like, we were all getting stoned together, and what were you doing when this song kicked into your head permanently? I'm sure that British teen, 25 years later, remembers the way it altered their brain chemistry the first time they heard the song, the way I remember the first time I really heard "I Want To Hold Your Hand" (on a faint radio in my house) or "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (getting on a bus with friends). It's instant nostalgia.
build is subtle but steady, taking you from "She Loves You" through "Walrus" through "Stairway to Heaven," before you got tired of it. It's essential Britishness is emphatically rendered by guest guitarist Paul Weller, a cult figure in America but Rock God in the UK.

"Don't Look Back in Anger" is one of the most resilient Oasis songs. It became a reassuring cultural touchstone after the bombing of Ariana Grande’s concert in Manchester in 2017. It's hard to think of this song without noting the 1956 John Osborne play Look Back in Anger, which adrenalized British culture in the 1950s, and launched a creative movement of writers and artists known as the "angry young men," roughly parallel to the Beat movement in the United States. (There is also a David Bowie song called "Look Back in Anger.") The piano chords that open the song echo the beginning of "Imagine," and the performance and lyric of the best solo record that John Lennon never made. "I'm gonna start a revolution from my bed," Gallagher sings, a reference to Lennon and Yoko Ono's famous "bed-in" for peace at a hotel in Toronto.

The original Morning Glory album had 12 songs, opening with the cheery and obvious "Hello," which borrows, with writer credit, from Gary Glitter and Mike Leander's "Hello, Hello, I'm Back Again." Slade’s "Cum On Feel the Noize" is a bonus track, Beatle-bop condensed into soccer chants transmuted into hard bubbleglam.

Two of the 12 songs on the original release were brief rocking instrumental interludes, known as "The Swamp Song" (excerpts one and two). The remastered CD has 40 songs; readers should be aware that the original masters were compressed for ultimate loudness, part of the competition between Oasis and Blur; consider your audio preferences, as copies of the new disc were not available for review, and my ears are unreliable witnesses. But among the 40 tracks here are a number of B-sides, an alternate mix or two, and live performances from concerts in Earl's Court, Knebworth, and the Roskilde festival in Denmark in 1995. Their version of "I Am the Walrus" is not here, but it exists so palpably in the undertow that you can roll your own.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxbVdqm6iaE
How many audiophiles actually perform any form of measurement on any aspect of their system? Is there any merit in doing so? To answer the question of whether it is necessary or even advantageous to test our audio systems, we need to first understand the usefulness and the limitations of measurements. In this article, we will explore the utility of the most quoted measurement in hi fi, the total harmonic distortion.

As my training is in the medical sciences, the way I approach this question parallels my approach to ordering diagnostic tests. Doctors love tests. Patients love tests (at least, those that don't hurt). Everyone loves tests, (I lied. Insurance companies hate tests.) However, patients and doctors often have a different understanding of why tests need to be done. ("The loan on the Mercedes is due" is not a valid reason.) With easy access to information on the internet, the first thing many patients say to me when I see them for the first time is: "Doc, I am here to get the ______ test."

Patients often think that the numbers printed on the test results form are the final arbiter of their health. The numbers don't lie. However, what they often don't understand are the concepts of false
positives, false negatives, positive predictive value, negative predictive value, sensitivity, specificity etc. Every test has its idiosyncrasies; some tests are good at ruling out diagnoses, but could give you a scare since they often say you are sick when you are not (they are more accurate when the result is negative than when it is positive). On the other hand, there are tests where, if they show a positive result, you are doomed, but they can also miss a lot of cases (they are more accurate when the result is positive than when it is negative).

Some tests directly measure something that is involved in making you sick. Other tests just look at things that might suggest you are sick, but are not directly involved in the disease process. And then there are tests that are completely useless, other than to fill the coffers of the lab. (Somehow, my specialty seems to be afflicted by this more than most.) Most of these tests have not been evaluated by regulatory agencies such as the FDA, but they are nevertheless widely promoted.

A friend of mine runs a reputable clinical lab in town. He told me that certain smaller labs love to underbid for contracts to do annual employment physicals and the like. They just run a small percentage of the samples, and make up the results (always within the reference range) for the rest. These are tests that of course have little clinical significance, and if someone questions their accuracy, the labs or organizations doing the testing can simply say that a person’s health status can change within a short time or, in a worst-case scenario, that the samples got mixed up. Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos took this concept to Silicon Valley and became a billionaire (for a short while).

In a similar manner in audio, there are measurements that directly correlate to sound quality. There are measurements that indirectly give you an idea of whether something is wrong. There are also measurements that are only meant to help sell merchandise. There is an eerie symmetry between healthcare and audio.

Someone did a study on a bunch of teaching hospitals and found that the amount of spending on lab tests spikes every July. This is the time when new interns start working, and, being less confident in their own clinical skills, they tend to order more tests for reassurance. After three decades of practice, I tell patients that they don't need to have the tests they've demanded, more often than actually ordering the tests. A parallel to this could also happen in the case of seasoned audiophiles who are more confident in their ability to tell what sounds good without resorting to measurements. However, even experienced clinicians rely on diagnostic tests, and experienced audiophiles could benefit from measuring certain aspects of their system too.

When someone asked Harold Leak, the founder of the eponymous British hi-fi brand, how he designed his products to sound the way they did, he said he did not know, since he never paid attention to how his products sounded. He insisted that his amplifiers must measure well, and I guess he also believed that if they measured well, they would sound good. To him, measurements were more important than subjective evaluation of the "sound quality," an ill-defined quantity.

He designed the first amplifier ever to have a measured total harmonic distortion (THD) of less than 0.1% (At 1kHz only. The THD of the Leak TL/12.1 rises rapidly with frequency. That mattered little to Harold, as it was customary to quote only the THD at 1kHz). His priority was to find a way to keep the amplifier from oscillating while applying enough negative feedback to get to the magic THD of 0.1%. As we shall discuss later, the relationship between the level of THD and subjective sound quality is complex; the fact that the TL/12.1 has an excellent subjective sound quality is purely coincidental, or even fortuitous.

When solid state amplifiers first appeared, one of the selling points was their low distortion. It is possible to design transistor circuits with massive amounts of negative feedback, thus reducing THD as measured by conventional methods to vanishingly low levels. This gives people the erroneous
impression that as amplification devices, transistors are more linear than vacuum tubes. However, the use of such large amounts of NFB can introduce other deleterious effects on sound quality (such as transient intermodulation distortion), which goes back to my previous comment of the cure being worse than the disease. And in this case, do we even have a disease that needs curing?

Peter Walker of Quad developed a technique to cancel out the music playing in an amplifier, leaving only the distortion and noise. He surmised that as long as the distortion is not audible (at normal listening volumes) under such a condition, the amplifier is "perfect" and "can never be improved upon," what he called a straight wire with gain. He went on to demonstrate that listeners were unable to tell whether a Quad transistor amplifier (the 405.2) was in circuit or not. His Quad II tube amplifier would have failed miserably if it were put to the same tests. However, 40-odd years later, his company chose to reissue the Quad II as the “Classic,” (the Quad II Classic reissue) whereas the 405.2 has been relegated to the footnotes of history (or maybe the junkyard of history would be a more accurate description). Go figure. David Hafler set up a similar test, which he called the Straight Wire Differential Test (SWDT). Stereophile’s J Gordon Holt did an interesting review of the Hafler XL-280, comparing the result of the SWDT with subjective evaluations.

A 1977 Wireless World article on amplifier distortion by celebrated amplifier designer Peter Baxandall began by stating, "There is a very widely held belief that all amplifiers sound different, and that the reasons for this are so subtle and mysterious that no one has yet properly understood them. I do not agree with these views, and confidently maintain that all first-class, competently designed amplifiers, tested under completely fair and carefully-controlled conditions, including the avoidance of overloading, sound absolutely indistinguishable on normal programme material no matter how refined the listening tests, or the listeners..."

Many phenomena in science were subtle and mysterious until explanations were found, at which point they are no longer subtle nor mysterious. Psychoacoustics is a complex phenomenon, and how the brain reacts to different distortion products is still not completely understood. Jean Hiraga performed an experiment by asking listeners to rate amplifiers with different distortion characteristics. He concluded that it is not the absolute level of THD that matters, but the spectrum of the harmonics present in the distortion. (Harmonics are multiples of the fundamental frequency.) He found that amplifiers with orderly diminishing levels of harmonics were subjectively the best-sounding. He noticed that each harmonic has a masking effect on the harmonic above; the 2nd harmonic is masked by the fundamental, and in turn masks the 3rd harmonic and so on. If the level of a harmonic is higher than that of the harmonic below, it would no longer be masked and its effect becomes more obvious, especially if it creates dissonance (the dissonant harmonics are the 7th, 9th, 11th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 17th, 18th and 19th).

Hiraga also noted that musical instruments have very high levels of 2nd and 3rd harmonics (70% in the case of a violin), but their character is determined by the relative levels of the 4th to 20th harmonics, which are at extremely low levels. Moreover, the brain is much more sensitive to distortion at high frequencies. In fact, at mid-bass frequencies, the distortion has to reach 20% before it is noticeable, but at high frequencies, distortion of well under 1% is noticeable. 2nd and 3rd-order harmonic distortions tend to have very little audible effect even at high levels, due to the strong masking effect of the fundamental, whereas the high-order distortions are noticeable at far lower levels. That is why a single-ended triode amplifier might have 3% 2nd harmonic distortion, and yet violins could still sound natural.

In 2006, almost 30 years after Hiraga first published his findings, Keith Howard published his research in The Absolute Sound as a sequel to the Hiraga experiments. By that time, single-ended
triode amplifiers had made a resurgence on the hi-fi scene, and one of the explanations for their popularity was their high level of second harmonic distortion, which was believed to be euphonic. Howard constructed a software utility that could add non-linear distortions to music through digital signal processing. He went on to add different patterns of harmonic distortions to music and assessed their effects. Howard concluded that it takes quite a large amount of distortion for the brain to take notice. He also found that none of the additional distortions was euphonic; even with the "ideal" pattern of harmonics as described by Hiraga, which at 3.33% THD would muddy the sound, but which Howard did not find objectionable. When Howard lowered the harmonics by 20dB (i.e. THD of 0.33%), the distortion was no longer noticeable.

However, the most unpleasant distortion pattern was the one with all the even-order harmonics removed (i.e. odd-order only); even though the THD has decreased to 1%, the sound was edgy and irritating. On the other hand, the pattern with all the odd-order harmonics removed, with a THD of 3.18%, sounded much less annoying, but still unnatural. In conclusion, adding second-order harmonics did not make the sound more attractive, but it did make the other added harmonics less unpleasant. Even though the early transistor amplifiers had principally odd-order harmonics, the distortion was at such a low level that it was probably not noticeable by the brain. So, what accounts for the nasty sound of some solid state amps, especially some older models?

So far, we have only discussed THD, which is measured by playing a pure tone in an amplifier driving a resistive load. But I seldom listen to sine waves for fun, and even though my speakers don’t have crossovers, they are hardly purely resistive loads. Two amplifiers with identical harmonic distortion spectra, when playing music while driving a real-world reactive load would likely sound different, as they produce additional harmonic (e.g. crossover distortion in class A/B amplifiers) and non-harmonic (such as intermodulation distortion) distortions under dynamic conditions, as well as other as yet undefined sources of distortion. In fact, with complex musical signals, the intermodulation distortion is often two orders of magnitude higher in power (i.e. +20dB) than the harmonic distortion. Moreover, intermodulation distortion is invariably dissonant and therefore more deleterious to sound quality. Applying negative feedback (NFB) to remedy the harmonic distortion in a poorly-designed circuit could lead to additional problems. Like using bad medicine, the cure becomes the problem. However, one can avoid these problems by using NFB judiciously, as the issue is not the negative feedback per se but its improper application.

While understanding harmonic distortion would help you better appreciate the technical aspects of a Stereophile equipment review (or other review where measurements are included), few audiophiles would be interested in measuring distortion in their equipment unless they are trying to build their own or do modifications to the gear. However, there are other measurements that might be worthwhile, something we will get into in the next issue.

4. https://www.axiomaudio.com/blog/distortion

Header image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/ArnoldReinhold.
First, the Nice part:

One of my earliest memories of hearing recorded choral music was of a particular disc from David (not yet Sir David) Willcocks and the Choir of King’s College, Cambridge. The record was entitled Jesu, Priceless Treasure, because it featured Bach’s great motet Jesu meine Freude BWV 227, which the Choir sang in William Bartholomew’s 19th-century “Englished” version. Willcocks’s performance, recorded in 1959, gave half a nod to modern practice — he brought in organist Simon Preston plus a cellist and bassist to play continuo accompaniment—but bowed to Victorian principles as to tempi (slow) and phrasing (à la Mendelssohn). Whereas 21st-century performances of BWV 227 usually clock in at around 20 minutes, Willcocks took nearly 27.

It didn’t matter. I loved it. Still do. When December rolls around, nothing warms my heart like hearing the Choir of King’s College singing something. Lately we’ve gotten a flood of lovely releases from them, occasioned in part by the 100th anniversary celebration of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols and in part by their fond, sad farewell to Sir Stephen Cleobury (1948–2019), who directed the Choir for 37 years.
Which seems like a long time until you consider the Choir’s history. Hugh of Balsham, Bishop of Ely, founded Petershouse, the first Cambridge college, in 1284. More significant for music at Cambridge was the activity of King Henry VI, who founded King’s in 1441 and provided it with a choir of 24 “singing men and boys.” He initiated work on the Chapel five years later, insisting from the outset that it be “without equal in size and beauty.”

This is the structure within which the King’s College Choir has offered daily Evensong, Sunday Eucharist, and all manner of special services since the time of Richard III, who saw to the completion of the Chapel’s first five bays around 1484; the entire edifice was not completed until late in the reign of Henry VIII, fully a century after its original foundation stone was laid.

Why dwell on this building? Because for centuries, its special acoustic has forcefully shaped the sound of the King’s College Choir. I can offer no better testimony than what I wrote for TMT 91 after attending Evensong in the Chapel:

> It was quite an evening. The Chapel itself, with its high vaulted ceiling, stained glass windows, and splendid Late Gothic architecture, provides an inspiring visual environment. . . . Those who queue up early get to perch in the choir stalls. That way they hear more of the Choir and less of the room, which I’m told has a 12-second reverberation time. (From the stalls, it feels more like three or three-and-a-half; see comparisons here). . . . When the Choir begins to sing, one feels as if the chapel has been flooded with light. The intensity of the sound is physically shocking. . . . Somehow the Choir has, over the centuries, learned to use the Chapel’s vast inner space as a kind of amplifier. They are not defeated by this room; instead they seem to regard it as their own Marshall Stack. As that day’s service continued with Byrd, Victoria, and Tye, I adjusted to the extraordinary music being made, but I was never less than astonished by its beauty and coherence.

