# Table of Contents

Opening Salvo: On the Road Again.......................... 1
Too Much Tchaikovsky: Classical Concept Albums ..................... 3
Music, Audio, and Other Illnesses: 96,000 People Can’t Be That Wrong .......... 7
The Audio Cynic: Why Do We Even CARE?? .................................................. 9
Quibbles and Bits: Sample Rate Conversion .............................................. 12
Twisted Systems: Audio Retales br /Visits Long Island ......................... 16
Behind the Glass: Talent Swarm ............................................................. 20
Vintage Whine: Horns, Part 2 ................................................................. 23
... And Indie for All: Pura Fe’ ................................................................. 32
Something Old / Something New: Caldara ............................................. 35
Industry News: More Upheaval at Sears and Texting Music ................. 38
The Copper Interview: Chad Kassem ...................................................... 42
Featured: The Return of Even More Neglected Artists! ......................... 54
In My Room: Zen and the Art of Speaker Building .................................. 62
Parting Shot: Spring is in the Air .............................................................. 68
On the Road Again….  

By Bill Leebens | Issue 33

As you read this, I’ll have just returned from the Munich High End show, the largest audio show in the world. Or at least the Western world, if we must split hairs.

To my shame, I’ve never been to the Munich show before. While I’m looking forward to it, I have a bit of angst regarding my very rusty high school Deutsch, no matter how many times folks assure me that it won’t be a problem. Oddly, I can still recall several of the dialogues I had to memorize for Frau Shelton, 45 years ago—but I don’t really anticipate having too many discussions about how high the grass is!

I’m reminded of the old joke, first told to me by a Dane who speaks six or seven languages: -What do you call someone who speaks three languages? —Trilingual. -What do you call someone who speaks two languages? —Bilingual. -What do you call someone who speaks ONE language? —AMERICAN.

Hilarious, no? (Okay, no.) I believe my testy response was, “if our country was as TINY as yours, we’d have to speak six or seven languages, also.” Oh, well.

At any rate: I hope to have a feature about the Munich show in the next issue—possibly the next two, if there’s enough of interest to show you. I certainly won’t bore you with the same old tired stuff you’ve already seen ten times.

Meanwhile, I think we have another strong issue. Professor Schenbeck leads off with his look at classical concept albums, Dan Schwartz writes about ;Richard Murison examines the thorny issue of sample rate conversion; Jay Jay French tells a tale of a high-end system delivered in Joisey; Duncan Taylor goes down the long list of talented folks he’s recorded; Anne E. Johnson introduces us to Pura Fe’—and I urge you to listen to this artist, who sounds like Bonnie Raitt one minute, Steely Dan the next; Woody Woodward looks at ; our record reviews were both new, last issue—Anne is back with the Something Old part; Industry News tells about texting music (?) and the latest chapter in big retail; and I write about music education (or lack of it), and the next segment of the horn speakers saga.

As promised last issue, John Seetoo is back with a terrific interview with Chad Kassem, possibly the busiest guy in audio. We’re happy to have our old friend Ken Kessler back as well, with another look at Neglected Artists. Think of this installment as the Lost Chapter….

We wrap up with an amazingly detailed In My Room from our pal B. Jan Montana, and another lovely Parting Shot. Our friend Jim Smith will be back soon.

Until next time: Später!
Cheers, Leebs.
Classical Concept Albums

By Lawrence Schenbeck | Issue 33

They’re baack.

Concept albums, that is, those packages that attempt—with varying degrees of success—to offer works that complement, complete, and inform one another.

For pop and rock, the advent of the Concept Album marked a new maturity in genres commonly associated with pimples and prom night. (My sources in the KGB tell me one such album will get special attention this month with a deluxe reissue.) In the classical world,
Concept Albums have also found a new lease on life. Recordings of the standard repertoire now multiply like mayflies—even obscure works get a fourth or fifth reading—so artists have embraced the Concept as a way of enhancing their brand. Here are some examples.

**Early Music:** My favorite Baroque album this spring is *Heroines of Love and Loss*, a recital from soprano Ruby Hughes, cellist Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann, and lutenist Jonas Nordberg ([BIS-2248; SACD and download](#)). Hughes wanted to highlight her favorite women composers of the period. Yet what makes the album memorable is that she and her colleagues universalize this music, associating its passionate and/or meditative laments with texts that call to mind classical cultural figures like Dido, Desdemona, and Venus. The mix is further leavened with gorgeous instrumental interludes from the likes of Kapsberger (a *Toccata Arpeggiata* for theorbo) and Vivaldi (the G-Minor Cello Sonata RV 42). This preserves the album’s intimacy while helping it avoid continuous melancholy, an affliction known in the industry as “Semper Dowland semper dolens.” Here’s a taste:

I also enjoyed *Give Me Your Hand: Geminiani & the Celtic Earth* (Alpha Classics [276; CD and download](#)) from Bruno Cocset and Les Basses Réunies. Talk about a concept: Cocset has assembled a charming, musically engaging set list that illuminates the mutual influence of certain 18th-century Italian musicians (Lorenzo Bocchi, Francesco Geminiani) and Celtic musicians and poets they encountered in their travels (Turlough O’Carolan and “David Rizzio,” née James Oswald). You’ll have to read Cocset’s fascinating [liner notes](#) to grasp the full extent of their cross-pollination. But what music! Here are two tastes:

Playing viola and tenor violin, Cocset provides a firm anchor for the ensemble’s mellow sound; their playing offers a variety of rich timbres and some of the most endearing tunes you’ll encounter this side of Dublin or Edinburgh.

Finally, give a listen to *Musica Baltica 1: Baroque Cantatas from Gdańsk* (MDG [902 1989-6; SACD](#)). Andrzej Szadejko and his Goldberg Baroque Ensemble perform church cantatas by four musicians active in Danzig/Gdańsk between 1687 and 1774. Danzig was a thriving center of trade and commerce; the music of its major churches reflected the city’s cultural importance. Much of that music has been lost, but a sizable group of manuscripts survived in the Library of the Polish Academy of the Sciences. Szadejko edited the works recorded here and turns in nice performances as well. On the whole, this music is less complex than what you might hear from Bach, Handel, or Vivaldi, but no less elegant. Its simplicity is refreshing.

The album was recorded in Gdańsk’s historic Trinity Church, the acoustics of which are on full display. You may not care for that; I found myself fiddling with gain and toggling between stereo and multichannel formats to render the building’s contribution less intrusive. Still, these are solid performances of interesting “new” repertoire and well worth exploring. Many selections from the album are available as live performances on YouTube:
**Speaking of violas:** Several good viola recitals have appeared recently, with *Bel Canto: La voix de l’alto* (Harmonia Mundi HMM 902277; CD and download) the pick of the lot. Antoine Tamestit has already distinguished himself as a member of Trio Zimmermann; this is his first album for HM as a solo artist. With pianist Cédric Tiberghien, another rising star, he focuses on a pivotal time and place for the viola: Paris in the 19th century. Beginning with Berlioz, French musicians widened and deepened the instrument’s role as a soloist. In his excellent program essay, Frédéric Lainé notes the viola is rightly considered a “dramatic contralto among instrumental voices.” Although *Bel Canto* includes music by Bellini and Donizetti, its beating heart consists of three works by Henri Vieuxtemps, Belgian violinist, composer, and teacher (Ysaïe was his most famous pupil) whose *Sonata* op. 36 remains a touchstone of the viola literature. Listen:

Beautifully recorded too.

**And furthermore:** Three more albums illustrate the joys and pitfalls of The Concept. Cellist Ophélie Gaillard’s *Exiles* (Aparté AP142; CD, vinyl, downloads) offers works by Bloch, Korgold, and Prokofiev, plus folk-song arrangements. Her collaborators include the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo and the Sirba Octet. It’s done very well, although I suspect there are more dramatic renditions of *Schelomo* out there, not to mention more idiomatic versions of the folk material. As with her Latin album, Gaillard’s good taste and scrupulous musicianship occasionally get in the way.

What you may find more telling about her (or her management’s) approach is the program booklet: from Mexico City (!), Gaillard contributes a three-page personal essay; Pierre Birnbaum describes American Jews’ struggles with assimilation and anti-Semitism; Alan Poirer discusses the music itself; finally we get Jean-Baptiste Urbain’s essay on Korgold and the film *Deception*. The booklet is crammed with session photos and artfully posed pictures of Ms. Gaillard in period costume with a worn leather trunk and autumn leaves scattered on the (subway?) steps behind her. A vintage movie poster and photos of early-20th-century immigrant life in Manhattan complete the portfolio.

Maybe these visuals and commentaries do help people connect the dots. Taken altogether, they strike me as generalized overkill, especially the posed artist pictures. Two albums from Alpha Classics fare better at this game: *Il Distratto*, No. 4 in Alpha’s *Haydn 2032* series, focuses on Haydn’s role as theatrical impresario and on his use of theatrical devices in the symphonies. Three are included, plus Cimarosa’s humorous cantata *Il maestro di cappella*. The program book offers several succinct essays and a selection of photos from Richard Kalvar of Magnum. You know what I like about those photos? They address “distraction” but are sly about it, as Haydn was. Nothing gives off the scent of a media consultant. Kalvar just assumes you’re awake. (It doesn’t hurt that the performances, by Giovanni Antonini and Il Giardino Armonico, are absolutely first-rate, not just done very well, but in a class by themselves.)
Almost as successful is New York (Alpha 274) from Ensemble Intercontemporain. These two CDs aim to illuminate New York City’s role in 20th-century experimental music. CD 1 gives us Intégrales (1925) from Edgard Varèse, Elliott Carter’s Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra (1996), and music by David Fulmer (b. 1981) and Sean Shepherd (b. 1979). CD 2 offers Steve Reich’s WTC 9/11 (2010), John Cage’s Music for Wind Instruments (1938), and Morton Feldman’s Instruments I (1974). All the performances seem exemplary, and the recording approaches reference quality. The realization of Reich’s piece, which blends electronic and acoustic elements, is especially stunning. But does this assortment of works work? Does it gain altitude as a concept?