A caveat: When allowed to sing freely with proper breath support, British boy sopranos produce a penetrating sound that can overwhelm the choral balance at climactic moments. The Chapel acoustic compounds this effect. Listen to the way the sopranos knock out a high B-flat in this clip from Bruckner’s festive occasional motet Ecce sacerdos magnus:

In terms of recordings, this year has brought a veritable feast of new releases from the King’s College Choir. My personal favorite is the Bruckner Mass in E Minor album we sampled above.
Anton Bruckner (1824–96), known today for his symphonies, began as a Catholic organist and choirmaster. He wrote a lot of church music, including three large-scale masses. The first and third are symphonic in style and scale; the second, in E minor, features wind accompaniment and is overall slightly more “polyphonic.” For earlier generations, that connoted a Cecilian sensibility favoring the supposed purity of Palestrina. But Bruckner’s youthful experiences at the Monastery of St. Florian acquainted him with livelier Venetian polychoral styles, including antiphonal effects favored by the Gabrielsi, Lassus, and others. Consider the call-and-response patterns that occur toward the end of this clip from the “Gloria” of the Mass in E Minor:

Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Et in terra pax
hominibus bonae voluntatis.
Laudamus te; benedicit te;
adoramus te; glorificamus te.
Gratias agimus tibi
propter magnam gloriam tuam.
Domine Deus, Rex coelestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe.
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei,
Filius Patris.

Glory be to God in the highest.
And in earth peace
to men of good will.
We praise Thee; we bless Thee;
we worship Thee; we glorify Thee.
We give thanks to Thee
for Thy great glory.
O Lord God, Heavenly King,
God the Father Almighty.
O Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son.
Lord God, Lamb of God,
Son of the Father.

The album rounds off with five more motets, among them “Christus factus est,” shown below in a video shot at the recording sessions. (Click here for text.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6-8Sa3Omuo&feature=emb_logo

It should be noted that when the Choir produces a recording like the Bruckner album, they do not occupy their customary position in the choir stalls. Instead members are arranged in formations that provide for optimum audio capture of the scheduled repertoire. The Christmas Eve radio broadcasts do not allow for such flexibility, and their audio quality can differ greatly.

That is reflected in a new download-only collection out this month, Carols from King’s (2020 Collection), a compilation from the two Christmas services (a TV broadcast and the Christmas Eve service) given at King’s in December 2019. Newly installed Director of Music Daniel Hyde conducts the Choir in both. The selection of carols is mostly fresh and the recording is usually quite good. Here are a few tastes:

And the premiere of 2019’s commissioned carol, “The Angel Gabriel” by Philip Moore:

If you’d rather hear the Christmas Eve service complete, with readings and prayers, The Centenary Service from 2018 remains available. I’d like to suggest another worthy item for consideration, composer Errollyn Wallen’s EP Peace on Earth. Three of her sacred choral works are performed by the Choir, recorded in June 2019 and conducted by Sir Stephen Cleobury. Wallen, who studied at King’s, is well-known in the UK for her skill in blending pop and traditional sounds. All three selections are available on YouTube: the gentle "Peace on Earth," a more adventurous "See that I am God" (text from Julian of Norwich), and finally the rapturous "Pace."
Happy holidays, one and all!

And now for the Naughty part.

Put the kids to bed, tune in Met Opera on Demand, and get a load of Gioachino Rossini’s 1828 opéra, Le Comte Ory. I stumbled on it a couple of weeks ago, doing research for my bel canto essays. It’s “late” Rossini, one of the last stage works he composed before taking early retirement. In this sex comedy set in the Middle Ages, Crusaders from the castle of Formoutiers have set off for the Holy Land, leaving their wives and sweethearts behind. But libidinous young Count Ory is still around, earnestly attempting to satisfy the ladies’ desires. After first disguising himself as a hermit, he and his entourage finally try out a scheme suggested by his page Isolier: they will dress as female religious pilgrims and gain entrance to the castle, where the women have gathered. In the meantime Isolier himself has begun to woo Countess Adèle, the focus of Ory’s own seductive stratagems.

Things come to a chaotically comic climax in Act II, especially the trio shown below from the Met production, directed by Broadway veteran Bartlett Sher and featuring Diana Damrau (Adèle), Joyce DiDonato (Isolier), and Juan Diego Flórez (Ory). As the scene opens, Isolier has finally managed to convince the Countess of his devotion to her. To demonstrate his fidelity, he has warned the ladies that they are sheltering not religious pilgrims but Ory and his minions. As Isolier and Adèle make their way toward a bed that has conveniently materialized, Ory enters the chamber unseen in the darkness, sick with love for the Countess, hoping to breathe the air she has breathed. (Actually, he’s hoping for more than that.) Isolier and Adèle quickly devise a trap for him.

Many uproarious bits follow, right up to the point when fanfares announce the Crusaders’ return. Rossini’s music for this scene (and indeed for the whole opera) is among the best he ever created; much of it was reworked from Il viaggio a Reims, a masterpiece tossed off for the coronation of Charles X. It’s true bel canto — suave, delicate, and demanding. According to Rossini expert Philip Gossett, the young Hector Berlioz “gazed openmouthed at its [orchestral] scoring.” This trio would take your breath away even if it wasn’t great theatre. But it is!

Now we’re ready to take on Rossini staples like La Cenerentola and Il barbiere di Siviglia — next time.
This time out, I want to share some audio-related news - both bad and good.

First the bad news, and I confess to some embarrassment, because I probably led a few people astray. In January of 2019, I bought a pair of HIFIMAN HE-4XX headphones from Massdrop (now just Drop). I paid like $180, and considered it a great bargain. These quickly became my second-favorite headphones, and moved into place on first usage. My (now-customized) Grado HP-1s remained my favorites, but the HIFIMAN headphones were more comfortable. Until they literally fell apart, which happened last month. One driver fell off the headband, and the other is ready to come off. I’ve heaped praise on them both in the PS Audio forum and here, so...embarrassment.
I communicated the issue to customer support at Drop, and sent a photograph. A day later I was informed that the headphones had obviously been abused. I replied that I had five other pairs (Grado, Sennheiser HD 600 and HD 650, [old] Ultrasone PRO 650, and AudioQuest Nighthawks), ranging in age from 29 years to 5 years, and all were treated equally, and the others were still perfect. Their response was to announce the termination of any contact.

So there it is: no support. I looked at the HIFIMAN site, and realized that the same headphones had both halved in price and were seemingly much better-made. The difference, as far as I can tell, is essential, for me. The headband, and most particularly the mounting of the ear speakers to the headband, is now far more substantial – the site claims it’s a new headband design. The current headphones have a new model number, the HE-400i Ver. 2020.

So I bought them, for about $170. The sound is indistinguishable. I hope to have better luck with them, as I abuse them to death like my other headphones.

Now the good news:

Paul McGowan will know, as I on occasion (OK – continually) bother him about this, that for some time I’ve been looking for a decent Wi-Fi speaker system for my kitchen. For many years, I’ve had my father’s old Toshiba shortwave radio in there – it doesn’t get the shortwave band anymore (is there any shortwave on the long-distance airwaves?) but it looks good and can get most FM stations. [Shortwave still exists, but I had to check! – Ed.]

Except the one I really want. There’s something about my house (I assume), but the adjacent NPR station constantly steps on the more local NPR station. The situation in the main system is a bit better, with a Magnum Dynalab Etude tuner connected to a rooftop antenna, but even there the station will only come in in mono, whereas all other stations come in in stereo. I thought that perhaps a Wi-Fi speaker system would solve the problem. A few years back, editor-at-the-time Bill Leebens had me go interview a raconteur named Rikki Farr, who was the compère at the Isle of Wight festivals and at the time was running a company in Orange County called Riva Audio, which made something similar to what I was looking for. I tried to reach him, but couldn’t.
Somewhere along the line, I was friended on Facebook by a nice gentleman named Jim Spainhour. Eventually, I looked into who he was – I get around to most people eventually – and realized I had heard of his company (Peachtree Audio), and, again eventually, thought that maybe they made exactly what I was looking for. So I contacted him.

I’m happy to report success on all fronts. The product is called the deepblueSKY. And it fulfills my needs exactly, while sounding very good. It’s a single unit with stereo mid- and high-frequency drivers and a mono woofer. One downloads an app (there are several that work, but the one I had good success with is called Audio Pro Control) and immediately just about everything you could want is there – Qobuz, my Roon connection, and via, TuneIn, a host of radio stations, including the NPR station I wanted. There’s plenty more, such as Tidal, but those are what I use.

So how’s the sound? Quite good. I haven’t quite plumbed the depths yet – but it’s there to do. NPR’s compressed and EQ’d voices are a touch too much so (gotta watch out for how they “eat” the mic!), but there are bass and treble controls for dealing with that. On local classical station KUSC, the voices are more reasonable when left flat. I’ll probably tweak the bass and treble down eventually, just to try a sort of compromise. On orchestral performances, there might be a tad too much treble, although I like that – it allows one to hear a bit more – but, again, if I ultimately decide there is too much, I can tweak it down.

In the course of conversation, Jim related the story of the deepblueSKY, and without belaboring the point, I’ll say that the speaker has audiophile credibility in its design. If Jim has his way, there might be a slightly more expensive model in the near future, with a wood cabinet.

The deepblueSKY retails for $299, weighs 16 lbs., and fits my needs absolutely perfectly. (It looks good too, although not quite as good as the old Toshiba.)

Header image of vintage Toshiba AM/shortwave radio courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Joe Haupt.
Strawberry Fields Forever…and Ever

Written by Jay Jay French

2020 is an important year in Beatledom. John Lennon would have turned 80 on October 9, and December 8 is the 40th anniversary of one of the darkest days in Beatles history.

Last year I started to think about the 40th anniversary of John’s assassination.

I am reminded about it every day, as I live very close to the Dakota apartment building where John lived and was gunned down. I walk in Central Park almost every morning and almost always get stopped by tourists who ask me two questions: One, “Where is the Metropolitan Museum of Art?” and two, “Where is Strawberry Fields?”

I usually walk them over to Strawberry Fields and there is always someone there playing Beatles songs on an acoustic guitar. No matter the season or the weather, someone is always there playing Beatles songs.

It was then that I decided that I wanted to write a positive story about John’s legacy as we approach the 40th anniversary of his murder.
On the night of December 8, 1980, I had just returned home from a dinner with my girlfriend. I turned on the radio and heard the devastating news. I ran out of my apartment and took my 10-minute walk down to the Dakota. I was in shock and I stayed there, keeping a vigil across from the building until about 4 am.

There really isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think about John – precisely because he was like a neighbor and because I look at that building and walk into Strawberry Fields all the time. I wanted to know about the people who sing there and provide the soundtrack to this remarkable New York City fixture, funded by Yoko Ono, that sits directly across from the Dakota.

You can’t miss it.

Before COVID-19 (for the last 35 years) tourist buses were always parked on 72nd Street and Central Park West. Everyone who enters the park on West 72nd Street wants a photo by the “Imagine” mosaic in the center of the area.

And always, Beatles music is being played live by someone.

Well, after going to Strawberry Fields numerous times, I found the person who is the organizer of the singing minstrels of Strawberry Fields. His name in David Muniz and he has quite a story to tell.

David is 58 and is a native New Yorker, growing up in Queens Village. His father was a jazz singer and exposed David to music early on, and to the Beatles in particular when his dad played him his favorite Beatles song, “And I Love Her.”

David was in California the night of December 8, 1980.

Strawberry Fields was created in partnership with the city and Yoko Ono and was officially opened on October 9, 1985, what would have been John’s 45th birthday.

These two dates – John’s birth date on October 9 and December 8, the day of John’s murder – bring the memorial into an even greater significance to worldwide Beatles fans.

David walked into Strawberry Fields for the first time shortly after it opened, strictly as an observer, but with an eye to performing. He looked around and there were lots of players performing at the same time.

“It was chaos because the money was so good.”

“The scene was also bad. There were junkies showing up and shooting in the woods,” David told me.

“There was a previous ‘Mayor of Strawberry Fields,’” David said. This guy kind of took over after it first opened. He wasn’t even a musician. He looked at this as a goldmine.

David left New York, but when he came back to Strawberry Fields in 2012, he was told that this guy was sick in the hospital.

The guy never returned. He died.

As there was no discipline among the musicians at this point, a lot of intimidation took place. Loud guys took over and chased others away. “A lot of these little guys were not ‘street’ and couldn't defend themselves.”
One “bipolar guy” (David’s description) used to curse at the crowds (which is an absolute no no) when people didn’t put money into his guitar case. David volunteered to bring order into the “system.”

“Everybody had cell phones,” Dave said, “so I suggested that I would do a list. If you come late into your hour time slot and that ate into your time, too bad.” No excuses.

I can tell you that after talking to David, he is the kind of streetwise New Yorker that one needs in order to deal with this kind of scene.

“So,” David continued, “there were about 15 people available when I took over. I told everyone: ‘Hey, even if I don’t like you, I’ll give you a slot!’”

“I did the list for a couple of months and everybody loved it. I had to leave town for a while to see my mother, but kept it going by text, and realized that I didn’t have to be here every day.”

I asked David if he was the “enforcer.” He said he prefers to be known as the “Keeper of the List.”

David went on: “I believe in all the teachings of John Lennon and Gandhi…but I’m a New York guy!”
I asked, “Do you have to play Beatles songs to play here?”

David replied, "There was a girl who only played the Godfather theme song on an accordion. I don’t care. Lennon would have agreed with that."

Performing time slots begin at 9 am and end at 7 pm. An important unwritten rule is that your instrument can’t be amplified. No electric guitars. No profane language either. Your performance needs to be rated “G.” There are no repertoire requirements, although people do expect to hear Beatles songs, especially if you want to make money.

What are the most popular requests?

David told me, “Imagine,” “Let it Be” and “Hey Jude.”

Does the weather stop the performances?

David noted: “I’ll post the next day's weather with the list; it’s up to the performers if they want to play. I've played during snowfalls. Wind is hard to play through though.”

Crowds are consistent, although things really slow down after New Year's through March, but the tour buses never stop coming.

I asked, “Do you consider yourself a keeper of the Lennon legacy?”

David: “Yes, I do, in a small way. I tell [the performers], ‘Hey, remember how important it is that every day, every performance, matters to the person who is there and listening to you, and I know that on the 40th anniversary, December 8, a lot of New Yorkers will come down.'”

Out of about 15 performers, there is a core of five that David can always depend on.

Yoko, who lives across the street, has come over many times over the years, according to David. Before her stroke, she would come over with her bodyguards and dance around. We all saw her several weeks ago; she was in her wheelchair, but she saw us all and waved to us.