Not quite. Granted, the thing about New York City as artistic locus is its diversity. And there’s a good historical arc here, beginning with Varèse and culminating in Reich, Feldman, and a couple of talented young’uns (people I’d never heard of, but maybe that’s the point). The one serious misfire is the Cage piece, written before he’d ever set foot in the Big Apple and well before he adopted the aleatory methods that won him notoriety. It’s essentially a student work that doesn’t belong in this company. (I have other quibbles about Carter, whose work in general strikes me as Faceless Mid-Century High Modernism, but that’s a matter of taste.) Click here to hear some (mislabeled) clips.
As I write this, I’m listening to the early Flying Burrito Brothers. I love this stuff.

I first got “turned on” to music like this by hearing the very first Hot Tuna album (called, shockingly, *Hot Tuna*), the one with mostly just Jack and Jorma. I had started playing about 6 months earlier, just as the Fabs split up, and was listening to Ten Years After, the Airplane, Santana, and Joe Cocker – “the heavy groups”. Suddenly, acoustic Hot Tuna — I consider the album to be among the greatest bass recordings ever done, both for Jack’s playing and for how it captured the bass’s tone. [1]

The album remains a touchstone for me, but I started to listen to everything that was, I suppose you’d call it, softer. That was the primary music I listened to for about two years — formative, crucial, years for my playing.

So, the Burritos: I had no idea who the members were, but I made a recording of them playing
in Philadelphia’s Sigma Sound Studios over the air on WMMR that I listened to all the time. I loved it. So one would think I’d be primed to love The Eagles, right? And, as I said last time, you’d almost be right. I want to explore what about them turned me off so much, and why I think (or rather, why I know) they’re so disliked by a very vocal minority.

And believe me, I know we’re a minority. In 2015 the Eagles Greatest Hits Reunion Revue played for eight nights at the forum. I went one of the nights, courtesy of Bernie. I enjoyed their playing, but that’s about it (except for the experience of seeing and hanging out with Bernie). It was nice to see that certain level of professionalism, but the music? Meh. But eight nights, 12,000 people a night — that’s a whole lot of fans. And plainly, they completely disagreed with me. People were swaying and singing along for three solid hours. 96,000 people can’t be THAT wrong.

So what is it? What about them puts off all of those folks who should like them?

I can almost remember exactly where we were when the discussion occurred. We had just played Mountain Stage in Charleston, West Virginia. It was, as usual, just the two of us, and we were on our way up and over the mountains to Washington D.C., to do a performance for Sirius Radio (I think — one of the digital services, anyway). I don’t remember how we got into it, but I do remember Bernie saying, “You would have hated playing with Henley!”

I laughed and said, “I’m sure I would have!” (I had heard plenty of stories about Henley). “But why?”

And he told me about how, back in the day (so to speak), if he changed ONE NOTE in a solo from how he played it on the record, Don would go nuts after a show. Around the time of the rehearsals for the Eagles’ 2015 shows, Bernie was over here one day, and we were talking about that moment. My wife, Elin, was curious what that was about. Bernie put it this way (paraphrased — his exact words are on the wind):

“For players like me and Dan, the opportunity to play live is a chance for everybody there to reach something new together. We approach the music as if it’s new – every time.” Conversely, the way Henley and Frey ran the Eagles, and with the addition of more musicians to fill out the recorded overdubs, Bernie described it as a review of the hits; the same way, every time.

It’s a battle, or conversation, as old as recording: should live music be faithful to the recording or not? Obviously, with my love of the Grateful Dead, and early Weather Report, the wildness of some music as opposed to the heavily-rehearsed, I know where I come down. Give me the chance to fail; it’s the only way I know to guarantee the chance to soar.

[1] When Jack Casady visited me in 1993 to do an interview for Bass Player magazine, I played him a track from Jon Hassell’s City: Works of Fiction to demonstrate the effect of the first Hot Tuna album on me.
After a zillion years in this business, you’d think I’d have a sense of just how disconnected the audio biz is from mainstream reality.

Short answer: yeah, no. Think what you want, Leebs, you don’t have a damn clue.

Alrighty, then....

As I prepare to leave for Munich. I’m hearing about all the companies that are barely making payroll, but have some ASTOUNDING NEW DIGITAL AUDIO SOFTWARE that’s gonna bail them out.

Uh huh.

Nobody gives a damn about software. The general public is inured to miraculous digital whatever, especially when it comes to music playback, and expects it to be ABSOLUTELY FREE (as FZ put it, forty-five years ago) and is more concerned about empty freezers than MP3. Let’s get REAL here: these are tough times. A miraculous new format matters very little in the
grand scheme of things, when people are worried about their next meal. Not to be a downer, but let’s try to approach the audio business like a BUSINESS, not a hobby.

Believe me, I love audio, and have been involved in it most of my life. But: in the big picture, I am one of 330 Million mostly obese folks in America, 1 of 7 BILLION souls worldwide. What I think matters naught, and most of those seven billion folks don’t even know our biz exists.

Here’s my point: if it’s all about the music, as we constantly say, then what are we doing to ensure that kids have music classes in grade school, much less access to instruments and lessons as they grow older? Frankly, I don’t see our efforts going that way—and I include myself in the opprobrium. We’ve all let things slide, and today’s world is clearly less-musical than it was in my youth, fifty years ago. I accept the blame, and so should you. I think we’re uttering BS phrases to make ourselves feel better.

As I’ve pointed out way too many times, 1% of my high school class consisted of professional opera singers and multiple-Grammy award winners. That was the class of ’74; do I see that happening with the class of 2014, or 2017?

No.

Why is that?

My children are now 23 and 25, but even in their adolescence there was little musical training. As far as I can tell, today’s grade-schoolers are largely fed cookies and then berated when they can’t hold still, in spite of having no recess or gym classes. I genuinely think that the musical future of America is part of this same picture, and it ain’t a pretty picture.

Let’s be clear here: I’m one of a gazillion adults who bailed on piano lessons by age 12, and have regretted it ever since. There are some who get it in adolescence; many do not. I certainly did not; the discipline of piano lessons was anathema to me, especially when I had a household full of a thousand LPs of talented musicians, ready to play for us whenever we chose. Why bother?

I get it now, and wrangle with the idea of piano lessons in my seventh decade. I’d rather do something than be presented with something.

What about the kids who never even have the opportunity to reject piano lessons? What about those kids who never have have the chance to hear a live, acoustic instrument, much less play one?

In the grand scheme that may seem trivial, but I suggest it’s a big damn deal, indeed. We’ve seen our world move away from music-making to passive music-listening.

I don’t know know about you, but that bothers me a great deal. If we really care about music, we should be ensuring that the next several generations have the chance to actually make
music.

So?

What’re you gonna do about it? I’ll let you know what my plans are in the next issue.
Sample Rate Conversion

By Richard Murison | Issue 33

Question: How does sample rate conversion work? I get asked this often, and the answer, like all things pertaining to digital audio, is both simple and complicated depending on how deeply you want to look into it. So here is a quick primer on the technical issues that underpin SRC.

First of all, what, exactly is Sample Rate Conversion? Well, digital audio works by encoding a waveform using a set of numbers. Each number represents the magnitude of the waveform at a particular instant in time, so in principle, each time we measure (or ‘sample’) the waveform we need to store two numbers. One number is the magnitude of the waveform itself and the other number is the exact point in time at which the number was measured. That’s a lot of numbers, but we can cut them in half if we can eliminate having to store all the timing numbers. Suppose we measure the waveform using a very specific regular timing pattern determined in advance? If we can do that, then we don’t have to store the timing information because we can simply use a very accurate clock to regenerate it during playback. This is how all digital audio is managed for consumer markets.

The “Sample Rate” is the rate at which we sample (or measure) the waveform. Provided we
know exactly what the sample rate is, we can relatively easily reconstruct the original waveform using those stored numbers. The chosen sample rate imposes some very specific restrictions on the waveforms that we can encode in this manner. Most particularly we must observe the Shannon-Nyquist criterion. This states that the signal being sampled must contain no frequencies above one half of the sample rate. If any such frequencies are present in the signal, they must be filtered out very strictly before being sampled. Also, it is one of the simpler tenets of audio that human hearing is restricted to the frequency range below 20kHz. Based on those two things, we can derive a commonly-quoted requirement that in order to achieve high quality, digital audio must therefore have a sample rate of at least 40kHz. For those reasons, the standard sample rate which has been chosen for CD audio, and widely adopted for digital audio in general, is 44.1kHz. Interestingly, for DVD Audio and other video applications, a slightly different sample rate of 48kHz was adopted. These numbers – or rather the differences between them – end up having important consequences.

Of course, the above is not the whole story, and there are various reasons why you might want to re-sample your audio signal at sample rates other than 44.1kHz. As a result, audio recordings exist at all sorts of different sample rates, and for distribution or playback compatibility purposes you may well prefer to convert existing audio data from one sample rate to another. If you convert from a lower sample rate to a higher one, the process is called up-conversion. In the opposite case, conversion from a higher to a lower sample rate is called down-conversion. The alternative terminology of up-sampling and down-sampling can be interchangeably used (I tend to use both, according only to whim).