David's favorite songs to sing, among many, are “Girl,” “Michelle,” “In My Life” and “Strawberry Fields.”

Lastly, I had asked David if the tradition of the “Minstrels of Strawberry Fields” could continue without him.

“I think about it, but I have no plans as to how long I will continue,” David told me. “But, in my mind I know who I would designate to carry on the organization, because this could go on forever.”

If you want to see and hear David Muniz, he is there almost every day, usually between the hours of 12 pm and 2 pm.

Of all the stories I have written about in my column, the coming of this milestone has loomed large over me. I have run this idea over and over trying to figure out, in words, my feelings about John and The Beatles.

This band is why I do what I do.

John’s image was the image that I followed the most. John’s voice reaches very deeply into my soul,
and his writing, as in songs like “In My Life,” represent the art of songwriting at its most emotionally involving.

Add to this that my mother passed away on December 8, 1974, and this makes this anniversary date even more emotional. This December 8, 2020, I will be there, standing in Strawberry Fields, and then standing in front of the Dakota. I will be there to show my respect and to reflect on all the good things that John did, created, wrote about and fought for.

This December 8, 2020, I will also play out in my mind what could have been had John lived to be 80.

This December 8, 2020, on the 40th anniversary of John Lennon leaving this world, I, along with millions of Beatles fans around the globe, will celebrate the life of John Winston Lennon.

“In My Life” I’m sure it will feel like “Yesterday.”

Joan Armatrading never caught on in a big way in the US. She didn’t quite fit in to any recognizable genres, and because she was Black she also didn’t meld with American preconceptions of what constituted a British artist. So it’s past time to reexamine and appreciate her distinctive songwriting and performance skills.

Born 1950 on St. Kitts in the Caribbean, Armatrading grew up in Birmingham, England. Her mother bought a piano because she thought it would look nice in the living room. Armatrading figured out what it was actually for, despite there being no musicians in her family. By the age of 14 she had started writing simple songs. As a sign of support, her mother pawned two strollers for a cheap guitar to give her daughter, who would go on to make 19 studio albums (and counting).

Armatrading started performing her own songs around Birmingham when she was a teen. In 1968 she got a role in a long-running production of *Hair*. Eventually the cast included Pam Nestor, a Guyanese-born singer and actor who also wrote poetry. Nestor became the co-lyricist for Armatrading’s debut album, *Whatever’s for Us*, released on the UK label Cube Records in 1972.

The album opens with “My Family,” a stirring declaration of unity among all humans. While the sound production tends toward the bright and rugged (the producer was Gus Dudgeon, known for his work with Elton John), the arrangements for piano, bass, and acoustic guitars (Davey Johnstone) are creative and effective. The song has pop leanings but an indie heart, which is a good way to
define Armatrading’s entire output.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHPrVO2PtrY

In 1974, Armatrading signed with A&M Records, releasing Back to the Night in 1975. This was followed by her true introduction to the international scene: Joan Armatrading came out in 1976, and its single “Love and Affection” turned out to be one of her most successful. It didn’t hurt that the album was produced by Glyn Johns, who has worked in the studio with luminaries like Eric Clapton, Small Faces, Steve Miller, and Linda Ronstadt.

No longer collaborating with a lyricist, Armatrading proves the strength of her own songwriting as well as her originality. Side B opens with “Join the Boys,” funky and sly, bolstered by a great group of session musicians. But it’s Armatrading’s contralto voice that distinguishes the track, scraping and digging into the melody.

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

Also produced by Johns, Show Some Emotion (1977) did even better on the charts, entering the US top 100. Johns stuck with her for To the Limit (1978); its studio personnel included guitarist Phil Palmer, a nephew of the Kinks’ Ray and Dave Davies who had worked with David Bowie. In other words, Armatrading was in the club, rubbing elbows with the highest echelon of British rock music.

The song “You Rope You Tie Me,” from To the Limit, is distinctive for its static blocks of melody against a lively R&B backdrop, allowing Armatrading to emphasize her gift for storytelling. The emotion is more important than the notes she sings. The high-speed piano runs are the work of Red Young, who has toured with many of the top acts in country music.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgYUc-e-FQ4

When Me Myself I came out in 1980, its title-track single did quite well in the UK. While Armatrading was a particularly hot commodity there – she even did a guest spot on the song “Don’t Lose Your Head” for Queen’s Hot Space album – she also reached the pinnacle of her popularity in America with this album.

The single version of the title track is the best known, but the track that follows it on the album deserves a listen. There’s a fun southern-rock swing to “Ma Me O Beach,” yet it stands out from typical examples of that genre in part because of Armatrading’s style of letting her voice trail at the end of each line. The driving drum part is provided by South African session man Anton Fig, who held together the rhythm of David Letterman’s band under Paul Shaffer for many years. Shaffer, in fact, is one of several pianists on this album.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5o3EevV0dB0

Steve Lillywhite, who’s studio craftsmanship assisted the rise to fame of Peter Gabriel, Morrisey, and others, produced both Walk Under Ladders (1981) and The Key (1983). America liked this album,
but her UK fandom loved it, making “Drop the Pilot” a top-ten hit for over two months. It’s telling, though, that that song was not produced by Lillywhite, but by Val Garay, hired by A&M to come in after the main sessions were done and build a more pop-centered hit for Armatrading.

So, for a better sense of this album, listen to the Lillywhite-produced “Everybody Gotta Know,” quiet and thoughtful with a wide-ranging melody unusual in pop music.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ukdMiTe3eQ

Armatrading was at the height of her fame, and A&M knew it. She kept pumping out albums – *Secret Secrets* in 1985 and *Sleight of Hand* in 1986. For *The Shouting Stage* (1988), she invited both guitarist Mark Knopfler and keyboardist Alan Clark from Dire Straits to join her in the studio, although not on the same tracks. The resulting singles had lackluster sales, despite the star power involved. Armatrading produced this album herself.

One of the most surprising songs on the album is the simple, prayer-like “Dark Truths,” although using orchestral players would have enriched the arrangement well beyond what the synths could manage. But it was the 1980s, so a thick coating of synths was practically a requirement.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaUx-8bnSZk

Armatrading’s final album for A&M was *Square the Circle* in 1992. Her strongest period in the charts was done – this album made barely a blip in America. But that was simply the results of the fickleness of the pop audience, not a change in the artist herself.

“If Women Ruled the World” is an intriguing track that lays a loose and snaking vocal line against a strict rhythmic structure. The lyrics reflect that dichotomy, describing a hypothetical society where women use diplomacy and love to overcome force and hatred. The guitar solo at the end is played by Armatrading.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGc19CQ_hZc

Since her time at A&M, she has moved around from label to label. *What’s Inside* (1995) was released by RCA, and Denon handled *Lovers Speak* (2003). Indie label 429 had the good fortune to produce *Into the Blues*, which was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2007.

Armatrading’s most recent release is 2018’s *Not Too Far Away*, on BMG, complete with the beautiful string sound of the City of Prague Symphony Orchestra, used sparingly and to good effect. All the other instruments are played by Armatrading herself, who also produced and engineered the album.

The best moment on the album is the percussive extravagance and emotional determination of the song “Loving What You Hate,” a throwback to Armatrading’s early years, before the pop music industry (temporarily) smoothed her edges.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uEMWqszWsw
Now at the age of 70, Armatrading has every reason to stay true to her musical self.
The geometric considerations with regard to vinyl disk recording and reproduction are plenty and can get quite complex. In fact, the entire first section of the *Disk Recording Anthology Volume 1: Groove Geometry and the Recording Process* published by the Audio Engineering Society is dedicated to groove geometry, with this topic attracting the interest of both engineers professionally involved in this field, and academics approaching the subject from a theoretical perspective.

One of the most widely discussed and even more widely misunderstood topics is vertical tracking angle (VTA) and its relationship to the stylus rake angle (SRA). Misunderstood equally as much by home listeners and mastering engineers, a lot has been said and published about VTA, much less about SRA, and close to nothing about how these two are related.

The origins of the stylus rake angle have absolutely nothing to do with audio. The rake angle is one of the geometric parameters of a cutting tool, as used in mechanical machining operations.

Since all grooved media (disk records and phonograph cylinders) are recorded by means of a mechanical machining operation, on a specialized machine tool called a disk recording lathe (see *Copper* Issue 95 for a description of the evolution of the disk recording lathe from the screw-cutting lathe), a specially designed miniature cutting tool is required for the removal of material necessary
to form a groove. This cutting tool is called a “cutting stylus” or a “recording stylus.”

While the ASA (American Standards Association, now ANSI, the American National Standards Institute) standards commonly used in other sectors of industry were never really used to describe disk recording styli, the same geometric parameter descriptions and nomenclature could easily be applied there too. Mechanical sound recording was the earliest form of micromachining, done at such a small scale that it took several decades for other sectors to even attempt any form of micromachining approaching such minute dimensions.

The rake angle is, therefore, the angle by which the cutting face of a tool is offset from normal to the workpiece (the blank record in our case).

If the tool face is set exactly normal to the workpiece, it is said to have a rake angle of 0 degrees. This applies to all machining operations, including all mechanical forms of sound recording. If the tool appears to be digging into the workpiece, it is said to have a positive rake angle, written as just the number of degrees off from normal, e.g. 5 degrees rake angle.

If the tool appears to be stroking the workpiece, it is said to have a negative rake angle, e.g. -5 degrees.

The rake angle can be set in two ways: either we use a cutting tool with a different geometry formed into it, and hold it in the same manner, or we lean the cutting tool to the desired angle.

Whether we’re turning a piece of steel on a metalworking lathe or cutting a record, the principle is exactly the same.

Depending on the workpiece material, the cutting speed, the cutting depth, the other aspects of tool geometry, the material the tool is made of and the required surface finish, a different value of rake angle will be required.

When machining metal, which is not usually meant for subsequent reproduction on a turntable, the most suitable value of rake angle can be selected for the job. As long as the material removal rate is within the economical range and the surface finish is acceptable, it is fine.

Records, on the other hand, need to be played back. But, the grooves still need to be machined in a manner which can achieve the required surface finish in a single pass. You cannot go back there and polish out the imperfections, as done with metal parts, which are often made in multiple passes of different tools, at different speeds.

Fortunately, there is not much diversity in the workpiece materials used in cutting records. Unfortunately, anything more than just one material leaves us with the need for more than one value of rake angle. To further complicate matters, groove depth can vary over a wide range, even within one side of one record. Even though records spin at a constant rpm (angular velocity), the linear velocity (the speed with which the surface of the record moves past the stylus) varies with diameter. Not only that, but there are more than one constant RPM values at which a record may spin, typically 33-1/3, 45 or 78 RPM. The cutting speed is essentially the linear velocity, constantly varying throughout the side - not the RPM. Things can be further complicated by the use of different cutting tool materials, which can be made from steel, tungsten, sapphire, ruby or diamond.

Nevertheless, due to the difficulty of producing complex geometries on such a small cutting tool, all
Disk recording styli are made with a flat cutting face. As such, the only way to set the rake angle at the time of cutting a record is to tilt the cutter head, or to design this into the head by having the cutting stylus held at an angle.

It may be tempting to think that if all recording styli share the same basic geometry, then surely all cutter head designers will have made sure that the styli are all mounted to the head at the same angle and that all cutter heads would be set for the same tilt, but the truth is far from this.

Depending on when a record was cut, stylus rake angles ranging from -10 degrees to +20 degrees can be encountered. In the stereophonic era, many records were cut with a stylus rake of 0 to +1 degrees, but not all!

If we were only to consider silent grooves, then this would not matter much. But as the stylus-groove interface during playback is very three-dimensional, and especially so when using line contact reproducing styli, accurate reproduction can only be achieved if the stylus rake angle of your phono cartridge is the same value as the rake angle of the disk recording stylus at the time the record was cut.

Sounds sort of similar to what you’ve been told about VTA, doesn’t it? Well, similar idea, but very different effect, which produces a different and perhaps more severe type of distortion than VTA errors of the same magnitude.

The SRA of your playback cartridge depends on how the jewel stylus was lapped and at what angle it was glued to the cantilever. Spherical styli do not have an easily-defined SRA, but line contact types, including elliptical styli, most certainly do. In theory, you can change the SRA value by finding a way to tilt the entire phono cartridge. In practice, however, this will simultaneously change the VTA of the cartridge.

The relationship between SRA and VTA is therefore fixed by the manufacturer of the cartridge. If a user tweaks one of these parameters, it will also affect the other.

Regardless of the actual value of the stylus rake angle when cutting a record, when a cutter head is recording (cutting) vertical information on the groove, it does so in a certain “plane of modulation.” Imagine a cutter head pushing and pulling the cutting stylus straight in and out of the record exactly normal to its surface. This would be exactly on the vertical plane. But if the head is pushing the cutting stylus at any other angle, or in an arc, as is often the case, then the vertical plane of modulation, or in other words, the vertical modulation angle, is offset from the true vertical. This is measured in degrees. Any information recorded in a certain plane of modulation can only be extracted accurately if the tracking angle of the playback setup is equal to the angle of the plane of modulation. The tracking angle must be equal to the modulation angle. So, the vertical tracking angle must be equal to the vertical modulation angle, as this was set at the time of cutting the record.

The vertical modulation angle can only be adjusted at the time of cutting the record by tilting the
entire cutter head. This, however, will also change the stylus rake angle, since the recording stylus will be tilted along with the cutter head, changing the angle of its cutting face to the surface of the record. Once again, we see that the relationship between the vertical modulation angle and the stylus rake angle is fixed by the manufacturer of the cutter head. One cannot be changed without changing the other. Just as in the playback side.

In Part Two we will examine the playback side of things in greater detail and relate the significance of VTA and SRA with respect to recording and playback.

*Header image of Clearaudio Stradivari phono cartridge courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Dieter Kamer.*
Considering that she wrote arrangements for Duke Ellington and mentored Thelonious Monk, jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams should be much more famous than she is. She was also an outstanding player with a warm, almost liquid sound. This is a musician well worth getting to know.

Williams was born Mary Scruggs in 1910, one of 11 siblings in an Atlanta family that moved to Pittsburgh when she was a child. By playing the piano at parties around her neighborhood, she brought badly-needed money into the household. She landed a coveted spot touring on the Orpheum vaudeville circuit at the age of 12, and soon Ellington invited her to sit in on some of his gigs. After she married saxophonist John “Bearcat” Williams, she took over leadership of her husband’s band in Memphis so he could accept work out of town. They both ended up moving to Kansas City, MO to play with the Clouds of Joy, a group directed by Andy Kirk.

When her marriage split up, she worked with Art Blakey in a band in Pittsburgh for a while before moving to New York. Much in demand, she faced mental health problems that prompted her to take a hiatus to devote herself to her faith and to charities, particularly helping substance-addicted musicians get back to work. Her religious explorations led to the composition of several Masses, one
of which was choreographed by Alvin Ailey. A beloved music teacher at all levels, she continued to offer advice to fellow professionals and basic instruction to school children until her death in 1981.

Enjoy these eight great tracks by Mary Lou Williams.

1. Track: “Taurus”   
   Album: *Zodiac Suite*   
   Label: Folkways   
   Year: 1945

Williams is joined by Al Lucas on bass and Jack Parker on drums for the album produced by Folkways founder Moses Asch. She wrote the *Zodiac Suite* in 1944 and the following year recorded it in the studio and also performed it at the Town Hall in New York City. Interestingly, this was the only complete recording of the work until pianist Geri Allen took on the challenge in 2005.

Each movement of the suite is inspired not only by a Zodiac sign, but also by one or more jazz-world friends whose birthdays fall under that sign. Thus, Duke Ellington (born April 29) is the dedicatee of “Taurus.”

2. Track: “Easy Blues”   
   Album: *A Keyboard History*   
   Label: Jazztone   
   Year: 1955

Jazztone was a mail-order record club, and they made this album to showcase the many styles of Williams’ playing and composition up to that point. The trio includes Osie Johnson on drums and Wendell Marshall on bass. The final track on Side B is Williams’ composition “Easy Blues.” (Jimi Hendrix altered this tune almost beyond recognition and claimed authorship on *People, Hell and Angels.*

Williams’ laid-back swing on this cut is a great explanation of why Ellington loved her style – intensely rhythmic and syncopated yet never bitingly percussive, and always with a sense of motion.

3. Track: “Black Christ of the Andes”   
   Album: *Black Christ of the Andes*   
   Label: SABA/Folkways   
   Year: 1964

When Williams converted to Catholicism in the 1960s, she let her newfound faith guide her creativity. “Black Christ of the Andes” is an important contribution to 20th-century American choral writing and a precursor to Williams’ larger-scale religious works.

The precise and sensitive singing is by the Howard Roberts Singers (named after the singer/choral educator, not the jazz guitarist), who were best known for their work with Harry Belafonte. Williams
displays an innovative hand at composing vocal harmony, obviously influenced both by the jazz and classical (particularly English) traditions.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTGTUza8TWA

4. Track: “Cloudy”
   Album: *Nite Life*
   Label: Chiaroscuro
   Year: 1970

While a rhythm section can certainly spice up a jazz arrangement, there’s something spectacular about hearing a great pianist play solo. That’s what makes *Nite Life* (released in some markets as *From the Heart*) so special: It’s Williams on her own, commanding and expressive.

“Cloudy” was a standard from the 1920s that Williams started playing when she was very young. Her audience never tired of it, so she kept it in her programs her whole career, writing countless arrangements. This poignant solo version may be the best.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc28VOvgQOY

5. Track: “Kyrie Eleison”
   Album: *Mary Lou’s Mass*
   Label: Mary Records
   Year: 1975

The content of *Mary Lou’s Mass* combines the traditional with the modern. There are the expected Ordinary movements – the texts that are used in every Mass, such as the Gloria, and the Credo. But then there are also new texts set to music, which Williams collaborated on with songwriters like Sonny Henry (who also plays guitar on the album) and Robert Ledogar.

Ledogar wrote English words to translate and expand on the Ancient Greek “Kyrie Eleison” prayer that always opens a Mass celebration. The large personnel list includes the Howard Roberts choir as well as about a dozen instrumentalists and solo singers. The music is an interesting mix of jazz, psychedelic rock, and gospel.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CYHZEAdh3I

6. Track: “Free Spirits”
   Album: *Free Spirits*
   Label: Steeplechase
   Year: 1975

No matter what else she tried, Williams always returned to the trio format. At this stage, the lineup included Buster Williams (no relation) on bass and Mickey Roker on drums. *Free Spirits* is unusual among Mary Lou Williams’ albums for including only one composition by her. There are a couple by sax and flute player John Stubblefield, including the title track.
“Free Spirits” has a distinctively post-bop wandering quality, blanketed in dissonance that is more atmospheric than a source of tension. The three musicians have a riveting and complex conversation.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcEWfbO5x4E

7. Track: “A Night in Tunisia”
   Album: Live at the Keystone Korner
   Label: HighNote
   Year: 1977/2002

This live recording was made in 1977 at San Francisco’s Keystone Korner jazz club. It wasn’t released until 2002. Williams is joined by Eddie Marshall on drums and Larry Gales on bass.

Dizzy Gillespie composed his masterful tune “A Night in Tunisia” in the early 1940s. It’s been recorded by countless jazz legends, and here Williams offers a version worthy of the work. She knew Gillespie well and appeared in two of his albums. Rather than leaning into the exoticism of the “Tunisia” melody, as many soloists do, Williams seems more focused on integrating the chords into the ensemble experience. The sonic balance (produced by veteran jazz specialist Joe Fields) bears that out.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-6NOJdxloE&list=PLccpwGk_xup-RaFNtxbycCC0kWB1NG75R&index=4

8. Track: “What’s Your Story, Morning Glory?”
   Album: My Mama Pinned a Rose on Me
   Label: Pablo
   Year: 1978

This is a stunning record. No drums, just Williams plus bassist Buster Williams, and some vocal tracks with Cynthia Tyson.

The real gem is “What’s Your Story, Morning Glory?” a song Williams co-wrote in 1938 for Andy Kirk’s Clouds of Joy when she and her husband played with them. The song has since become a standard, but you’re not going to beat this soulful rendition, which turns practically symphonic by the last eight bars.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teZsqxs0oKg

Header image of Mary Lou Williams courtesy of Wikipedia/public domain.
Two Outstanding New Releases...and a Repackage of a Great One

TO BE DETERMINED

Written by Tom Gibbs

Joni Mitchell is one of the rare folk artists from the late sixties whose first few albums eschewed covers of all the traditional folk warhorses, and concentrated entirely on her own compositions from the get-go. You almost get the impression from albums like Song For A Seagull, Clouds, and Ladies of the Canyon that at the point of her first release in 1968, she emerged from the womb as a fully-formed singer/songwriter. Who else in the realm of folkdom, besides maybe Bob Dylan at the point of his first album, was writing and recording all their own songs? And Joni managed to somehow make it late into the twilight of her existence here on earth before finally caving and allowing the release of any recordings that predated her official album releases — which are very telling of who she was in those extremely formative years. If you’re a Joni Mitchell fan, this is an absolute treasure trove — virtually none of the five discs worth of material here has ever seen the light of day. They include no fewer than two dozen Mitchell originals that have never been previously heard. Hearing the contents of Archives – Vol. 1: The Early Years (1963-1967) is revelatory, and pretty much like winning the Joni Mitchell lottery.
The five-disc set covers a four year period; early on, Joni had been befriended by local Saskatoon, Saskatchewan DJ, Barry Bowman, who made in-studio recordings of her at local AM radio station CFQC. At this point, she’s known as Joni Anderson, and she plays and sings nine folk songs that were composed by folk singers like Merle Travis and Albert Frank Beddoe; seven of the songs were strictly from the canon of traditional folk offerings. The tapes were thought lost until being rediscovered by Bowman’s ex-wife in 2015. The first track, Joni’s take on the classic “House of the Rising Sun,” is maybe the single best track on the entire collection — you’re immediately struck with the impression that this girl is going places. Her voice here — light years away from the two-pack-a-day smoking habit that followed her throughout her mature career — is shockingly lyrical and crystalline. How Bowman managed to not leave mid-recording and find someone from a record label to hear this greatness for themselves — and immediately sign her to a contract — is beyond belief. Other highlights from this segment include the traditional tunes “Anathea” and “Molly Malone,” where Joni’s singing offers vocal theatrics that are unlike anything from any other female folk singer from that era — she effortlessly reaches upper octaves that would completely elude her in less than a decade.

Disc One continues with a live performance (from Joni’s personal archive) a couple of years later at the Half Beat Club in Yorkville, Toronto, where she offers vocal introductions and live takes of many of the songs she sang in Saskatchewan in 1963. Her vocal theatrics are still absolutely effortless, but she shows a considerable growth in the maturity of her stage banter and the presentation of the songs, along with her acoustic guitar playing. With songs that by now she’d performed countless times over a relatively short period. The last three songs on the disc are performances recorded live in 1965 in her parents’ living room.

https://youtu.be/4wWR3ZkyyGY

Disc Two opens with a three-song tape that Joni recorded for her mother Myrtle Anderson’s birthday
among the songs is Joni’s classic “Urge For Going,” which would eventually get a studio recording during the Blue sessions. Although it didn’t make the final cut of the album, it would become a perennial concert favorite, and the version heard here clearly shows the genesis of Joni’s songwriting style that crystalized during the mid-sixties. The disc continues with a five-song demo that Jac Holzman of Elektra Records recorded in Detroit. The maturity of the songs here for the yet-unsigned Mitchell is little short of incredible — the opening “What Will You Give Me” shows Joni’s voice already beginning to morph into the more familiar tone of her first few albums. There are additional demos and home recordings here, along with a couple of small segments recorded for the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), but the real highlights of Disc Two occur during the live songs recorded live in 1967 at the 2nd Fret Club in Philadelphia. Where Mitchell plays her own songs live, including stellar and fully-formed versions of the aforementioned “Urge For Going” and especially “The Circle Game,” which would become one of her biggest songs and one of the cornerstones of her album Ladies of the Canyon, which really put Joni squarely in the public consciousness in 1970.

Disc Three continues with more live recordings from various sets of the Philadelphia 2nd Fret shows, along with a variety of demos and home recordings; most notably recordings made for the Folklore program that aired on Philadelphia’s FM radio station, WHAT. Songs from Joni’s canon that begin to make appearances in her performances include “Song For A Seagull,” “Both Sides Now,” and “Morning Morgantown.” But one of the standout performances is the rare (at this point in her career) cover of the Neil Young song “Sugar Mountain,” which was recorded during one of the Folklore segments. It’s a much more upbeat take compared to Neil’s dour and subdued approach to his most important early song.

Disc Four starts with more home recordings, then the remainder of the disc and all of Disc Five covers three sets that Joni recorded live at Canterbury House in Ann Arbor, Michigan, also in 1967. The sets all include mature versions of many of Mitchell’s most important early songs, and the tapes were also thought to be lost; amazingly, they were discovered in 2018 by the Michigan History Project. The Project also discovered a ton of Neil Young tapes from the same era, but that’s a story for another day! Anyway, Joni tears through classics like “Chelsea Morning,” “Conversation,” “Michael From Mountains,” “Little Green,” and of course, “The Circle Game.” There are spoken introductions to almost all the songs, and this is one of the most thrilling aspects of this box set: getting to hear Joni Mitchell’s own words, enlightening us to the circumstances and meanings of some of her formative early music.

Of course, the sound quality is all over the place, but for a set that’s mostly historical in scope, it’s surprisingly (and consistently) pretty great, especially the home recordings, demos, and radio station, in-studio recordings. And the live recordings — especially those from Canterbury House — are also quite good, considering the vintage. All my listening was done via Qobuz’s 24-bit stream, and the sound was very good on my home system! I have this vision of loveliness of Joni Mitchell from 1969 that’s etched on my brain from a BBC session that aired just after Woodstock’s completion — I’m absolutely in love with that snapshot in time of Joni. If you’re at all a Joni Mitchell fan this set is indispensable and a must-listen; it’s fortunate for fans that she survived her 2015 aneurysm and was able to oversee the production of this set. Very highly recommended!

Rhino Records, 5 CDs (download/streaming [24/44.1] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon Music, Google Play Music, Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music, Pandora, Deezer, TuneIn)
Pink Floyd - *Delicate Sound of Thunder (Restored/Re-Edited/Remixed)*

The undisputed triumph of David Gilmour’s rebranding of the Pink Floyd experience is definitely the release of 1987’s *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*. Along with the tour that followed its release, and the concert film and album that followed the tour, *Delicate Sound of Thunder*, Pink Floyd fans definitely registered their votes in the affirmative for this continued version of the band where it really counted — with their wallets.

Following Roger Waters’ departure from Pink Floyd, David Gilmour decided that the band was, indeed, still alive. He started resuscitating the group by rehiring keyboardist and founding member Rick Wright, who’d been fired by Waters in a fit of anger during the recording of *The Wall*. New sessions soon commenced for the next Floyd album, *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*. The process was marred by an ongoing lawsuit over the band’s name, which was ultimately decided in favor of Gilmour. Roger Waters’ derision over what he viewed as a diluted version of the Pink Floyd brand continued and he frequently complained loudly in the international press. Nonetheless, the album sold very well, reaching No. 3 on the US *Billboard* charts and going quadruple-platinum. The ensuing tour played to sold-out audiences worldwide, and footage from a five-night stop at New York’s Nassau Coliseum was assembled into a concert film, *Delicate Sound of Thunder*. The double-CD release was also a success, reaching No. 11 on the charts and triple-platinum sales levels. *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* and *Delicate Sound of Thunder* definitely seemed to validate the David
Gilmour vision of a continued existence of Pink Floyd.

I have a great amount of respect for Roger Waters’ creative genius; I just can’t reconcile his lack of enthusiasm for the other members of Pink Floyd, especially considering their significant contributions to the band. The Pink Floyd of David Gilmour, while heavily disparaged by Roger Waters — and somewhat less enthusiastically embraced by the critics — still sold tons of product and concert tickets. With last year’s release of the massive *Pink Floyd: The Later Years* box set, it was readily apparent to me that the set’s audio and video quality showed serious improvements over any previous iterations of the material I’d had the pleasure of experiencing. That was especially true with *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* and *Delicate Sound of Thunder*, where the sound and image quality of the CDs, DVDs, and Blu-rays absolutely blew me away! I sat down with my wife last December to skim through the Blu-ray of *Delicate Sound*, and ended up watching the entire two-hour-plus runtime — it was spellbinding, to say the least.

https://youtu.be/tWgemfXWJ0

Not really considering myself a Floyd completist, however, I could probably get on without the need to own the monstrous box, especially considering its nearly $400 price point. And for those who’d like a chance to experience the spectacle without the expense of the big box, Sony/Legacy has now made that possible with this new release of *Delicate Sound of Thunder*, which is being made available as 4-CD, 3-LP, Blu-ray, or DVD sets. While I can’t attest to the sound quality of the LPs (my review samples didn’t arrive by my deadline), the 3-LP package looks quite nice and doesn’t appear to be priced too ridiculously. However, the CDs/DVDs/BDs look and sound nothing short of amazing, and are miles beyond any previously released versions. The live concerts drew from much of the music contained in *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*, as well as drawing from Pink Floyd albums going all the way back to 1971’s *Meddle*. I wasn’t able to attend any of the concerts back in the day, but the *Delicate Sound of Thunder* DVD or BD videos give you the closest thing possible to having a front row seat for the show. And the new releases offer extra tracks that weren’t present on the original CDs and DVDs back in the eighties.