We’ll start with a simple case. Let’s say I have some music sampled at 44.1kHz and I want to convert it to a sample rate of 88.2kHz (which is a factor of exactly 2x the original sample rate). This is a very simple case because I can do that by taking the 44.1kHz samples, and inserting one additional sample exactly half way between each one. The process of inserting those additional samples is called interpolation. In effect, what I have to do is (i) figure out what the original analog waveform was, and then (ii) sample it at points in time located at the mid-points between each of the existing samples.

Obviously, the key point here is to recreate the original waveform, and I have already glibly stated that “we can relatively easily reconstruct the original waveform using the stored numbers”. However, like a lot of digital audio, once you start to look closely at it you find that what is easy from a mathematical perspective, is often mightily tedious from a practical one. For example, Claude Shannon (he of the Shannon-Nyquist sampling theorem) proved that the mathematics of a perfect recreation of the analog signal involves the convolution of the sampled data with a continuous $\text{Sinc}()$ function – I have described this in some detail in Copper 23. However, if you were to set about performing such a convolution, and evaluating the result at the interpolation points, you would find that it involves a truly massive amount of computation, and is not something you would want to do on any sort of routine basis. Nonetheless, convolution with a $\text{Sinc}()$ function does indeed give you a mathematically precise answer, and interpolations performed in this manner would in principle be as accurate as it is possible to make them.
So if a convolution is not practical, how else can we recreate the original analog signal? What we do is make a sensible guess for what the interpolated value ought to be, and pass the result through a digital brick-wall filter to filter out any errors we may have introduced via our guesswork. If we have made a good guess, then the filter will indeed filter out all of the errors. But if our guess is not so good, then the errors can contain components which fold down into our signal band and can degrade the signal. This filtering method typically has the disadvantage (if you want to think of it that way) of introducing phase errors into the signal, and has the effect that if you look closely at the resulting data stream you will see that most of the original 44.1kHz samples will also have been modified by the filter. Up-conversion in this manner is usually performed by a specialized filter which in effect combines the job of making the good guess and doing the filtering.

When up-converting by factors which are not nice round numbers (for example, when converting from 44.1kHz to 48kHz, the conversion factor is 1.088x) the same process applies. However, it is further complicated by the fact that now you cannot rely on a significant fraction of the original samples being reusable as samples in the output. For example, if converting from 44.1kHz to 88.2kHz, every second sample in the output stream is derived from an interpolated value. The interpolated values, which contain the errors, alternate with original 44.1kHz sample values which, by definition, contain no errors. It can be seen, therefore, that the resultant error signal will be dominated by higher frequencies that were not present in the original music signal and can therefore be easily eliminated with a filter.

On the other hand, if I am converting from 44.1kHz to 48kHz, then only one in every 160 samples of the 48kHz output stream will correspond directly to original samples from the 44.1kHz data stream (you’ll have to take my word for that). In other words, 159 out of every 160 samples in the output stream will start off life as an interpolated value. Therefore the quality of this conversion is going to be entirely dependent on the accuracy of those initial interpolation guesses, or more specifically, the accuracy of the algorithm used to make those guesses (a more complicated topic that I won’t be going into here). Again, the process of making a best guess and doing the filtering is typically combined into a specialized filter, but the principle of operation remains the same.

Down-conversion is very similar, but with an additional wrinkle. Let’s start with a very simple down-conversion from 88.2kHz to 44.1kHz. It ought to be quite straightforward – just throw away every second sample, no? No! Here is the problem: With a 44.1kHz sample rate you cannot encode any frequencies above 22.05kHz (i.e. one-half of the 44.1kHz sample rate). On the other hand, if you have a music file sampled at 88.2kHz you must assume that it has encoded frequencies all the way up to 44.1kHz. So before you can start throwing samples away you have to first put it through a brick-wall filter to remove everything above 22.05kHz. Once you’ve done that then, yes, it is just a question of throwing away every second sample (a process usually referred to as decimation).

This additional wrinkle makes the process of down-sampling by non-integer factors rather more complicated. In fact, there are two specific complications. First, you can’t decimate by a non-
integer fraction! Secondly, because you’re now interpolating a signal which may contain frequencies that would be eliminated by the brick-wall filter, you need to do the interpolation first, before you do the brick-wall filtering, and then the decimation last of all (I’m sorry if that’s not immediately obvious – you’ll just have to stop and think it through). In summary, to get around these two issues, the process of down-sampling by a non-integer factor will usually involve (i) interpolative up-sampling to an integer multiple of the target sample rate; (ii) applying the brick-wall filter (matched to the final desired sample rate); and finally (iii) performing decimation.

I hope you have followed enough of what I just wrote to at least enable you to understand why I always recommend sample rate conversions between members of the same “family” of sample rates. One family includes 44.1kHz, 88.2kHz, 176.4kHz, 352.8kHz, DSD64, DSD128, etc. The other includes 48kHz, 96kHz, 192kHz and 384kHz. If you feel the need to up- or down-sample, try to stay within the same family. In other words, convert from 44.1kHz to 88.2kHz rather than 96kHz. And convert from DSD64 to 176.4kHz rather than 192kHz. But in any case, SRC does involve a substantial manipulation of the signal, and the principle that generally guides me is that if you can avoid it you ought to be better off without it.
Robin Williams famously once said that “Cocaine is God’s way of telling you that you’re making too much money!”

Well…the same could be said about really expensive toys whether they be cars, watches or….audio gear

How and why someone buys a big ticket item, especially in high-end audio, probably has more to do with the salesman then the buyer. Case in point:

I came to work one morning and was told that there was to be a big delivery that day. An “all hands on deck delivery”.

Four of us in two vehicles had to deliver a massive four piece speaker system as well as the then crown jewels of solid-state high-end audio, three pieces of Mark Levinson gear (pre-amp, cd player, D to A processor).

This was a near 100k purchaser. The house in which we were deliver this was on the North Shore of Long Island: a beautiful neighborhood, of course.
The purchaser met us in the driveway. He resembled an extra in the Sopranos (a smaller version of Big Pussy). A bit overweight, wearing a tracksuit and holding a cigar.

As we were about to unload the equipment, he was actually kinda beaming at his latest acquisition.

What happened next is just the kind of thing one would come to expect.

When asked which room he wanted it in his reply was: “I want you to put it in my bedroom, on the second floor”

Whoa….his bedroom?

This was a monster system.

Was his bedroom that big??

In fact, his bedroom was easily half the square footage of the entire first floor and could easily contain this system.

The speakers weighed a ton and maneuvering the columns up the rather small staircase was really hard but they were expertly wrapped and we did it with no scratches..anywhere!

Once in the bedroom I also noticed something that struck me as odd. This person must have had some kind of big system before because sitting on platforms at the end of the bedroom where the speakers were to be installed were a pair of Crown DC300 amps.

A word about Crowns first.

Crown amps had, for years, been the standard high power amps for big PA systems used for sound reinforcement in almost every concert I performed in or witnessed, for many years. They are built like battleships and they have a great reputation for dependability.

One day, in the late 70’s, I was curious as to how it would sound in my hifi system. I took one of ours that powered our band’s PA system home and replaced my current amp (A Phase Linear 400) with the Crown.

Sadly the Crown was one of the worst sounding amps I had ever heard (as it regards the specific needs for home audio). The sound was harsh, brittle and lacking any “air”.

Furthermore, it made my Phase Linear sound like a “Mac!”

I remember thinking at the time that this was the worst sounding amp made in a non-communist country!

So here I am, standing in this huge bedroom in NJ and about to hook up one of the world’s greatest (and most expensive) speaker systems…to Crown amps??
I had never seen Crowns in home use by anyone and I was taken aback by the sight of them especially in light of the great gear that we just delivered.

As the installation continued, we set up the 3 pieces of Levinson gear which were also among the sexiest pieces of hifi jewelry available at the time. The room was appointed nicely and the Levinson gear did look great next to each other. At this point, the owner started talking to me and volunteered that he was a “professional insurance witness”. For some reason he also told me how much one makes in that profession (it was impressive and it explained a lot!).

I asked him why he bought the equipment he did and he said that he just went into the store to buy a new CD player and, after hearing the speakers, bought most of the items in the audio chain at the salesman’s suggestions. That my friends, is how that kind of sale is done.

At this point we were about to finish the installation and fire up the system when the buyer left the room and came back with what looked like a $99 Yamaha cassette deck and said this to me:

“Before we turn all this stuff on, Can you please install and hook up my cassette deck”. Looking at this cheap piece of crap, I thought to myself “why would you even want this sitting on a shelf next to this really expensive and aesthetically stunning Levinson gear”. Well I didn’t say that out loud but I did ask why he wanted the deck in first and his reply was one of the greatest responses I ever heard. He said “because I mostly listen to bootleg Grateful dead tapes”...

WTF, I thought. This guy just dropped 100K on a system so he could listen to crappy cassette recordings of “China Cat Sunflower”? Robin Williams was right!

I did what he asked and, once everything was up and running, that’s exactly how we first heard the system.

I then asked if he had a favorite CD so we could also make sure that that was also working. He said “Yeah wait a minute. I’ll get one“.

What CD he gave to to reference knocked me over.

No Dark Side of the Moon or Cat Stevens’ Tea For The Tillerman or any other audiophile reference that one would think one would use (that is, if you a reader of The Absolute Sound or Stereophile!)

None of that was in this house. Of course not. Those readers don’t buy this kind of gear.

I couldn’t wait to hear what CD was about to play in this 100K system.

He put in his ‘reference’ CD.

As we were preparing to leave, he just stood in the center of his bedroom with his cigar in hand and looking at his purchase.
The CD he put in was yet another bootleg Dead concert on a self burned CD.

I’m sure, to his ears, “St. Stephen” never sounded better...
More to come...
I’ve seen so many musicians play music in my life. Being the son of a composer and maestro meant that I was usually Assistant #1 when a production needed some help. And for six years I was home-schooled, which meant I could also do things like attend ACDA (American Choral Directors Association) conferences, or skip out with Dad to see a musical performance in the middle of the day.