While I look forward to the eventual arrival of the 180-gram LPs, those who are mainly into digitally-based sound should at least check out the high-resolution digital versions of *Delicate Sound of Thunder* available on Tidal and Qobuz. And even though I predominantly see it as more of an audio/visual spectacle, the songs definitely stand up very well to audio-only playback, making the LPs seem even more attractive to me. But if you’re a huge Floyd fan — especially of this version of the band — you simply must see the remastered/remixed/recut version of the concert film, and preferably on Blu-ray. The DVD isn’t bad, and my Sony Blu-ray player upscales everything to 4K, making the DVD look impressively good. But watching the BD disc is an exceptionally immersive concert experience that can’t be missed. Very highly recommended!

Sony/Legacy Recordings, 4 CDs/3 LPs/BD/DVD (download/streaming [24/96] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Pandora, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, TuneIn)
The War On Drugs - Live Drugs

The War On Drugs is a Philadelphia band that has somehow managed to elude my radar up until now. TWOD was formed in 2005 by vocalist/principal lyricist and guitarist Adam Granduciel and lead guitarist and indie phenom Kurt Vile; the two shared a love of Bob Dylan, and used that as a catalyst for the development of TWOD and Vile’s side project band, The Violators. Vile departed TWOD after the release of the band’s first album, Wagonwheel Blues, in 2008, mainly because he wanted to focus on the Violators and his solo career. Originally a quartet, The War On Drugs has gone through a series of personnel changes over the years, and has also grown in scope to a sextet. The current line up is filled out with Granduciel, lead guitarist Anthony LaMarca, bassist David Hartley, keyboardist Robbie Bennett, drummer Charlie Hall, and saxophonist Jon Natchez. All members contribute to the group’s sound on a variety of other instruments in addition to their primary positions, making TWOD a very diverse band, indeed. After signing a two-album deal with Atlantic Records, the group reached the apex of their popularity with the release of 2014’s album Lost In the Dream, which received a Gold record for its impressive album sales. TWOD soon found itself no longer just playing small rooms, but headlining concerts and festivals, eventually releasing 2018’s A Deeper Understanding, which won that year’s Grammy award for Best Rock Album.

Live Drugs isn’t so much a document of a live performance by the current band; it’s actually more of a byproduct of the current pandemic situation, where Adam Granduciel, in the absence of any
current band concerts, wanted to showcase a kind of overview of the live history of TWOD. Focusing on their ascension to concert headliners, which immediately followed the band’s increase in scope from a four-piece act to their solidification into the current sextet status, *Live Drugs* covers performances taken from a tour that extended throughout 2019 and into early 2020. And as with most touring bands, TWOD live shows often feature expanded versions of songs that have experienced significant growth in meaning since the album versions were originally laid down. Adam Granduciel, when asked about the evolution of *Live Drugs*, offered the following: “as a band leader, I always want to know where a song can go...even though we’ve recorded it, mastered it, put it out, and been touring on it, it doesn’t mean that we just have to do it the same way forever.”

And although now a major-label phenomenon, The War On Drugs hasn’t abandoned any of their indie sensibilities from earlier in the decade. Actually, I was surprised to find that many of the songs had extended run times, and often featured almost proggish intensity and scope. *Live Drugs* opens with the driving, propulsive “An Ocean in Between the Waves,” an atmospheric tune that starts with an understated drum beat from Charlie Hall, which is layered with an almost proto-psychedelic guitar figure from Anthony LaMarca. A few bars in, David Hartley’s bass enters full tilt, and the intensity level of Charlie Hall’s drums suddenly are ratcheted upwards as well; the song propels itself instantly from simply an interesting groove to almost anthem-like status. “Thinking of a Place” is one of the songs that kind of gives a glimpse of Adam Granduciel’s fascination with Bob Dylan — his voice kind of has that smoky growl that’s reminiscent of mid-period Dylan — but the song soon takes off in a completely unexpected direction with what is probably Anthony LaMarca’s most stunning extended guitar solo on the entire record. Robbie Bennett’s keys just shimmer throughout, giving the song a gauzy, hazy, dreamlike quality — taking the song down to its lowest point, and just as you’re certain the song’s about to fade out, Granduciel reappears, and the song carries on another inspired four minutes — but never during the song’s nearly eleven-minute runtime does it seem overly long, and you never lose interest. Towards the end, a harmonica figure appears briefly, more firmly cementing the Bob Dylan allusions. It’s an incredible song, and a remarkable musical journey.

https://youtu.be/eY13y7vR2yY

“Under the Pressure” opens with another atmospherically nebulous keyboard intro from Bennett, which is soon joined by some stellar guitar interplay between LaMarca and Granduciel. This extends for several minutes, and is one of the hallmarks of TWOD — their impressive use of extended intros and outros that build their live performances into near-anthemic levels with their musical greatness. I really have to admit how very shocked I am that The War On Drugs doesn’t have an even bigger grasp on the public consciousness than they do, so very impressive is their level of musicianship and songcraft. As the song outros with nearly two minutes of guitar and effects from LaMarca and cross-fades into the closing tune, “In Reverse,” the effect is nothing short of mesmerizing.

*Live Drugs* is also represents a first for me in my experience with digital streaming of music; because the performances are taken from a variety of live recordings and sources, the bit-rates of the files vary significantly throughout the album, from 16-bit/44.1 kHz to 24-bit/44.1 kHz to 24-bit/96 kHz. Regardless of the continual shift in sources from CD-quality to high resolution, the sound quality is never less than superb. All my listening was done via Qobuz, and I was definitely impressed with the consistently great sound. I’m now very primed to start digging into their back catalog of albums. *Live Drugs* is very highly recommended!

Super High Quality Records, CD/2-LPs (download/streaming [mixed sources] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, TuneIn)
This fall, the Audio Engineering Society (AES) held its annual convention online because of COVID-19 restrictions. Ordinarily hosted at the gargantuan Javits Center in New York, this had the unforeseen benefit of actually making AES Fall 2020 easier to attend than in past years. This was primarily the result of not having to pick which concurrent live events to attend and which ones to miss, thanks to on-demand options. I felt AES Fall 2020’s premier event was unquestionably the video series “7 Audio Wonders of the World,” which offered virtual tours of iconic and historically crucial recording studios. My previous articles covered the first three: Skywalker Sound in Lucas Valley, CA; Galaxy Studios in Belgium; and The Village in West Los Angeles. But AES Fall 2020 was so large in scope, I will turn to other topics in this installment and review the remaining four studios in a separate article series.

In the meantime, other highlights of AES Fall 2020 included some fascinating symposiums on the challenges faced by professional producers and engineers who have created the records we’ve grown to love over the years; an inside look on the making of Jackson Browne’s Haitian collaboration: Let the Rhythm Lead: Haiti Song Summit Vol. 1; and an exploration into the latest reissues of classic synthesizers from the second half of the 20th Century from Moog, Roland and Korg. Also, some new avenues and encoding platforms for immersive audio remix capability, using Stevie Wonder’s “Superstition” as a familiar example.

The Producers: From Melodies to Masters

Peter Doell of AES hosted a discussion with noted producers Jack Douglas (John Lennon, Aerosmith),
Shelly Yakus (Tom Petty, Eurythmics, Alice Cooper), C.J. Vanston (Ringo Starr, Spinal Tap), and Eric Boulanger (Green Day, One Republic) on the challenges of producing records and working with artists in the current climate. Wonderful stories and insights about the making of some iconic recordings were retold with a mix of humor and awe. Some excerpts included the following:

Legendary producer Jack Douglas (John Lennon, Alice Cooper, Cheap Trick, Aerosmith and others) recalled how he got his start at Manhattan’s Record Plant East as a janitor and client. By day, he was an arranger for the ABC Afterschool Special TV show, and by night, he was an engineering apprentice whose job included janitorial duties.

He explained the process of producing John Lennon’s Double Fantasy, starting with a bunch of song snippets on a stack of cassettes, consisting solely of Lennon’s voice and an acoustic guitar or piano. Lennon was pessimistic about the songs’ potential and hired Douglas to choose the songs and assemble the band for the album. Douglas charted (arranged) the songs he selected and then hired the A-list band, which included bassist Tony Levin, guitarists Hugh McCracken and Earl Slick and drummer Jim Keltner, to rehearse at SIR Studios while keeping the identity of the artist a secret. The rehearsals were recorded and Lennon would listen to the playbacks and comment on any changes he wanted or areas that he wanted Douglas to pursue further. The band realized who the artist was when Douglas told them to report for final rehearsals at The Dakota on Central Park West. Douglas noted that Lennon kept a cassette recorder atop a Fender Rhodes electric piano at the doorway to his apartment and wrote the music for “(Just Like) Starting Over” during a rehearsal break.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfbAAiL5ec8

Douglas told the story about how the music for Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” created a lyric writing block for Steven Tyler that almost caused the song to be discarded. On a break, the band dejectedly went to Times Square to watch Mel Brooks’ Young Frankenstein. Marty Feldman’s Igor character uttered the phrase, “Walk this way...” and a pioneering rock song (later to become a rap/rock smash in collaboration with Run-DMC) was written later that evening.

In addition, panelist Shelly Yakus (Tom Petty, Ramones, U2, Lou Reed and many others) discussed his new online audio engineering and production mentoring and coaching platform. Eric Boulanger spoke of his recent projects with Diana Krall, Harry Connick, Jr. and Mandy Moore. Film composer C.J. Vanston talked about his work on Harry Shearer’s The Many Moods of Donald Trump, a spoof album featuring a 35-piece big band including the Snarky Puppy horns, with all the music recorded from remote locations.

The four producers shared and agreed on many other aspects of their craft. They stressed the importance of trying any idea that the artist conceives of, even when the producer doesn’t think it will work. It’s important for the artist not to feel adversarial in the creative process, which then can eliminate some self-doubt an artist may carry about a particular element in a song. Yakus suggested recording both a producer’s and an artist’s version of a song so that comparisons can be made more objectively later on. Vanston advised a “seven minute rule,” his opinion that any idea’s value can be assessed by most people within an average of seven minutes. Of course, indecision can also be arduous. They noted that Bob Seger often cut his instrumental tracks in three different musical keys before deciding on which key to use for his vocals.

Regarding technology: Having the ability to save infinite takes and make infinite sonic corrections is a wonderful tool, but all four producers agreed that it was important not to lose the feel and spirit of
the performance, which contains the minute human variations, intangibles and even mistakes that allow a song to connect with listeners. On the other hand, Vanston noted that even using analog tape, Miles Davis “comped” his solos (assembled them from different takes). Douglas explained that the average listener doesn’t care about the process, they only care if the song speaks to them.

**Platinum Producers Panel**

*Guitar Player* magazine Editor-in-Chief Michael Molenda moderated a panel that included Julian Raymond (Fleetwood Mac, Cheap Trick), Fab Dupont (Shakira, Jennifer Lopez), and Ebonie Smith (The Roots, Sturgill Simpson) to give perspective on today’s record label demands, artist sensibilities, and the challenges for producers caught between the two.

On the topic of identifying a great song, the panel concurred that *uniqueness* was a key consideration. Artists often feel pressured to do their next project in the current trendy style. However, it is those artists with the courage to buck those trends that become breakout sensations, such as Billie Eilish, and they become successful *because* of their uniqueness, which is a quality that cannot be engineered.

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

They viewed the producer’s job as bringing something to the table that will add to that uniqueness factor. Raymond’s work with Jennifer Nettles of Sugarland and Cheap Trick, both of whom have a formula that has garnered huge fan bases, is predicated on bringing in a fresh twist to the music within the confines of those formulas.

The panelists talked about the art of diplomacy between the producer and the artist. Smith stressed that a final version of a song has to ultimately satisfy the artist to the point where they will be able to conjure the magic when they perform that song on stage, possibly for the rest of their careers. Thus, keeping all of the mix versions of a song for recall was essential.

Dupont pointed out that beat makers, who are essentially composers, like to refer to themselves as producers, hence creating confusion as to what the industry definition of a producer really is, which is to extract the essence of a song and put it into a format that will simultaneously satisfy an artist’s aesthetics and a record label’s commercial needs for radio, streaming and unit sales.

Dupont also cited how producers often do double time as therapists, since artists who emote in public through their work are inherently fragile psychically. Developing trust with a stubborn artist like David Crosby was essential in getting him to change microphones or to try using a horn section. He also pointed out that sometimes, the potential for getting a better-sounding record by replacing a band member has to be sacrificed for the sake of band morale, and the producer has to create a sonic workaround to compensate for the weaker but well-liked musician.

All three panelists marveled at the quality of today’s production tools and that badass music can now be made with a 10-year-old laptop and a $25 microphone – something unthinkable a decade ago.

**“Superstition” and Immersive Audio**

Brian Gibbs of AES presented an A/B comparison of a 360 Binaural Dolby Atmos vs. stereo mix of Stevie Wonder’s hit “Superstition.” Even on headphones, the depth effect from the immersive mix when compared to the original stereo recording was startling. He also explained the pros and cons of the different platforms that are currently available for producing immersive audio. These
Technical Issues in Reissuing Classic Synthesizers

Dave Mash of Bar of 2 Productions interviewed engineers and product design specialists from Korg, Moog and Roland on the technical challenges posed in the reissue of classic ARP, Korg, Moog and Roland synthesizers. The sounds from these instruments have contributed to the bulk of popular music from the 1970s to the present.

Korg’s reissues include the ARP 2600, most famously showcased on Who’s Next, and Korg favorites like the MS-20, Mono/Poly and M1, used by Phil Collins, Deadmaus, Madonna and other artists.

Moog’s reissues feature a recreation of Keith Emerson’s groundbreaking modular Moog setup as well as the MiniMoog and Polymoog, the choices of artists such as Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Pink Floyd, Dr. Dre, and Bernie Worrell.

Roland’s reissue of their Jupiter and Juno synthesizers and the D-50 recreate the sounds of Duran Duran, Depeche Mode, Michael Jackson, Alicia Keys and many others.

One of the main problems faced by all three companies was the scarcity of vintage electronic components, many of which are no longer manufactured or have since been replaced by more efficient but different-sounding versions. Even if schematics of the original synthesizers are available, changes to accommodate contemporary demands, such as MIDI functionality and digital control of oscillators for pitch stability – features that did not exist when the synths were originally marketed – had created some interesting manufacturing choices.

Korg has opted for faithful-sounding versions of their ARP and Korg reissues with the addition of modern USB and MIDI interfaces, using original parts when possible and reverse-engineering circuitry and other components for those not currently available. Moog has gone completely retro and is recreating exact copies of their original analog units, down to their inherent flaws. Roland has gone the opposite way, using its Zencore technology to digitally model its originals, thus allowing the reissues to not only reproduce the sounds of yesteryear, but to also offer new sounds.

Let the Rhythm Lead

Taking a page from Paul Simon’s landmark Graceland album, Jackson Browne has collaborated with a mix of World Beat and US artists like Paul Beaubrun, Habib Koite, Paul Rodriguez, Jenny Lewis and others to make an album to benefit Artists For Peace and Justice, a non-profit group that has built a school for audio/video production in Haiti. Recording in the school, they incorporated many aspects of local culture rhythms, melodies, and performance into the record, Let the Rhythm Lead: Haiti Song Summit Vol. 1, which was released earlier this year.

The project included donations of equipment from Browne to the school, and this equipment was used on the recording. The experience allowed for the Haitian students to learn analog signal chains and sophisticated mic techniques. Browne, Lewis, Beaubrun and multi-instrumentalist Jonathan Wilson also discussed the genesis of several of the songs from the record with Grammy Museum host and moderator Scott Goldman.
Platinum Engineers Panel

How fitting that the Audio Engineering Society should feature a panel of some of the industry’s finest engineers to discuss their craft and art! Moderated by Grammy Award-winner veteran Jimmy Douglass (Timbaland, Foreigner, Justin Timberlake), the panel included the legendary Tony Visconti (David Bowie, T. Rex, Paul McCartney) (featured in Copper #96 and #97), Russell Elevado (D’Angelo, Mark Ronson, Jay-Z), Joe Zook (U2, Pink, One Republic), and Marcella Araica (Usher, Missy Elliot, Madonna).

All of the panelists shared how they got their professional starts and how the industry has changed over the years, both in practice and in technology. Here’s an outline of some of these changes:

- The evolution of Digital Audio Workstation (DAW)-based recording, and how the shift from analog tape to DAW has changed, from requiring two separate engineers for each to now making both skill sets essential for work in modern studios. Visconti and Douglass recalled when now-defunct tape-to-computer sync devices like the Psion were crucial during the infancy days of Pro Tools, now the industry-standard DAW.
- How plug-ins (software emulations of hardware processors) have drastically improved in some ways and why outboard gear is still superior in other instances.
- The trend towards using samples and effects sounds, and how they have reduced actual playing of instruments in contemporary recordings.
- The return of mixing dynamics after years of the loudness wars’ hyper compression.
- The trend towards artists reducing their involvement in the mixing process over the past 10 years and focusing more on social media, videos, and live performances.
- The trend towards artists’ reliance on Auto-Tune and in flying disparate elements into a demo to make a record, as opposed to being “start to finish” artists who can do actual, complete
vocal and instrumental performances.

- How the rising demand for expeditious recall of alternate mixes and stems (stereo recordings made from mixes of multiple tracks) has forced an increase in “mixing in the box” vs. using mixing desks.
- Why monitoring on something as tiny as iPhone and laptop speakers (in addition to using traditional large studio speakers) is crucial for creating modern mixes, as a good deal of listening is done on such devices.
- Adapting mixes for different digital conversion systems in streaming platforms, such as Spotify or Amazon HD, as each have different digital to analog algorithms, which can affect sound quality.
- The lack of production and especially engineering credits on streaming platforms, unlike with CDs or vinyl LPs.
- How streaming platform playlists have ostensibly killed the album.
- The trend towards less instrument density, more sonic space and more bottom end in mixes.
- How a significant portion of “modern mixing” has actually become the process of fixing distortion and off-axis sounds, due to inexperience in setting aspects like the recording’s resolution (96 kHz, 44.1 kHz or MP3), poor mic technique, and other amateur mistakes from artists attempting to self-engineer in their bedrooms.

Always fascinating, educational and entertaining, AES Fall 2020 was an unequivocal success and tangible evidence of how engineering innovation continues to resolve the most daunting obstacles.
The AES (Audio Engineering Society) Show Fall 2020 was of necessity an all-virtual affair. This season’s marquee event was “7 Audio Wonders of the World,” which featured in-depth video tours of seven landmark recording studios that between them are responsible for countless records, films, and TV programs we have come to know and love. Past issues of Copper featured Skywalker Sound in Lucas Valley, CA, Galaxy Studios in Belgium and The Village in West Los Angeles. Number four on the 7 Wonders list was Blackbird Studio in Berry Hill, Tennessee.

Mark Rubel, Director of Education at Blackbird Studio/Blackbird Academy, hosted the virtual AES tour.

Nashville has long been a mecca for singers, songwriters and musicians. Berry Hill is a community within the Nashville city limits and is home to over 50 recording studios. The uber-level of professionalism and musicianship is reflected in the community, where there is a refreshing lack of pretension and hierarchy since so many artists from all genres of music choose to record in the area. It is not uncommon to see icons like Alice Cooper buying a burrito at a local restaurant, the mom
picking up her kids in the SUV having a slew of gold records in her living room, or the guy in overalls causally having a smoke being the guy who played lead guitar on three of the year’s top selling records.

Blackbird Studio has its origins in the Creative Workshop, founded in 1970. Creative Workshop was the first recording studio to be established in the Berry Hill area. When a large adjacent lot became available, Creative Workshop acquired the space and then sold it to Blackbird sound engineer John McBride and his wife, Grammy-winning country music star Martina McBride, in order to build their own studio.

Blackbird offers nine world-class recording facilities, The Blackbird Academy, an audio production teaching academy, and Blackbird Rentals, a vintage gear rental service. Blackbird also has two producer’s offices, additional technical space, tape transfer facilities and an R&D facility used by musical instrument manufacturer Yamaha, all under one roof.

Owner John McBride justifiably takes great pride in making Blackbird Studio a place for artists to have unlimited creativity in translating the sounds they envision to be realized. And the facilities cannot be simply “good”; they have to be great, since McBride’s motto is, “Either You Rock Or You Suck.”

McBride, with collaborators such as recording engineer George Massenburg, has made Blackbird a top-flight recording facility on par with any other in the world, as the diverse artists whose albums recorded there line the walls of its front lobby can attest. On the floor in front of the original main live recording room. McBride added a granite floor, customized with sandblasted lyrics from the Beatles’ “Blackbird.”

In addition to Martina McBride, artists who have recorded at Blackbird include Keith Urban, Styx, the Stray Cats, Greta Van Fleet, Taylor Swift, The White Stripes, Alison Krauss and Union Station, Stevie Nicks, Yo-Yo Ma, Mariah Carey, Buddy Guy and the Black Eyed Peas, just to name a few.
The maintenance and repair shop have three full-time tech staff who not only maintain the studio but are constantly on the lookout to cannibalize parts from discarded, non-functional, or no longer manufactured units in order to keep Blackbird’s collection of vintage gear in top condition. During the virtual tour, among other items we were shown a Lexicon 250, the first-ever digital reverb (nicknamed, “R2D2”), and a drawer of spare European parts for Telefunken V72, V76, and V78 preamps. Blackbird has 100 (!) of these units since John McBride is a huge Beatles fan.

Studio A is constructed around a 72-input Neve 8078 mixing console custom-built in the late 1970s for Motown’s Los Angeles studios, which was subsequently sold to Donald Fagen of Steely Dan for his solo projects (including The Nightfly), and then bought by John McBride. Geoff Tanner, the original engineer on the Neve blueprints, was brought in to rebuild the console. Among other refinements, it was rewired with solid copper and solid silver wiring. The speakers in Studio A are ATC300 monitors, Genelec and Yamaha NS-10s. The room offers digital recording and analog 24-track Studer 2-inch machines.

The outboard equipment used in the various studios is duplicated in all of the large rooms and also on rolling racks for use in the smaller studios as needed. Notable vintage gear includes Pultec equalizers; Neve 2254, Urei 1176 and 1178 compressors, Teletronix LA-2A and RCA compressors and limiters, Lexicon digital delays and reverbs, a vintage Yamaha SPX90 multi-effects processor; an Eventide 949 harmonizer, GML headphone preamps, Telefunken V72 and V76 preamps and much, much more.

Instruments in Studio A include a classic Hammond B3 organ and Leslie rotating speaker setup, a Yamaha C7 concert grand piano and a Fender Rhodes Suitcase 73 electric piano. It is a large space.
When the Mavericks record there, they routinely set up the entire band in the room, except for the drums, which have their own dedicated drum booth.

The uniquely designed "Big Room" was built after the property line expanded to the end of the street, thus giving Blackbird the opportunity for additional real estate. The Big Room has 22-foot-high ceilings with non-parallel walls featuring acoustically variable absorption panels. Tie lines for mics, headphones, data, timecode, MIDI, and speakers are all built into the walls.

For headphone monitoring, rolling carts each contain a 16-channel, Mackie mixer with talkback and footswitch controls. The room also has JBL playback speakers and video cameras and mics can be hung from overhead to avoid floorspace clutter.

Behind the studio glass is a second-floor auxiliary control room, which also doubles as a separate studio (Studio I). This allows for flexibility in booking simultaneous sessions in Studio A as well as in the Big Room with Studio I.

Studio A offers the luxury of a dedicated echo chamber room with non-parallel walls, floor and ceiling that cause the sound to bounce unevenly for natural reverberation. The ceiling can be raised or lowered to change the quality of the echo.

Blackbird’s mic selection is mind-boggling - 1,400 microphones (!) total in four lockers. The mics are serialized for the reference of artists and producers seeking the sounds of a particular mic.

Whole drawers of LDC (large diaphragm condenser) mics include ribbon RCA 77s, KU2As, KU3s, 44s and a PB31 built in 1931 and formerly used backstage at Radio City Music Hall. Blackbird has
Telefunken ribbon mics going back to 1927, Telefunken 251s on several shelves (some have AC170 tubes, a superior-sounding model not originally meant for export), and a Telefunken 270 (serial number 1 - the only one in existence! As you might expect there are Neumann tube U47, U48, U67, U69C and M50 mics along with mics from AKG, Coles and many other manufacturers. One particularly notable mic is a Neumann MM5 measurement microphone, which producer Glyn Johns favored for drums and acoustic guitar.

Studio B (for overdubs and mixes) was used for the Chicks’ (then the Dixie Chicks) Grammy winning *Wide Open Spaces* album. It sports a 96-channel API Legacy Plus console modified with three stereo busses. Each is wired to a different signal path based around API, John Hardy 990s, and Inward Connections electronics in order to make instant comparison purposes. The main speakers used in the studio are large ATC monitors, and Yamaha NS-10s for near field listening.

Studio C was designed by noted engineer George Massenburg. It was originally built to allow the engineer and the musicians to be in the same room and has a living room feel. Sound diffusors that look like brush bristles protrude from the walls; they are actually 8-foot by 4-foot by 1-inch thick sheets of 1-inch thick MDF (medium density fiberboard), designed on a computer in accordance with Massenburg's design. Studio C is now equipped with a Dolby Atmos 9.1.6 immersive audio mixing system. The studio features nine ground-level ATC speakers plus six height-channel speakers and six subwoofers. In a Zoom discussion with George Massenburg, he described Studio C this way: “The room disappears. The mix is uniform and diffuse, and you don’t hear any walls. The room was designed to [reproduce any sonic environment and enable] any artist to hear themselves better.”

Studio D is favored by The White Stripes, Kings of Leon, Megadeth, Jimmy Buffett, Ghost, Little Big Town, Keith Urban, and Sheryl Crow among others. It has a tracking room with a slate wall behind a curtain to enable various acoustic adjustments, Studio D features a keyboard room with a Baldwin electric harpsichord, Hammond B3 organ, upright and 7-foot grand pianos, and Fender Rhodes and Wurlitzer electric pianos. It’s large enough for nine musicians to record live with a singer. If a singer prefers, there are five vocal isolation booths available. Huge Clair Brothers S4 speakers are mounted in the ceiling corners for playback.

Studio D houses the largest API Legacy Plus console in the US, designed by Michael Cronin and offering 192 total channels. Studio D’s echo chamber is the source of Kings of Leon’s snare drum sound, and has a dense, cavernous echo.
Studio E, which has a 32-channel API 1608 console, was being used by Grammy-winning engineer Bill Schnee (Steely Dan, Chicago, Whitney Houston), and was unavailable for the virtual tour. Studio F is used for mixing and overdubbing, while Studio H is another smaller “living room-type” environment for vocals, overdubbing, mixing and demo production. It has the original 16-channel API 1608 desk, serial number # 001, designed for Blackbird, and nearfield monitors only. Plenty of rock and country stars like Dolly Parton, Taylor Swift, Steven Tyler and Keith Urban still use it. During the virtual tour, singer-songwriter Jim Lauderdale, taking a break between vocal sessions, spoke about feeling at home whenever he entered Blackbird. Studio I (the auxiliary control room for the Big Room), which acts like Little Big Town and Pharrell Williams prefer, also serves as a classroom for The Blackbird Academy teaching facility.

The Blackbird Academy’s Mark Rubel noted that in this COVID-19 era, all studios have HEPA filters cleaned monthly to minimize dust.

Blackbird’s collection of instruments is as impressive as its mic locker, featuring dozens of guitars, guitar and bass amps (including two of the legendary Dumble amplifiers, which can fetch six figures on the used market), keyboards and about 65 drum kits and 150 snare drums! As you can imagine, Blackbird Audio Rentals also offers a vast array of vintage and modern gear. The sheer volume of Blackbird’s vintage recording gear is simply staggering, and the facility probably contains more highly-coveted mics and audio processing equipment than several of the other “7 Audio Wonders of the World” recording studios combined. The fact that such a diverse roster of top artists from all genres have chosen Blackbird at one time or another is a tribute to John McBride’s vision.
How I got to meet my idols.

Me: “Hi, I’m Rich Isaacs. I’m on the Atlantic Records guest list.”

Winterland box office attendant: “I don’t see your name here.”

It was March 24, 1974, and Genesis was going to play their first show ever in the San Francisco Bay Area, in support of their album Selling England by the Pound. At the time, I was the music director for the San Francisco State University radio station, KRTG.

(More than) a little back-story: I began my college career at the University of California, Berkeley, thinking I would major in the physical sciences. I quickly found out that people there were serious about it, and I wasn’t. A friend from high school was majoring in broadcasting at San Jose State University, and he suggested we take a course together in radio station operations at the local junior college in the summer following our freshman year. I really enjoyed it, and decided then and there to change my academic direction. Goodbye chemistry, physics, and calculus – hello sociology, philosophy, psychology, and a slot on KALX (90.7 FM), the UC Berkeley radio station. My plan was to transfer to SF State as a junior to major in what they called Broadcast Communication Arts.