When I reflect on this I am transported to one memory from about age 7, when my dad brought me to the dress rehearsal of a local Masterworks Chorale performing something I don’t remember. What I do remember is Dad leaning over and whispering his observations to me the whole time.

“You see the alto on the third row just to the left of the basses? You see how her posture is slumped — you can hear that she’s flat occasionally. There! Did you hear that?”

Or: “You can hear that they need practice ending their consonants in unison. That’s a mark of excellent choirs — ending their S-es and other consonants together at the end of phrases.”
Speaking of phrases, I am paraphrasing — it’s an old memory. But the point is, my musician father lifted the veil on music for me whether I asked him to or not. I’m thankful that he did. Yes, I watch and listen to music with entirely different thoughts coursing through my head than the average person. But when I’m the only one in the club who’s not dancing because I’m staring at the musicians, I don’t feel a burden. I very much enjoy the analytical view of music that my dad helped build.

Because music was demystified for me as a child, I naturally kept the musical experiences flowing once I left home. I blogged about or made music throughout my college years, and I never had a living situation that didn’t include a decent pair of speakers. Thinking about the reconditioned Larger Advents at the 9th Street house... what ever happened to those?

Anyway. I know what a good musician looks like. At this point I can tell if a player is good just by looking at him play — no sound involved. I know this stuff well enough to confidently sort the talented from the pedestrian. And since my live video recording studio became a national stop on the map for traveling bands in a few genres, I was lucky enough to have a front row seat for some of the country’s best up-and-comers.

Which is why I’m going nuts about a recent quiet announcement of four Colorado-only shows from a brand new mash-up dream quartet featuring four of the best players I’d ever recorded. This acoustic A-Team’s first four shows in CO are a sign that progressive bluegrass and acoustic music still has a future in this pop-centric world.

Let me back up a bit and touch on the players and their bands. This will be a two-part column, so grab a drink and settle in.

I’ll start with a string ensemble that gave me one of those “Oh, yeah — I’m supposed to be working here!” moments during the recording when my attention was so drawn to the music. This band’s bass player provides the bottom octave of this new mystery quartet, but the first band I recorded him in is one to know in its own right. Sadly, it’s an ensemble that no longer exists, but the group has plenty to offer with two published albums available for purchase.

When The Deadly Gentlemen from Boston, MA, stopped by to lay down some music for our mics and cameras, they showed off the type of national, elite-level talent that our studio was aiming for.

Progressive bluegrass, acoustic heavy metal — these guys didn’t like to be pegged as a jug and washboard troupe. The collection of East Coast virtuosos played the traditional instruments of bluegrass, but with them they crafted lyrically smart, poppy songs and riff-based, vocal harmony-rich ...music.

The Deadly Gentlemen were lead by a guy named Stash (more on him in the next issue), and featured some of the serious national players of their young ages. Speaking of young, the group was also a collection of college buddies (albeit from impressive music training institutions), with all the poking and snickering and finger-pulling you might expect.
Readers with sharp eyes will recognize bassist Sam Grisman (son of famed mandolinist David Grisman) and mandolin player Dominic Leslie on mandolin from a previous group I wrote about, The Brotet. Sam is the one featured in the new quartet I’m getting to, but stay with me here. The broader point is that this new generation of great players has and will continue to intermingle and form bands with each other going forward. They’re the new crop of pickers bringing old music to future audiences.

And like the Brotet, The Deadly Gentlemen was comprised of players not only insanely skilled but refreshingly creative. Talent knows talent, but some of these guys are smart, too. When was the last time you heard of a banjo player who graduated from Yale and earned a PhD in biology from MIT??

The Deadly Gentlemen’s second-most famous member, Greg Liszt, is a real character. Upon reaching Yale, Greg was inspired by a banjo-playing future Yale president, and early on, joined his group “The Professors of Bluegrass.” Years later, when he received his PhD in molecular biology, Greg immediately retired from science and hit the road to play banjo for Bruce Springsteen.

For several years before forming the Gentlemen, Greg was instrumental (nyuk, nyuk) in the success of roots bluegrass group Crooked Still. In the years since our recording he continued to tour and compose. Still no science for this guy, or at least not as his main gig – he’s currently a professor of banjo at Berklee College of Music. Greg offers a banjo perspective that is unique, for example infusing his playing with “math-based” licks and progressions.

Greg is just one of The Deadly Gentlemen, and each member has a story. But the main story is of birds of a feather flocking together and making music through the years. Take a look at the video below and dig into the world of these talented youngsters. Keep an eye on Grisman, because he’ll show up again. Have a good two weeks!
In our last issue we looked at the historical and physical forebears of horn loudspeakers. Horns—either actual animal horns or manmade constructions that mimicked animal horns—are found being used to amplify sound as far back as there is recorded history.
It’s hardly surprising, then, that horns quickly became part of the picture in sound reproduction, just as they had been in sound production. Horns became an integral part of early phonographs to increase the volume of sound produced by mechanical sound-boxes, both the familiar external straight-sided trumpet and flared morning glory varieties, and more complex geometries contained within the cabinetry of console phonographs.
When Peter Jensen and Edwin Pridham developed the moving coil loudspeaker in 1911 (as described in *Vintage Whine #9*), the first thing they did was couple it to a horn, to make it louder. In this initial case, it was too loud, and we had the first recorded instance of acoustic feedback. The horn was coupled to the throat of the speaker, labeled #2 in the bottom diagram.
Jensen and Pridham permanently coupled their prototype to a horn, and mounted it atop the chimney of their building. The two played records through the set-up, which locals were said to enjoy, miles away. With the onset of electrical amplification, large public address systems became possible; in 1915, such a Jensen-Pridham “Magnavox” system provided Christmas music to a crowd of 100,000 in San Francisco. In 1919, Woodrow Wilson became the first American President to be electrically amplified through a Magnavox system, delivering a speech to a sizable crowd.

Starting in the teens and going into the 1920’s, the Bell System’s Western Electric division, known primarily as a manufacturer of telephone receivers, became one of the first manufacturers of “Loud Speakers” for home radio sets. Prior to this, individual listeners had to utilize earphones; the new “receivers” (telephone parlance was still used to describe the speaker units) allowed a roomful of folks to listen at the same time. Note that the $161 set-up shown below was fully half the price of a contemporary Ford Model T, and would be equivalent to about $2200 today.
This period ad shows what looks like a 10D speaker with a 7C amplifier, using WE 216 “tennis ball” vacuum tubes, circa 1921.

As the years went on, Western Electric became a leading provider of broadcast and sound-reinforcement systems, and became involved with movie theater sound in its earliest days. A wide variety of horn systems was designed and produced to suit theaters of all shapes and sizes; the fascinating Movie Mice website shows a number of such systems. The amazing dual-horn 16A system is shown below, with four 555 compression drivers.
The 16A horn is still much revered among vintage audio fans, as are the 555 compression drivers.

The leading WE theater system was known as the “widerange” system, for its broad frequency response (keep in mind that meant it still dropped like a rock above 10 kHz). As detailed in a fascinating piece on the excellent Lansing Heritage website, that system had serious problems, mostly due to the phase delays between the WE 555 compression drivers mounted on long “snail-horns” and the bass drivers, as well as high distortion and low efficiency from the open-baffle 18” woofers.
The next level of development in theater sound systems initiated due to dissatisfaction with the Western Electric “Widerange” system—and this is where the genealogy becomes confused—and confusing. Again, thanks to Lansing Heritage for keeping the story straight.

John Hilliard of movie studio MGM’s sound department sought to create a system that overcame the problems of the WE “Widerange” system, and approached WE about doing so. After a year, nothing had happened, and Hilliard was approached by Jim Lansing and Dr. John Blackburn of Lansing Manufacturer (antecedent of both Altec-Lansing and JBL), who had similar concerns about theater sound systems. Given the go-ahead from Douglas Shearer, head of MGM’s sound department (and brother of actress Norma Shearer), the group began work on what was ultimately known as the Shearer Horn (shown at the top of the page).

The system was two-way, with a bass re-entrant horn (as opposed to the “Widerange” system’s open baffle) using four 15” Lansing field-coil woofers, crossed over at 500 Hz to a multicellular horn designed and built in MGM’s shops by Robert Stephens (who later founded speaker manufacturer Stephens Tru-Sonic). A wide variety of cell configurations were developed to suit theaters of varied sizes and shapes; all used Lansing-built compression drivers.

The system was found to be far superior to the WE system that provoked the project; superior enough, in fact, that Western Electric developed its own version using their own drivers, and marketed it as the “Diaphonic” system. RCA marketed several similar systems, and Lansing Manufacturing had exclusive rights to the name “Shearer Horn”. Douglas Shearer himself won a Best Technical Achievement Academy Award (“Oscar”) in 1936 for his role in development of the horn that bore his name.

The Shearer Horn not only set a standard for horn speakers that continues to influence design to this day, but the alliances it created changed the structure of speaker manufacturers in America. We’ll look into that more in Part 3, in the next issue of Copper.
No artist springs fully formed into the world. Being creative is a kinetic state, shifting constantly, and not always in linear development. Few singer-songwriters reveal this inner prism more clearly than Pura Fé.

Describing herself as an “heir to the Tuscarora Indian Nation,” Fé has long looked to her ancestors’ music to color her compositional palette. After all, she claims eight generations of Tuscarora singers on her mother’s side. You could say her songs can be understood partly by how much each one is influenced by Native American traditions.