The department had a great reputation, but their radio station was not in the same league as KALX. KRTG wasn’t even an on-air unit – it was a closed-circuit affair to two of the three dorms on campus! When I got there, the music director was Dennis Netto, who would go on to Bay Area fame as “Dennis Erectus” on San Jose rock station KOME. Dennis was outrageous in a good way, and may well have been the first “shock jock,” pre-dating Howard Stern by a good ten years. I took over as music director after Dennis graduated that year.

Because KRTG was “small potatoes,” we didn’t automatically get a lot of product support from the record companies. In those days, every major label had an office in San Francisco. One of my duties was to visit each of them at least once a month to beg for promo copies of the new releases. If I was lucky, I could get a few extras for myself. On one of my early visits to the Atlantic records office, the
label rep, Tony Harrington, said he would put me on the guest list for Dr. John, who was to perform at The Boarding House. The night of the show, I strode proudly to the ticket taker and told him my name and that I should be on the Atlantic guest list. My name wasn't there! Not knowing what to do, I told him my story, and luckily he let me in.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1h0YHbCgP0o

Fast-forward to March, 1974. I had purchased Genesis tickets for a friend and myself as soon as the show had been announced. A week before the concert, I was in the Atlantic office again, talking with a new rep, Paul Pieretti, and he asked if I wanted to be on the guest list. Of course, that meant I had to sell my tickets, but it was no problem. The day of the show, we went to Winterland and I had the box office exchange that began this tale. Because of the Dr. John incident, I was undaunted, confident that I would be able to get in. I immediately asked, “Who’s here from Atlantic?”

It happened to be Tony Harrington, the guy who had said he put me on the Dr. John list! I was told to go to the backstage entrance and ask for him. When he came out, I explained the situation. He said he couldn’t let me backstage, but he opened up his jacket, revealed a wad of Ticketron tickets, and peeled off two for me. I thanked him and asked if there might be a possibility of doing an interview for the station. He said yes, and told me to be at the Holiday Inn downtown the next morning. Standing behind me was a guy I didn’t know. When I turned around, he said, “You’re Rich Isaacs, aren’t you? I’m a friend of your brother, Jon, and I work for Bill Graham. Would you like to get backstage?” Oh boy! Talk about serendipity.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CubzEiY42zk

The concert was great, although sparsely attended. The next morning I headed to the hotel, cassette recorder and Genesis albums in hand. First up was an hour with Tony Banks and Phil Collins. This was my first-ever interview. I figured that interviews were probably a colossal drag for the artists, so I tried to come up with something that would at least show that I knew my stuff. (Remember, this was way before we had the incredible access to information made possible by the internet.) I had brought along an album called Ark 2, by Phil Collins’s first band, Flaming Youth. (At the time, I thought the title was Flaming Youth and the group was Ark 2, leading to a tiny bit of embarrassment.)

I turned on my tape recorder, showed Phil the picture of him on the back cover, and said, “Okay, the first question that I have is, ‘Is this the same Phil Collins?’” He laughed and said, “Yes, it is – I’m glad you asked that question. Yes, it is, good God, so it is. You got hold of this here?” I explained that I also worked in a record store, and it was in our 69¢ bin, which meant it was old and forgotten. Tony Banks joked, “Well, you’d better get rid of it, then.” Phil, still looking at the cover, said, “A blast from the past – I have that T-shirt with me in the very drawer, in fact.” The interview went well. Both of them were quite gracious with their time, Banks being more serious and cerebral, with Collins more of a “regular bloke.” At the end of the hour, I had them autograph my copy of Selling England, and went to another room to spend 45 minutes with Peter Gabriel.

Banks had mentioned that Gabriel had a bit of a reputation as a difficult interview, largely because he was low-key, chose his words carefully, and there were a lot of “ums” and “ers.” It was an accurate assessment. Although he was not as easy-going as the other two, he was nonetheless
fascinating. He also autographed my LP. When I got home, I transferred the recording to reel-to-reel tape so that I could edit it for broadcast. Razor blades and splicing tape, baby! Those were the days.

(Speaking of razor blades – one of my fantasies at the time was to be the recording engineer for Genesis. Had I pursued that dream, working my way up the studio chain by sweeping floors, assisting with sessions, etc., I might have reached that goal in 1980 or 1981 for the recording of Abacab. That album contains a particularly obnoxious song entitled “Who Dunnit?” If I had been required to record that and replay it over and over in mixdowns, I would have taken said razor blades and slit my wrists. Have a listen, if you dare.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsx4lO7Vsr0

The next year, the band was touring in support of their magnum opus, The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway. They had become more popular, and, as a result, I couldn’t get an exclusive interview. Atlantic set up a sort of “Meet the College Press” affair in a hotel meeting room, with 15 or 20 representatives of college papers and radio stations. Gabriel and Banks were sitting at the front of the room, and we took turns asking questions. Most of the others directed their inquiries to Gabriel, since he was the front man. My previous experience had shown me that Banks was a better source of information, and, as I mentioned, I wanted to be different and avoid the trite lines of questioning offered by some of the other interviewers. I asked Banks how it was that Brian Eno came to contribute to the recording, since they had never previously used other musicians. He said that Genesis and Eno were working on albums in the same studio, and he ran into Eno in the loo. They talked and agreed that Eno would apply some of his unique sound processing to parts of The Lamb. That led to more questions being asked of Banks by the others.

After the interview, I gave Banks a copy of the self-titled album by the Italian progressive rock band Banco (see Issue 115). I thought he would appreciate the keyboard playing on it. I wish I could say I heard back from him, but no.

The second part of this saga will deal with the interviews on the two subsequent tours, and the hoops I had to jump through to make them happen.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKmF5JCyVVs
A full day on the “road” to Baldan Baravain required significant recuperation. It took us some time to regain our land legs after ten hours of incessant bouncing. After dinner, we took a tour of the valley, circumambulating the ruined temple (which we were there to restore) clockwise in the traditional Buddhist fashion. Since the summer sun doesn’t set here until almost 11:00 pm, we expected a warm leisurely walk on a pleasant evening. Our tired minds and car-sick bodies were unprepared for monsters.

Alfred Hitchcock understood the human feeling of helplessness, especially when we are overwhelmed by forces beyond our control. In his movie *The Birds*, he played to those primal fears masterfully.

Until arriving at the peak of the two-week long season of the Mongolian horsefly, I had never known the sensation of being swarmed. These were not the flies North Americans are familiar with – but horribly beautiful creatures roughly the size of a large wasp, with spectacular multicolored eyes and a proboscis that can open your flesh through clothing! With an abundance of wild horses that don’t enjoy the benefit of having hands to swat these pests away, one would think humans would be excluded from their bloody menu. But alas, such was not the case. Ignorantly, I was wearing red – a raw steak increased to grotesque proportions by their multiplying eyes.

They travel in swirling clouds, hunting in packs. As we entered the woods peripheral to the valley, our small party was summarily set upon. Even with my daily practice of yoga and not-so-daily practice of meditation, calm remained elusive with hundreds of carnivores attacking. Luckily I found...
that if I kept moving, these louts didn't have the time to find purchase on my skin or clothing. It became quite comical; I used all the Kung Fu moves I've seen in movies, but resigned my delusions of stardom as the most effective strategy proved the most logical: run away! It turned into a sort of sick game, with me running full-tilt and abruptly changing direction to shake off the squadron that, once focused, inevitably caught up. Every time I lost them with my fancy soccer footwork, I would look back and see the confused cloud pause, regroup as a unit, and give chase once again. They were relentless.

Fortunately, the traditional Gers we stayed in seem to hold some protective mojo against these marauders. Except for the one or two that obviously didn't read the rule book, the swarm simply stopped its pursuit at the colorful door to my abode. My breath heaving almost to the point of nausea, a more effective way to get blood circulating after a long road trip I could not have envisioned.

Believing as I do that everything has its place in the world, I'm still petitioning for an explanation of the need to bless us (and the equine world) with the company of these airborne demons.

Breathing relief on a small bed in the safety of my Ger (which the Russians call a “Yurt”), sounds emerged from the night. Through thick layers of felt set as remedy against the cold nights, all sounds from outside take on a pleasant otherworldly muffle. I smiled in recognition as the natural inspiration for European clock makers, the cuckoo bird, began its song. There aren't many of them; they seem to be solitary creatures. But if you hear a pair of these avian tenors on opposite sides of an open valley, you're eavesdropping on a distinct and beautiful conversation, in stereo. It was to their staccato arias that I dissolved into a deep, dreamless sleep – my first night in the wilds of Mongolia.

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Emerging the following morning, clad head to toes in the finest cotton armor, I found that horseflies - as a happy contribution to my sanity - have a reliable work schedule: punching in promptly at 10:00am, well-rested, hungry, their scissor-like mandibles freshly sharpened. They do what they were born to do and then return to their dens of Hell 12 hours later, bellies replete with fresh flesh. Breakfast without them was a joy.

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During the restoration – I was privileged to work alongside the Mongolian carpenters creating traditional furniture for the temple; disassembling and moving the scaffolding (made only of fallen trees and cord, and reaching over 30 feet high and 150 feet wide) from the temple walls, and carefully working with shovels, picks and trowels in the continuing excavation. On this last assignment, I was thrilled to have revealed the original wooden threshold of the temple from its deep grave of dirt, rocks and weeds. The wood crumbled at the lightest touch, but patience was rewarded, first with a hint of directional grain, and then the discovery of the compromised threshold itself. I will never forget the feeling of my first find. I understand now how archeology could be an exciting vocation.

Over the course of the restoration, many artifacts were found in the rubble: Buddha statues and carvings, ceremonial horns, pottery, bones, tools, and hundreds of personal religious items worn and used by the 7,000 monks and nuns who once lived and prayed here.
June 30, 2002. Today in Yokohama, Japan, Brazil and Germany will play in the final game of the World Cup of football (soccer), the most popular single sporting event on the planet. Without electricity or television, I knew when coming here that I would miss the only sporting event I have ever cared to watch. I assumed that I wouldn't even hear the results for days.

To make the best of the situation, I organized a local version of a World Cup football match. Enthusiasm was high as we set up makeshift goal posts of weathered logs. By consensus, we jokingly decided on side boundaries: China to the south and Russia to the north. The field was resplendent with marmot holes, rocks, and mounds of dung at various stages of dehydration. With full teams comprised of three westerners and roughly 15 Mongolian men and women, we were ready to begin.

I was smiling so much it hurt. The sidelines cheered loudly and joyously at anything and everything occurring on the pitch, not differentiating between bad passes or actual goals. Most of the locals played barefoot, miraculously avoiding cuts, stubbed toes, or falls. Guré, Baldan Baravain's new resident Lama – the same man I watched conduct a ceremony with a horn made from the shinbone of a human virgin – joined us on the field. At first, he played in full robes, but soon stripped down to American-style oversized boxing shorts, a billowy silk shirt and his yellow sash (an article that served to keep him not completely out of uniform). Guré turned out to be quite an athlete. He played like a Buddhist version of the Tasmanian Devil. He was everywhere at once and never stopped running or smiling. He must have come from good stock, since his mother was playing as well!

After two hours, all of us sweating, covered in dust and dung, and more tired from laughing than running, we retired happily to clean up and rest.

Later, Mark, the project leader, came into my Ger and asked if I wanted to go watch the World Cup finals. I thought he was teasing me, but he looked serious. It turned out that a well-to-do herdsman about 20 bumpy minutes away by jeep had a solar panel, a satellite dish and a black and white TV that could pick up Russian broadcasts! How could I refuse? We entered his Ger in time for the second half and sat down for the most surreal experience of watching sports ever.

At around 11 pm that night, after it was safe to be outside without a flame thrower, I stepped out of my Ger and gawked at a magnificent black canvas, so dense with stars, so humbling. But where there is beauty, there is also contrast – which became apparent the next day.

In the West, our food is very nicely packaged. In the case of meat products, this presentation effectively insulates us from its rather unpleasant origins. Mongolians, on the other hand, are very intimate with their food. During my stay in the countryside, for the first time in my life, I witnessed an animal lose its life to become food. It was not pleasant – branding me with lingering mental imagery that is still challenging to one who spent two decades as a vegetarian.

Jara, one of the herders, skirted the flock and feigned disinterest. Targeting a goat, he bolted after it, catching the terrified animal deftly and heaving it up on his shoulder in one fluid and practiced motion. At the appointed place, Jara straddled the goat and held on to its horns. Toumroo, a man I’ve only seen as jovial and gentle, approached the animal with the same hammer we were using to build furniture in the temple. My stomach turned at what was about to transpire, yet I felt the need to
experience this, to expand my experience of life and death. The first blow to the top of the head stunned the goat but unfortunately did not render it unconscious. I will never forget the sound. The seconds between blows felt like hours. With the next strike, the goat hit the ground, its legs each shooting out from under it in different directions and sending its small tail into a desperate spasm. The animal was unconscious, but not dead. Its limp body was turned over, and Toumroo opened a slit in its chest with a long blade. I cringed as he reached deep into the steamy opening with his naked hand and squeezed the animal's heart to end its life.

A celebratory barbecue in Mongolia is called a “Horhuuk,” and involves removing intestines and organs, and placing large, red-hot rocks in the body to cook the meat from the inside out. It was disconcerting to find out that what I witnessed was done in our honor as “distinguished” guests.

Thankfully, as a reverent tribute to life and home economics, no part of an animal goes to waste here. We even learned to play a game of skill called “ankle bone flipping,” in which, yes, the ankle bones of a sheep are used for entertainment. Also available were intricate puzzles and other ingenious games made of this abundant resource.

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After a hot morning of excavation work, and a lunch accompanied by a bucket of smoldering dung used to ward off the uninvited horseflies, everyone decided to go to a nearby lake. It turns out this lake was the site of Genghis Khan's coronation as leader of the Mongol hordes. Nothing here seemed to lack historical significance. As a nod to the local legacy of tribal warfare, we engaged in mud ball skirmishes using ammunition scooped from the soggy bottom. Rural Mongolians, who probably found it strange to see westerners changing into bathing suits, had no problem stripping down to their underwear and diving into the war with abandon.

Four of us westerners had come to the lake prepared to camp out overnight. As we were setting up, a pair of blue herons ambled by slowly with that awkward slow-motion avian gait that makes you think that they really do belong in the air, where their six-foot wingspan presents us with a different picture of graceful movement.

After nightfall, as I was drying my socks marshmallow-style over the campfire, we spotted headlights in the distance. Before long, it was obvious that the driver saw our campfire and was heading for us. Not speaking the language, and being in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night, at least one of our party got nervous. A Russian military jeep pulled up, and stopped six feet from us, beaming its headlights into our eyes. We didn’t breathe, not knowing what subsequent seconds would hold. After an excruciating pause, the doors swung wide and three Mongolian men and one woman emerged, smiling wryly. We rummaged for our phrase books, and in no time the party began. Vodka came out of the jeep, to be matched by my offering of dried apricots, pistachios, and Japanese rice crackers from a favorite store at home that I was saving for just the right occasion.

If anything, Mongolians know how to celebrate life with drink. After we (mostly they) exhausted the vodka, the songs started, with everyone taking turns. The woman, a Buryat from the north, transfixed us with a hauntingly beautiful song in her native tongue. All was quiet as she finished; no one could speak. Buryats in Mongolia have been able to retain their distinct and proud culture, which combines Buddhism and Shamanism, since the 17th century. If songs are any indication of depth of culture, Buryats must be remarkable people indeed. I wished I had brought my tape recorder. All I have left of that melody is an elusive echo.
As the remaining vodka was transformed into song, it became obvious our guests were not ready for the merriment to end. One of the men brought out a bottle of homemade “Airag,” a strong alcoholic beverage made from fermented mare’s milk. Yes, mare’s milk. Since it is very impolite to refuse a drink in Mongolia, we drank. A more “interesting” beverage has never passed these lips. But to its credit, it certainly gets one laughing in a hurry. After about an hour of revelry, our new friends abruptly rose, smiled their thanks and disappeared into the dark. For just one night, I felt like a nomadic host – receiving unannounced guests with the ease and grace of a native.

The next morning on our hike back to camp, we were startled by what had to have been an overnight explosion of wildflowers! Carpets of pastels rolled over the hills as if on this one day all agreed to unfurl their glory in unison. Minutes later, cresting a hill, we noticed another breathtaking phenomenon. Answering the call of the first explosion with perfect timing, thousands of small butterflies burst onto the scene in full regalia of powder blue and fire orange, creating a nearly kaleidoscopic image on the sunlit landscape. Magic is everywhere here. It is not surprising that Shamanism has held the attention of this land’s people for centuries.

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The days blended into one another as we worked on the temple restoration, spending a good part of our time on rickety scaffolding, an experience interrupted at times by shouts of glee from amateur archeologists assigned to excavation duty.

On our last night, another mare’s-milk-vodka-sing-along was organized, but it turned somber. I realized that they are going to miss us as much as we will miss them. Early the next morning, we were bumping our way back to Ulan Bator – attempting to hold back the tears, with not much success.

I will probably never see these friends again. Somehow, they were living full lives without postal addresses, internet, e-mail or even telephones – communicating again with these last surviving nomads remains, at the very least, challenging. I miss their fearless and unabashed generosity framed by mischievous smiles and warm, twinkling eyes.

It took many summers and the consistent efforts of local craftsmen and foreign conscripts such as myself, but the yellow temple is now restored and returned to its rightful people as a nucleus of their lives. I feel honored to have been a small part of undoing the wrongs this gentle community suffered and helping them reclaim and rebuild their spiritual home.

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Postscript and photos:

I could spend many more pages relaying anecdotes of my time living with the Mongolian people. For brevity’s sake, I’ll leave you with an experience that illuminates their innate nature, this time back in the capitol, among its roughly 1.5 million city folk.

Every summer, in the heart of Ulan Bator, Mongolia puts on a national fête called the Nadaam Festival, which celebrates its culture through sport contests and other merriments.

My timing was good, as I just got back from completing my work at the temple.

Mongolians are thick-skinned and easy going. It takes a lot to ruffle them. The main entrance to the stadium was in a state of some disrepair, with the walking path being, uh...pretty much,
well...absent. It was an 8-foot drop down to a pile of rocks and nothing remained but the original joists. So naturally, the eager attendees simply walked on what wood there was to work with, laughing and smiling.

Over the course of a few minutes I saw mothers in long dresses carrying children, elderly people who shuffled across with their canes and very big men whose weight I thought would snap the old wood like a pretzel...they all made it across without fanfare or any apparent distress.

The Nadaam festival highlights the major sports that Mongolians love: wrestling, horse racing, and archery.

The stadium was full and the parade began. Suddenly, everyone looked up to see three men parachuting down to the center of the arena, and on their way down, setting off fireworks and smoke trails emanating from some hidden apparatus as they came in for a landing. But it wouldn’t be Mongolia if something unexpected didn’t happen. One of the fireworks that was supposed to go up misbehaved horizontally and released a small flaming rocket directly at the section I was seated in. The missile struck about ten feet from me, hitting a well-dressed woman in the abdomen.

As I’ve noted, it’s hard to ruffle these people up. She brushed the remainder of the fizzled-out flare away and patted down the smoky embers that marred her nice blue silk dress. She did not seem to be hurt, so she didn’t get up from her seat, didn’t complain...she just continued watching the festivities with a smile.

*Header image courtesy of* Pixabay/Herbert Bieser.*
My life took a swerve in the summer of 1974. Did I have an affair with an older woman whose husband was away in a war? Did I learn that love means never having to say you’re sorry? Was I picked by the Red Sox in the first round of the amateur draft? None of the above. I spent the summer earning money for college by working in a record warehouse, filling orders for record stores in Southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

This sounds like a good swerve, doesn’t it? A music-obsessed teenager surrounded by sky-high shelves of long-playing records, all current. What else could I ask for?

Aside from the paychecks, a lot!

There was no air-conditioning in this cavernous space in the middle of suburbia. No place to eat lunch. The only music they played while we worked was a tape loop of 1950s pop. I heard the Coasters’ “Yakety Yak” three times a day. There was no employee discount because there was no need for one; most of the employees were Portuguese immigrants with an imperfect command of their new language. They weren’t in the market for Pink Floyd records. The tiny population of teenage boys on the job who were in the market for Pink Floyd records was, to use the technical corporate term, too small to f*ck with.
But the main drawback to this job was the astonishing weight of the LPs *en masse*.

After pulling orders for various music shops, I had a stack of records on my two-wheel hand truck that weighed 16 tons, by my estimate. The stack grew so high that I had to cinch it down with a seat belt. I pushed and pulled this captive mass of vinyl through the warehouse to the loading dock, where I unloaded the records into bins. Walking the empty two-wheeler back to my starting position and accepting the next list of orders gave me a few moments of rest. And then I resumed pulling orders.

My sweat-soaked days in the warehouse (I particularly loathed double-record sets such as Yes’ *Tales of Topographic Oceans* and *Chicago VI* and *VII* and I thank the gods of audio engineering that Chicago’s *four-record* live album was before my time) were reinforced the following year in Boston. I worked for a moving company that specialized in transporting students’ stuff in and out of their dorms and apartments. My specialty within this specialty was moving their record collections. I was assigned this duty for my own safety, to keep me away from the furniture. You get trapped in a stairwell once by a runaway couch and nobody forgets it.

Every day I schlepped plastic and wooden crates packed with LPs in and out of elevators or up and down stairs. (The two albums I saw the most: for the girls, Carole King’s *Tapestry*; for the boys, *Aerosmith’s Toys in the Attic.*) I swore an oath that I would never own a roomful of these things.

**How to Get Along Without Vinyl**

Cassette tapes seemed like the perfect alternative to LPs, being light and compact. My first collection of cassettes sat snugly on the shelves of a spice rack I had made in my junior high shop class. LPs demand that you create a shrine in your house and then sit your ass down and stay there. Cassettes were the go-anywhere, power-to-the-people format. The first time I fired up *Born to Run* on a boom box outdoors, I cried out, “Democracy is in the streets!”

Ray Chelstowski wrote about his life with cassettes in Copper No. 123 (“Tale of the Tapes”). I enjoyed cassettes until I could no longer ignore their drawbacks. My tapes got jammed in the cassette deck in the car. Tape rolled off reels and had to be rewound with the high-tech tool of choice, the point of a Bic pen. The cover art was too small and it rarely appeared on the back of the cassette.

But most importantly, when I wanted to find a song, or when I wanted to skip a song that wasn’t a favorite, I had to fast forward again and again and again, testing the air each time, then rewind because of course I had fast-forwarded my way into the next song.

At one point I owned a cassette deck with a counter, which was useful, but I had to write down where each song started and find a place for this list inside the cassette case, which was a chore. I wanted to rawk, not take notes.

In the 1990s, a friend bought himself a new CD deck and gave me his old one. My life swerved again with the impact of a Corinthian column of vinyl bursting through the bottom of the bin I was trying to lift.

Next time: How I discovered CDs and achieved inner peace.
Concert T-Shirts: History in the Making

Written by Ray Chelstowski

Recently, a college buddy posted a picture of himself on social media with a Pablo Cruise T-shirt that his brother had given him for his birthday. It was so random that I was pretty sure it was tied to an inside joke between them. Could Dave have really been a big fan of the band and its songs like “Love Will Find A Way” and “Whatcha Gonna Do,” or was it that he, like many of us, thought that the band’s logo with its sunset coloring and lilting palm tree was a perfect metaphor for the 1970s? Either way it got me thinking about the concert/rock tee phenomenon.

The rock T-shirt had its origins in the late 1950s via an Elvis fan club. However these tees were rarely worn in public and were considered part of a fan club membership pack. Then in 1968 rock concert promoter Bill Graham and his San Francisco-based Winterland Productions decided to use concert tees as a way to help promote local bands like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane. Graham saw a “walking billboard” potential in the tees and saw to it that they’d have a band image on the front, with a band’s touring calendar printed on the back. Since most concertgoers of that time either watched a performance standing on a dance floor or sitting on the ground, these tour calendars were impossible to ignore. Sometimes, based upon the size of the crowd and the venue you were in, the back of the person in front of you might be the only thing you could clearly see all night. It was brilliant if for nothing more than its simplicity, and his decision to use a screen printing process allowed Graham to produce the tees quickly and in volume. Almost overnight he created a new industry.

The concert T-shirt platform quickly moved to becoming a more creative canvas for bands and the artists that followed them. Concert tees would begin to embrace design elements that made them more than swag. Instead they could make a personal statement about the person wearing them without them ever uttering a single word. Soon the tour dates on the back of the T-shirts would begin to disappear and the focus would move to what was on the front of the tee (although you still see tour date calendars on T-shirts today, or at least you did until bands stopped touring).

Some T-shirts from the 1970s have become as famous as the bands they promoted. Consider this a
small sampling:

AC/DC, “lightning bolt”: In 1977 this T-shirt became the debut platform for the now-iconic lightning bolt logo, making it one of the most recognizable images in all of rock. It’s propelled the sales of everything that’s included the logo, and, according to historian Glenn A. Baker, made AC/DC the first band to ever make money off merchandise. KISS would learn from AC/DC and make merchandising their primary source of income, adding bobble heads, action figures and much, much more to their offerings over the decades.

Pink Floyd, “The Dark Side of the Moon”: This tee has long ago reached cult status. The album’s prism illustration may even be more associated with the T-shirt than the actual album. The appeal is so vast that this tee is even often sold at astronomy expos – in volume!

Grateful Dead, “Steal Your Face”: The “Steal Your Face” logo was developed and released in 1973. It was designed by the artist Owsley Stanley and created by Bob Thomas. While this instantly-recognizable skull-with-lightning-bolt logo has emerged as one of rock’s most recognizable images, band historian David Lemieux recently told me that fans in the 1970s rarely wore T-shirts with the logo to concerts. There, you were more likely to see denim, flannel and suede. That has long since changed, and at any given Dead & Company show you could now call wearing this tee (or some variation of it) the dress code.
The Rolling Stones, “lips and tongue logo”: While the famous “lips” logo made its debut on the album *Sticky Fingers*, it was when it started to appear on T-shirts that it really caught air. The T-shirt is so closely associated with the band and their fan base that the Stones included a photo of a couple from Europe with one of them wearing it on their 1998 live album *No Security*.

The Ramones, “Presidential Seal”: The Ramones’ famous “Presidential Seal” was created by New York artist Arturo Vega, who wanted to create a logo that would establish the Ramones as the quintessential All-American rock and roll band. The result was this famous graphic, themed after the Seal of the President of the United States. It may not have accomplished what it set out to do, but the logo and the tee are now iconic, found everywhere, and have become in every way “American.”
At one point around the 1970s, the concert tee became so popular that iron-on decals were made available through various promotions. They could be offered as a gift with purchase in your local record store, come in the Sunday newspaper, or be slipped into the jacket of an album you purchased. I also remember mailing in a proof-of-purchase for something and having an iron-on sent to me. All you needed was a blank tee, an ironing board and an iron and you could make your own rock tee the way you wanted. The concept was awesome. The execution, not so much. The images always looked faded and typically would vanish after two or three runs through the washing machine. The DIY movement in tees wasn’t quite there yet.

In the 1980s the popularity of concert tees waned a bit. Fashion senses moved away from denim and cotton tees to bold, bright colors and apparel that popped. Maybe the only tees of that period that made an impact were the ones worn in Wham and the “We Are The World” videos.

In the nineties the rock tee reasserted its influence with bands like Nirvana, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Metallica. They kicked rock T-shirts forward with designs that the bands personally created. To this day, Nirvana’s “Smiley Face” tee, with a logo drawn by the late Kurt Cobain himself, demonstrates how powerful a legacy these shirts can leave behind.

Today, big apparel companies like streetwear brand Supreme have flooded the marketplace with new tees tied to bands like Joy Division, Sonic Youth and the aforementioned AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, and Nirvana among others. However, this market saturation has really diluted the impact that wearing a tee from one of these bands once made. I mean who cares now if you like AC/DC? Who doesn’t? It’s like wearing a tee promoting Coca-Cola!

Like all things vintage, there is also an active collector’s marketplace for tees. Original concert tees from bands like Aerosmith can command prices as high as $300. On eBay, the range of offerings is wide and the pricing for all (even through the pandemic) has remained strong. If you can believe it, someone recently paid $10,000 for a Led Zeppelin tee from 1979!
A few years back I was tempted to take my collection of concert tees and send them off to a company that takes old sports jerseys and recycles them into a quilt. I thought it would make a great bedspread for the guest room. I was the only one in our house who felt that way. On second thought, though, I’m glad the idea got vetoed. My old Grateful Dead and NRBQ tees were meant to be worn and some of my newer concert tees, like one from a Doyle Bramhall II show, have been hijacked by my teenage daughter. That makes me even happier than wearing them myself.

The T-shirt may have gotten its real pop culture debut from Marlon Brando, who famously wore one in the 1951 film *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But it earned its cool factor by helping rock n roll become more than just a musical genre. T-shirts propelled rock forward and made it a lifestyle. That lifestyle has been defined by the teens who proudly represent the bands that they think matter most. To anyone paying attention it begs the question, “When was the last time you felt this strongly about anything?” The answer is probably when you last wore one of these tees yourself.

Whatever path forward rock takes, this fashion phenomenon will proudly promote it, probably with a whole bunch of swagger, flair, and fun – even if the band on the front is someone like Pablo Cruise!
"You're not likely to believe this son, but when I was your age, you could walk into Disney Hall almost any weekend evening and enjoy a fantastic concert without being frisked, fingered, or verified." Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, California about five years ago.