The key here is “how much.” A host of other types of sound shape Fé’s output, in changing ratios at any given time. Expect to hear shades of Appalachian folk, traditional blues, jazz, soul, and even a touch of rock and roll. But that Native American heart is never completely hidden.

The track “Borders,” from the 2009 album *Full Moon Rising* is a good starting point for getting to know the complexities of Pura Fé. It’s interesting to consider the interplay of style and content in this song. The lyrics are a plea for unity among Native American groups. The song’s musical style is flat-out funk.
A folkier sound carries the song “Let Heaven Show” from 2007 album *Hold the Rain*. And while acoustic six-string guitars have been in pretty much everybody’s music for a long time, their presence here conjures up more Anglo-Appalachian influence than pure First Nations.

The lyrics overflow with deep-seated peace and appreciation of the world, not the anger and frustration found in a track like “Still You Take,” about human greed that destroys both the earth and our fellow creatures, not to mention ourselves. The poet’s range of expression is as wide as her musical taste.

Even after hearing a few diverse songs, don’t think you can guess what Fé will offer next. Her 2013 album, *Caution to the Wind*, at first seems like it’s by an entirely different artist with the same name. The opening track, “I Want to Be with You,” could be a ’70s pop tune with soul-inspired harmonies and cliched imagery that begins “Ever try to catch a falling star?” But it’s unmistakably Fé’s voice. And isn’t that a Native American wooden flute I hear?

By track 3 of *Caution to the Wind*, there’s no question who’s writing these songs. The social conscience returns and the romanticism steps aside. “Bye Bye Missy Blues (for Little Mommy),” while its jazz fusion sound may bring to mind Steely Dan, deals with the painful issue of teen suicide: “Missy lost her life down by the railroad tracks. / She couldn’t take it.”

And then, in “Great Grandpa’s Banjo,” yet another aspect of Fé’s musical persona steps into the light. No accompaniment besides rattles supports the tight overdubbing of her voice in this traditional-style song.

It’s worth noting here that Fé is not always a solo act. She also performs and records Native American-influenced songs with a group called The Ulali Project, an all-female “First Nations quartet,” as they bill themselves. There’s no intermixing of styles, and the traditional drums and garb keep the focus away from jazz or pop. The excellent singers blend well together and really sell their traditional roots as a vibrant musical form.

Fé’s most recent solo album, from 2015, is *Sacred Seed* on Nueva Onda records, produced by
Mathis Haug. It includes songs in English, Tuscarora, and Tutelo. (Tutelo is in the Siouan family of Native languages, whereas Tuscarora is related to Iroquois. Both peoples consider North Carolina home.)

She used Tutelo for the song “Mohomoneh,” which is a prayer of gratitude to Mother Earth.

One of Fé’s self-proclaimed goals in music-making has been to explore “the connection between Native music and the African-American primal art form.” Maybe that strikes you as a gimmick, or as too New Age-y to bear. But give it a chance. Here’s the title track of *Sacred Seed*. The soul-inspired phrasing is there, but with a different approach to the overall sound. It combines traditional Native percussion with piano and the twangling bass of bluesy jazz. All this is in service of socially conscious lyrics:

Part of Fé’s identity as a Native American is clearly bound up with her maternal musical line and the important role of women in First Nations society. A multitude of female voices slide in close harmony against a bowed upright bass in “Woman’s Shuffle,” with breathtaking results. Fé describes what they’re singing as “vocables” rather than language, but the sense of empowerment is unmistakable. She calls the style “old Southern Indian soul.”

Pura Fé is impossible to categorize. She’s the kind of artist who keeps learning and therefore keeps changing. As her philosophy deepens, the wisdom she shares gives the devoted listener greater strength. There is no end to this process of growth. As she puts it in her song “True Freedom,”

*Who are we? Powerful beyond measure.*

*Who are we? Power of the Creator.*
For a composer not celebrating a round-numbered anniversary of his birth or death, Antonio Caldara (1670-1736) sure is getting a lot of attention from recording studios in 2017. Recent releases include both sacred and profane, and both vocal and instrumental works.

In the late 16th through 18th centuries, there was no more respected place for a composer to get his training than San Marco in Venice. Young Caldara sang and studied there with the great Giovanni Legrenzi (who probably also taught Vivaldi a few years later). Caldara’s best known today for his vocal music; no surprise, given his training.

In his role of maestro di cappella at courts in Mantua, Rome, and Vienna, his duties usually focused on sacred music. He’d have to produce new music for every church service, plus special occasions like coronations or weddings.

There are two new recordings of motets. On *Caldara: Motetti a due e tre voci, Op. 4* (Pan Classics PC10362) Thomas C. Boysen conducts the United Continuo Ensemble. The 12 motets in Op. 4 were written in Rome, where Caldara replaced Handel at the court of the Marquis Francesco Ruspoli.

The liner notes describe the pieces as “antiquated for their time.” True enough. “Laboravi in gemitu meo” might be mistaken for the style of Carlo Gesualdo (1566-1613), whose use of
dissonance was so intense and bizarre that historians compare his compositions to “Mannerist” paintings, such as the freakish fruit-faced portraits by Arcimboldo. In fact, Gesualdo did set the same motet text, some 110 years before Caldara. Here’s the earlier version:

And here’s Caldara:

Caldara had most likely studied Gesualdo’s music while in Venice. One way to be sure you’re hearing Caldara is the use of organ as continuo. Thanks to the slow tempos and an elastic phrasing in the voices that’s almost like sighing, the recording has a melancholic but calming effect. Boyer’s group is excellently trained, with singers who can hold their own on one person per part.

When Caldara was called to write old-fashioned counterpoint, he was the best in the business (if you don’t count that young J.S. Bach fella starting to make a name for himself). This was true his whole career, even in a late work like the Missa dolorosa (Sorrowful Mass). The piece was written for Habsburg Emperor Charles VI, who was crazy for counterpoint.

In a recording (Brilliant Classics 95482) by Ensemble La Silva, directed by Nanneke Schaap, this Mass proves Caldara still had the old-school touch, the ability to use counterpoint for great emotional impact. The opening tracks comprise the Ordinary, or those words used in every Mass. (The other texts, the Propers, change day by day.) In one way, Caldara keeps up with the times: typical of the 18th century, the five Ordinary texts are split into many short movements.

The Gloria thus becomes six movements. In the short “Qui tollis,” Caldara sports a more up-to-date style. It’s also interesting to hear a string ensemble provide the continuo support rather than organ. Unfortunately, the performers don’t have a strong leader in Schaap, and as a result the rhythm and ensemble can be messy, and the vibrato oddly warbling:

The collection also includes ten motets. The performances suffer from the same ragged edges as the Mass does, not to mention some painful intonation in the voices. Here is “Ego sum panis vivus” for soprano, countertenor, and continuo:

Before Emperor Charles VI held that lofty title, he was less-lofty King Charles III of Spain. Caldara impressed with a cantata for the king’s 1708 wedding in Barcelona. These deep
Spanish ties explain the material on the CD set *The Cervantes Operas* (Glossa GCD 923104). The two operas in question, inspired by sections from the two volumes of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, are *Don Chisciotte in Corte della Duchessa* (1727) and *Sancio Panza Governatore dell’isola Barattaria* (1733). Caldara, with librettist G.C. Pasquini, wrote them for the Habsburgs in Vienna.

La Ritirata, under the direction of Josetxu Obregón, chose this moment to capture the rare repertoire because 2016 marked the 400th anniversary of Cervante’s death. The recording includes arias from both operas and some instrumental dances by Caldara’s colleague in Vienna, Nicola Matteis.

Bass João Fernandes brings bluster and humor as Diego, strict father of the story’s love interest, Lucinda, in the aria “Per tanti obbligazioni Signir” from *Sancio Panza*:

On other tracks, soprano María Espada distinguishes herself with an impressive command of the era’s fluttering ornamentation, and tenor Emiliano González Toro provides a strong hero’s voice. The precise ensemble playing of the period instruments is most notable for the swift-tongued recorders of Tamar Lalo and Guillermo Peñalver (the latter of whom also plays traverso, an early version of the modern flute).

Although it’s not devoted entirely to the works of Caldara, *The Italian Job* (Avie AV2371) must be included here. First, it has the best classical album title of the year so far. The subtitle, *Baroque Instrumental Music from the Italian States*, prepares you for works by Albinoni, Corelli, Tartini, Torelli, and Vivaldi as well. And while those other composers are known for their non-vocal offerings, Caldara is not, so this is a rare treat. Most important, this innovative performance truly captures late 17th-century style.

The group La Serenissima, directed by violinist Adrian Chandler, exudes the pulsing, frenetic energy that makes middle Baroque music rock. While these works are of their time, they also look backward, as Caldara’s music always does. In this allegro from the Sinfonia in C for 2 Oboes, 2 Bassoons, 2 Trumpets, Timpani, Violin, Strings and Continuo, the use of instrumentation as texture seems to borrow from Monteverdi’s playbook from three generations before:

If there’s one thing we can learn from Caldara in all these recordings, it’s that you really can make a living by keeping the past alive.
More Upheaval at Sears and Texting Music

By Bill Leebens | Issue 33

Sears Holdings Corporation Chairman and CEO: “We Are Fighting Like Hell”
May 11, 2017 Annual Meeting of Stockholders

[This is not a press-release per se, but a slightly-abridged version of a statement delivered by Sears Chairman Eddie Lampert to the annual stockholders’ meeting. Sears has had a rough number of years, along with many other traditional retailers; Lampert has drawn fire for a number of moves including the purchase of Kmart. Recently, Sears stock tumbled after a company 10-K statement filed with the SEC stated that “Our historical operating results indicate substantial doubt exists related to the company’s ability to continue as a going concern’; the stock took another hit following Lampert’s statement below. —Ed.]

The past year will be remembered as one of the most challenging periods for “brick and mortar” retailers - and our company was one of the many affected by these headwinds. Our Board, management team and the tens of thousands of associates working at Sears Holdings understand that performance matters, and we remain committed to powering through these challenges.

However, we need the support of our members, vendors, lenders and the communities we
serve to succeed. While we are not asking to be spared from informed opinions about our business performance, for far too long, many commentators have rushed to conclusions about the future of our company. Not only have these predictions been off the mark and based on incomplete and selective information or biased sources, but they have also been harmful. We have spent a lot of time educating many external stakeholders – we need each other for success – and while it hasn’t been easy, we are still here and fighting hard.

We remain a proud business with a large number of hard-working associates all over the country working toward the success of our company. While the retail environment is as difficult as it has ever been, it is important to remember that Sears and Kmart have been evolving to meet the needs of shoppers for over a century. And, during this time, we have given birth to many companies and supported many of our vendors through difficult periods and their own challenges....

People have often asked me why I am still committed to the company and why I continue to invest a significant amount of my own money in its “transformation.” The answer is that I firmly believe we will succeed in becoming a company that helps our members manage and improve their lives. I don’t know why people would root against a company that impacts so many people, but I can tell you that your Board of Directors and your management team are doing everything in our power for us to succeed – we are fighting like hell!

Sears and Kmart continue to be two of the country’s most iconic retailers – and make no mistake – they are still very important to American consumers. We continue to have a large footprint through our stores – many in leading locations. Shop Your Way has tens of millions of members actively engaging with us both online and in-store. We are also home to an industry leading home services business. All of these unique assets – whether inherited, acquired or built – are our strengths. They provide us with the necessary foundation to create value as we sharpen our focus on our Best Stores, Best Categories and Best Members.

I thank all of our associates, members, stockholders and business partners for their support and commitment to our company – we remain firmly focused on successfully executing our strategy and look forward to reporting progress.

Eddie Lampert is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer at Sears Holdings Corporation.

####

**Sharing Music and Sending Text Messages Combine to Create More Beats**

Pioneering mobile company tunes into the power of music to help people connect

[I suppose it was inevitable that sooner or later someone would develop a way to send music files in a message. All I can say is: yay. According to the [CrunchBase](https://crunchbase.com) file on Beatshare, the
company has had about $2.5M in funding since 2014, and lists zero employees. It’ll be interesting to see if this becomes a reality. —Ed.]

IRVINE, Calif. - (May 11, 2017)— It’s estimated that people take around 100 million selfies per day. They also love to share music and realize it helps create memories. Now, with the advent of Beatshare, they can do both in a simple manner, all from their iPhone, using iMessage or in a stand-alone version. The new Beatshare app gives people the opportunity to send a song they love or a 10 second clip of a song to someone to share their thoughts, feelings or emotions through the power of music. You can even integrate it with pictures, video, and your special message. This is a simple and quick way to convey thoughts and feelings, as well as to have a little fun with the song and message.

“We believe music should be a central component to the way we communicate and that’s precisely why we created Beatshare,” says Eli Aizenstat, founder and CEO at Beatshare. “Whether you’re a creator or spectator, Beatshare taps into the intrinsic power of music. When the beat drops, chorus hits, and a hook repeats, it evokes powerful feelings.”

Beatshare has found a way to unleash the power and potential of music within the evolving menu of messaging tools. Each individual using the app is empowered to match clips from over 100 million songs to photos or videos in a way that elevates messages to a personalized art form. Imagine picking your boyfriend or girlfriend’s favorites song, setting some pictures to it, adding a message, and sending it to them for their birthday or just to let them know you are thinking of them. Music is a message and the app helps people send it in a unique way.

Beatshare is currently accessible to the Apple iPhone. Full music catalogues from Apple Music, Spotify Premium and SoundCloud are integrated in Beatshare, which creates an unrivaled user experience.

The technology allows users to easily package intimate thoughts into a 10 second multimedia message either for direct chats with a contact or to a group of close friends and relatives, who are connected through the iOS app or iMessage extension. Having a tool to create rich media accessible within messaging enables users to create and send truly impressive, unique material, and to do so in ways so familiar, they’re second nature.

Aizenstat, the 24 year-old entrepreneur of Beatshare, points out that millennials listen to three hours of music per day and send on average a constant flow of 120 daily messages. Beatshare unites the two. Sharing a Beat with a friend connects them with the sender’s now. It’s not a tired old selfie, so one-dimensional. A Beat is a dynamic clip layered in sound, sight and emotion. The ease of use and integration represents a breakthrough in communication with the potential to rock the way mobile junkies who are crazy about music interact.

By 2019, more than one-quarter of the world’s population will be using mobile messaging apps, according to eMarketer’s new forecast. Beatshare is at the forefront of this movement and will greatly expand the capabilities and content of messaging. Incorporating Beats as an innovative use of the language of music will transform the way people everywhere engage one another.
About Beatshare (beatshare.me):

Beatshare was created to bring music into the heart of mobile communications. The application utilizes the power of music by letting users simply express their thoughts, feelings and emotions via personally chosen music clips in combination with photos or video. With Apple Music, SoundCloud and Spotify Premium integrations, just choose any song, select a 10-second clip, add a personalized photo or video and send your musical message one-to-one or to groups. Join the Beatshare movement @AppBeatshare and download the app for free from the IOS App Store or the new iMessage App Store.

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Chad Kassem is the founder and owner of a number of businesses: Acoustic Sounds, Acoustic Sounds Super HiRez, APO Records, Blue Heaven Studios, Quality Record Pressings, Analogue Productions, and the annual Blues Masters at the Crossroads festival in Salina, KS [Chad may also have a few more businesses we’ve forgotten…—Ed.]. Acoustic Sounds’ audiophile vinyl pressings have helped lead the resurgence in quality vinyl recording sales over the last decade, and they have also entered the reel to reel tape market. John Seetoo spoke with Chad for Copper about the beginnings of his business, and his thoughts on how the industry has changed.

JS: You started buying and selling LPs about 30 years ago, when most people were abandoning records for CDs. Had you always been a music fan and record collector? Or did you just see an opportunity?

Chad: No, no. I’m from Louisiana; from the Cajun part – Lafayette, Louisiana. Growing up in that area made me a music lover. In 1984, I moved to Kansas…pretty much when the CD came out. When I moved to Kansas in ‘84, I started collecting records as a hobby. I was working for a little over minimum wage, and I was buying albums when pretty much the whole world was switching over to CDs. People were selling their albums and buying CDs and I kept on collecting albums. Buy sell and trade, buy sell and trade. I was making more doing that than with my day job. Then we started working out of my apartment, and the apartment filled up and I got so I couldn’t move any more, it was full of records, so I bought a house. But then that house got full, and the city started complaining because 18 wheelers would be showing up delivering pallets at my house, people said I had to move; had to get a building.

So—in ‘86, I started the business, where it became a full-fledged business; by ‘88 I moved from the apartment and went to a house; and between ‘88 and ‘91, I ran it out of that house. We had 11 employees working out of the house (laughs). It was great; I mean, we were doing like a hundred grand a month out of a bedroom, you know? That was back when you had a fax machine!

JS: You went from selling old records to reissuing rare titles, to actually pressing those records and printing the jackets—not to mention running recording and mastering studios, and a blues festival. Did you have a “master plan” from the start? Or did things just grow organically?

I do everything BUT print the jackets. We have a four color press that prints the inserts and the labels. Pretty much organically. Everything we do – I mean, we have a Hi-Res download site. People were asking – I mean, we sell SACDs, so they asked for downloads and we provide them. People asked for reel to reel, so now since we own our own studio, we’re making reel to reel tapes. Everything kind of goes hand in hand; we almost have like, five to ten to 15 different businesses here, you know what I mean? Just to have a printing press – I had to learn all about printing presses. Do you want a 4 color press or a 5 color press? Do you want coding? So I had to learn each thing...

But it’s all in conjunction - all linked together. We have graphic designers that work here. We
sell pre-owned records – that’s a whole other part of the business. We’ve got graphic artists. Got my own blues label, where we record the musicians. And actually, you mentioned the blues concert – with the recording studio, I bought an old church in 1997 and we made a recording studio out of it called Blue Heaven Studios. Then in 1998, we had our first blues concert. Well, the one coming up this October will be our 20th, our 20th Blues Masters concert.

Chad, in the Quality Record Pressings plant—in a Blues Masters t-shirt, of course!

*JS: Congratulations.*

Chad: Yeah, thanks. So then I just bought Doug Sax Mastering, so we’re going to start mastering very soon. So we can do everything from the recording from the microphone to the mastering, to the plating, to the pressing, to the printing of the labels and inserts and the design of the jackets. We just don’t do the printing of the jackets.

*JS: You both anticipated the increased demand for records, and contributed to it by reissuing desirable titles. Is your pressing plant still running at full capacity? Do you see demand falling off at all?*

Chad: No, no, it’s running full. I mean, we just got a new country order. Chris Stapleton.
We’re pressing 60,000 records for him. I mean – country music? 60,000 records? You think vinyl’s falling off? (laughs) We’re working on six more presses right now and before October we should have those six up and running.

**JS: Here’s a question that always irritates Michael Fremer: are you sure the resurgence in the popularity of records isn’t just a fad? If it turns out that it is—then what?**

Chad: Well, ever since I started out in 1984 when CDs came out, it’s always been growing – for me. Do you know what I mean? So - people ask me all the time, “How did you know this was happening?” or, “Did you see this happening?” My answer to that is this: I always trusted my ears. I always knew the LP would never die because I trusted my ears on the sound quality. But what I didn’t see coming was for the CD to start dying like it did! It had a 30 year lifespan!

Listen, since the day CDs came out, I have been doing this, investing every moment of my time and every dollar I had to making this thing grow, and I still am. I mean, the amount of money to put these next six presses up on line are incredible. So if it was starting to die or slowing down, I wouldn’t be doing that.

It’s always grown. Is it a fad? I don’t think so. I mean, let’s say, it slows down, even if it goes back to 1992 numbers. That’s fine. People still want records. They wanted them then. I mean, it won’t be every band in the book, just certain bands will make records, you follow? So, it ain’t gonna die and it’s not slowing down.

**JS: You produce LPs, sell downloads, and now are reissuing reel-to-reel tapes. Do you see any areas of the recorded music biz that you’ve missed, now that you also have concerts and mastering covered?**

Chad: Well, I’m looking at – in the process of buying a pretty famous audiophile label. But after this...in a few days, I’ll be 55. I think I’ve reached my limit. My goal is to finish what I’ve started, and to finish it well. I don’t want to take on any new business things, do you know what I mean? I need to finish what I’ve started and ride it on out. I mean, when you have a hundred employees...I want to finish these six presses, get the mastering facility running, do all these re-issues we’ve already got lined up...just try to see it to the end. Like right now, a lot of the stuff I’ve started, we haven’t reached the full capacity of it. We’re not making as many records with the machines we have right now.

Dude, I’ll tell you what – pressing records and having a pressing plant is HARD. And people really don’t understand, they think you’re just cutting a fat hog you know? You’re making money hand over fist. And you go to work, and, “Oh, so and so broke a screw today,” and you know, well a screw is $3,000! “Oops! Sorry!” (laughs) And you barely get a “sorry” you know? And they’re breaking screws like you and I break toothpicks!

**JS: There’s a lot more to the business that meets the eye, once you look below the surface.**

Chad: Right. When you get into manufacturing. The one thing, the one good thing about being
in vinyl pressing is that you don’t have to advertise; you don’t have to go looking for orders. And you’d think, “Well, that’s a great thing, right?” You’d think that you could run 24 hours; you’d think that money – you could just – there’d be plenty of it. But the reality is that there’s labor, there’s material, and there’s electricity. And the only one you can really control is labor, and you can only control that to a point. It’s just – it’s a tough business that costs a lot to start and to keep going. But I’m in the middle of it now.
I mean, for me, I’ve always seen it growing. I would never thought that I’d be pressing 60,000 country records, you know what I’m saying? But again, I’m more surprised that the CD died how it did! (laughs) I say good riddance.

JS: Given the challenges you have towards putting out vinyl, do you see streaming services affecting your business, or the market for physical media?

Chad: Well, vinyl will always be vinyl and it’s going to do what’s it’s going to do. As far as us issuing SACDs and us continuing doing downloads, I’m not sure how streaming will affect the downloads. It probably will. You probably have to be a much bigger player than me to get into streaming. You probably have to make some guarantees, and things like that. I’m not ready to jump into that right now. We’ll just have to see. The streaming quality, I’m sure, will continue to get better. You know, everything is about these businesses learning new ways to capitalize on their investment. Music – get it out, the way people want it. So they’re probably figuring out ways to make deals on it. I’m going to wait until it’s a little easier to get into that game. Right now, it’s probably just the major players.

JS: Or Neil Young right?…[referring to the recently-announced XStream streaming service]

Chad: (laughs) Well, it’ll be interesting to see how that works out for him. Hopefully, he’ll have more success than he did with downloads on Pono.

JS: Salina is smack-dab in the middle of Kansas, in an area better-known for farm equipment and grain elevators than the blues. What kind of reactions did you get from locals when you first proposed a recording studio in a church and a blues festival, twenty years ago?

Well, CBS Sunday Morning and CNN came and did a piece on that. We get a lot of questions, not just about that – Salina – it’s pronounced “sa-LIE-na”, that’s the way the locals say it – Salina, Kansas is not known for the music business, much less the blues. So they ask, “Why Salina?” The only thing I come up with is: “Why not?”

So they ask that question. The reaction – a lot of people were surprised. I mean, the blues musicians, when they come here, they’re the most surprised. A lot of people were surprised, but they liked it – they filled the church up. A lot of people come from out of state to come to this thing.

Here we are in the Midwest, almost exactly in the middle of the country. About 90-93% white here. It blew peoples’ minds that we were having this blues festival in Kansas. But they like it. They come. Anything to get people into this town, they like it.

JS: I’m sure it helps local businesses, right? Lodging and food?

Chad: It’s a two night event. We seat about 500 people each night. So they rent a lot of hotel
rooms and sell a lot of food. Actually, Salina is on the corner of two interstates: the east/west interstate – that’s I-70, and then the north/south, I-135. And they both cross here. So there’s a lot of hotels and restaurants catering to people. And that’s why we had a play on words, we call our blues thing, “The Blues Masters at the Crossroads”. I’m sure you know enough about the blues to know about the significance of the crossroads in Mississippi and all that. But they call it the Crossroads here too, because of the interstates. I mean, if you put your finger on a map in the middle of America, you would probably land right on Salina.

Like I said, I’m from the Cajun part of Louisiana and I’m a real proud Cajun. Tomorrow, I’m going to a private party to see Dr. John at Antone’s in Austin. And also there’s Sonny Landreth. Then I’m going to Lafayette for a festival called Festival International. So yeah, I miss it. But there’s a lot of good things about the Midwest. There’s no traffic, there’s not much crime. There’s not much trouble, you know?

*JS:* Your love of the blues and subsequent formation of APO shares some aspects to the story of Bruce Iglauer’s Alligator Records. Did that influence you at all, and given the analog roots of Alligator’s earlier releases, is there a special approach you use to capture the magic of blues for your recordings, given your love of analog?

Chad: Well, I know Bruce a bit, and I know the label, and I also know Delmark. In fact, we were just at a HiFi show in Chicago and Delmark – in fact, Bob Koester of Delmark is from Kansas. He’s the guy that Bruce worked for and learned from; he’s almost like a Chess Brother! Yeah, he’s still living.

But anyway, what we do, the way we record – we have a church. The acoustics in there – they built the church before there were microphones and amplifiers. And we like to have a kind of “less is more” thing; as little as possible in the middle of the process. A bunch of tubes, analog (tape), and air. Just the pure acoustics. We’ll have the musicians also play acoustic (instruments) too a lot of times.

So, we also do live to 2 Track. I don’t think Alligator ever did live to 2 Track except maybe those first Hound Dog Taylor records. But most of them were multi tracking. You can tell when something sounds really processed versus...

*JS:* …sounding like it’s right in the room?

Chad: Yeah, we like to think ours sound right like you’re in the room.

*JS:* What is the most unusual recording experience that you have had at Blue Heaven that wound up surprising you with its results?

Chad: That’s a good one! (pauses) We like to record the oldest [blues artists] you know, the most original blues that we can. A lot of times, we’re recording people in their nineties. We’ve recorded like, Pinetop Perkins – he was in his nineties, Henry Townsend – in his nineties, Homesick James, Robert Jr. Lockwood, also in their nineties.
Henry Townsend wanted to talk more money. We had the recording on, everything set up and ready to record. Henry’s nickname was “Mule”. And he goes (mimics Townsend): “We have to talk. I need more money!” (laughs)

I say, “Well Henry, you know, we’ve got engineers and musicians here from all over the world ready to go.”

And he goes, “Like I said. We gonna have to talk.” (laughs).

Now this has nothing to do with the blues, but John Atkinson of Stereophile came here to record...the guys from St. Martin’s in the Fields from London. And they came here with Stradivarius violins...

The church acoustics are so good, you could hear water drip all the way in the corner. Just water dripping on the ground...So they had these birds squawking. And you know these people all flew in from London, very quiet, very famous, and they had a Stradivarius, a Guarneri....we had like $20,000 a day’s worth of people here and we couldn’t record because of the birds squawking.

So we called the city. And you can’t kill the birds. No, no. Can’t get them exterminated. Only thing you can do, they tell me – “there’s this poison that you can spread it on the ground, and it gets into their claws when they walk on it, and it kills them.”

So I go, “Now let me get this right. You won’t let me kill them now, but you’ve got this poison that will slowly and painfully kill them, and we’ll have to wait days before we see results?” And the officer says, “Well, I guess you’re right, never thought of it like that.” (laughs) And it’s against the law to kill them. You can really get in trouble.

So we got a cherry picker. Somebody got up there with a spray can of foam; like in the fascia board. And you heard them go, “CHEEP...Cheep...cheep....” and then it was gone (laughs). We didn’t have much of a choice.

The other funny thing was, the ladies wanted to break for lunch. So they asked,

“Hey, are the instruments cool?”

“Yes ma’am. We’re in Salina.”

So we go to eat about a block away. And while we’re eating, she mentions that the Stradivarius violin is worth about $4 million and the Guarneri is worth about $2 million.

So then I go, “Ok, Can you hurry up and finish that lunch?”

“What do you mean? I thought you said everything was cool?”

“Everything IS cool, but for $4 million I don’t even trust myself, so let’s go!” (laughs)
You know, we left the doors open and everything...every recording session has something.

John Atkinson came to our first blues concert and he answered back that he was coming this October, so that’s cool.

*JS: Acoustic Sounds and Quality Record Pressing first really became known in the audiophile market. Is that still your primary market, or have you gone more mainstream as you’ve grown?*

Chad: We’re mostly audiophile. I mean, anybody who wants LPs we’ll sell to. We sell albums to everyone, but it’s still probably mostly audiophiles. It’s also interesting that about 30 percent of our business is overseas.

*JS: Finally: did you have any idea what you were getting into when you started buying records? And where do you see your business growing in the future?*

Chad: It’s like I said before – We just want to do what we’re doing only better, and to finish the things we’ve started.

*JS: Better quality and more internal efficiency?*

Chad: Right. I started the printing press, (new) pressing plant and mastering..we just want to take the things we’ve already started and finish them and make them more efficient to do it better, instead of other new things. ‘Cause it’s enough. I can’t really take much more. I feel young at 55, but I’ve got to be realistic, man. I can’t..I’ve already created a monster! (laughs). I’ve gotta tame it down, you know? ‘Cause my ideas are endless.

And you asked if I ever had any plan – and the answer is: no, none of this was planned. We just fly by the seat of our pants. It’s like with reel to reel tape; we always loved it and we always knew it could be the best, but to actually manufacture it and negotiate it, to do all those things – it’s not easy.

Customers may ask for things or we may come up with things, but I’m trying to limit those unless it’s a great idea or something very easy.

[Thanks to both Chad and John for a very interesting interview!—*Ed.*]

Here’s an interesting video on the Doors boxed set shown above:
The Return of Even More Neglected Artists!

By Ken Kessler | Issue 33

Due to a “senior moment,” I missed the “thirties” in my running series of overlooked artists. As my fellow senior citizen, Editor Leebens, missed it, too, I’m relieved: it was a shared “senior moment.” What mustn’t be assumed is that these artists are in any way less significant than the others in the round-ups, while some of them, such as Johnny Rivers and Julie London, are so underappreciated that I often despair about a world in which Kanye West is deemed a “genius”. As ever, I hope at least one of these enriches your life, expands your horizons or – at the very least – sends you wandering down Memory Lane.
In any list of major American artists who couldn’t get arrested outside of their home market, Johnny Rivers looms large. This astounding performer, an early purveyor of “blue-eyed soul”, had the misfortune of arriving on the scene just before the British Invasion, but he still managed in his home market a dozen Top 30 US hits, a couple of dozen Hot 100 appearances and even a Number 5 LP. He segued from rock’n’roll and Motown covers to singer-songwriter/Left Coast troubadour with ease. Among his later, undiscovered gems are killer versions of “Help Me, Rhonda” and “Rockin’ Pneumonia and the Boogie-Woogie Flu” and the LPs *Outside Help*, *L.A. Reggae* and *Borrowed Time*. Buy anything with his name on it, from his live debut to the present releases, without fear of a dud moment. The man has style, soul and a genuine rock’n’roll heart on a par with Springsteen.

32.) **Julie London**

During an era when astounding singers of popular standards seemed to be falling out of the
trees, Julie London might have been lost in the pack that included Ella, Dinah and Sarah at the pinnacle, plus Helen Humes, Eartha Kitt, Keely Smith, Doris Day, Patti Page, Peggy Lee, Nancy Wilson and far too many others to list. Thing is, London was so sultry, so salaciously smokin’ hot AND so astounding a stylist that the recipe was irresistible in the prudish Fifties. She was a guilty pleasure. Her sleeve art could have been X-rated. You may know her only for “Cry Me A River” or her move into acting on both the big and small screens, but – as with Doris Day – this second career overshadowed her sublime musical legacy. She was of the breathy, come-hither school of emoting, and it didn’t hurt that she looked the part. In these politically correct times and absurd gender wars, rife with unbridled irony and/or utter hypocrisy, a time when no-talents like Beyoncé or genuine talents (though she often does her best to undermine it) such as Lady Gaga can get away with less clothing than a stripper could in the 1950s – with not a peep from the feminist sisterhood – Julie London still out-sexys them all. And she could sing.

33.) Mike Bloomfield

Far too many A-list guitarists, including Eric Clapton, have praised Bloomfield’s abilities to on the record for you to wonder why he’s in this list of overlooked geniuses, but the sad fact is that everyone still worships at the altar of Stevie Ray, while Bloomfield is primarily known as a footnote in Bob Dylan biographies and discographies. Screw that. If you love the blues and are not one of those reverse-racism idiots who think that you have to have been born in the Delta or Chicago’s South Side, up yours: Bloomfield was born in Chicago. And while it may be been the North Side, he gravitated towards the blues clubs, honed his chops and proved to be one of the most incendiary guitarists the genre ever produced. I ask you to do only this: stream a mere two tracks off the first Paul Butterfield Blues Band, “Shake Your Money Maker” and “Look Over Yonder’s Wall.” And then tell yourself, “This sumbitch was only 22?” R.I.P, MB.
34.) Shadows of Knight

As one who values the *Nuggets* compilation the way linguists worship the Rosetta Stone, I admit to prejudice toward the Shadows of Knight. The highpoint of the short-lived band in which I sang as a teenager was our poor cover of their sublime cover of Them’s “Gloria” and I think the Shads’ version killed it even over the original. Usually grouped with a host of other semi-remembered kick-ass outfits who are filed under “Garage Bands”, or “punk” before the British stole the term and applied it to crap like the Sex Pistols, the Shadows of Knight had Chicago blues in their bloodstream, and a clear adoration of the early Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Yardbirds and the Pretty Things. Check out “Oh, Yeah,” “Boom, Boom” or any of their other blues covers, provided you don’t have that hang-up about cultural hijacking. These guys could rock and snarl with the best of ‘em.

35.) Kinky Friedman

Now far better known as a Texas politician and crime novelist, Kinky Friedman and his band,
the Texas Jewboys, flipped the finger at just about everyone with his 1973 debut, *Sold American*: racists, homophobes, anti-Semites, mass murderers. By performing as a nice (or not-so-nice) Jewish boy in the most *goyishe* genre of them all, he also pissed off a whole lot of Nashville rednecks. Musically, even if you don’t care for his brand of satire – Lenny Bruce meets Buck Owens – his albums are terrific fun, embracing the all the C&W subgenres from country rock to country swing and he was hip enough and cool enough to attract as his guest musicians the likes of T-Bone Burnett, Eric Clapton, Lowell George, Levon Helm, Mick Ronson, Ron Wood, Rick Danko, Dr. John, Richard Manuel, Ronnie Hawkins and another nice Jewish boy named Robert Zimmerman. Kosher Kountry, indeed, and still funny as hell.

36.) **Harpers Bizarre**

Skip this if you hate “Sunshine Pop”, that frozen-in-time genre from the circa 1969 that included Spanky and Our Gang, the Association, the Merry-Go-Round and other bands that emulated the harmonies of the Beach Boys and the Mamas & Papas, and then applied them to everything from Broadway tunes and the Great American Songbook to soft rock and the singer-songwriter canon. This group, with its roots in the Tikis and a drummer secured from the wondrous Beau Brummels, broke huge with a cover of Simon & Garfunkel’s “59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy)” and applied the same sugar to material from Randy Newman, Leon Russell, Van Dyke Parks and Doug Kershaw, intermingled with Cole Porter, Harold Arlen and Burt Bacharach. I am in no mood to adopt the defensive against those who think it’s twee and must have some heavy political or philosophical message in all they see, hear say or do: this stuff is gorgeous, immaculately produced and ever cheerful – essential at a time when the French have decided to elect a banker as president, Assad is still in office and Canada is run by a snowflake. [I’ll forward all the reader emails to you, Ken—*Ed.*] Pour a cherry cola and chill.
Is there a sub-genre for Gary U.S. Bonds, Mitch Ryder & the Detroit Wheels and all those other acts whose every recording sounds like it was recorded at a frat party? Cannon, who is known primarily for “Palisades Park”, had that knack, but has been written off as a typical *American Bandstand* habitué of the pre-Beatles era. [Brief aside: that period between the demise of the original golden age rockers – when Elvis joined the Army while Chuck, Little Richard and the others seemed to disappear, and the arrival of the Beatles – needs to be reassessed. Anyone who can’t hear the magic in Gene Pitney, Johnny Tillotson, Leslie Gore, Roy Orbison *et al* needs to lighten up a bit.] Along with “Tallahassee Lassie,” “*Way Down Yonder In New Orleans*” and others in a similar vein, the material he produced was uplifting in a “I’m-In-Touch-With-My- Inner-16-Year-Old” way. If you’re of a certain age, and spent your afternoons glued to the TV set, you will choke with nostalgia when you hear Cannon’s theme for Dick Clark’s TV show, *Where the Action Is*, which happens to feature no less than Leon Russell, James Burton, Glen Campbell, and David Gates. Lo-fi joy, probably best on a beaten-to-hell transistor radio, but an absolute hoot over a high-end system.
I know: like a chat room commentator who recently accused me of not being serious about music, this will provide cause to have you scratching your heads. Admittedly, I only recently rediscovered TT because I am addicted to ukulele – further proof that I and my hero ukulele devotee George Harrison cannot possibly be serious about music – but I was staggered to hear beyond “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” that he was actually a sincere and clever interpreter of the Great American Songbook, a masterful plucker of the four strings and the beneficiary of some sublime studio craftsmanship. This may be testing your eclecticism too far, but for those who are game for anything, you might be pleasantly surprised. Which reminds me of one undeniable benefit of streaming: if you’re with Amazon Prime or other streaming service with a vast catalogue, you can try just about any of my recommendations without having to buy a CD or LP which you might later regret. So go on, you have nothing to lose.

39.) **Manfred Mann**
Choose whatever incarnation you like: the eponymous jazzer or one of his assorted Earth Band line-ups, but for me it’s the group that gave us astounding chart hits including “Do Wah Diddy Diddy”, “Sha-La-La” and the exquisite “Pretty Flamingo.” They offered a unique sound in a peerlessly fecund period of fresh approaches to pop and rock – the British Invasion of 1964-1966 – but (like the Zombies) Manfred Mann had a musical depth beyond the obvious blues or R&B backgrounds that powered most of their fellow travellers. True, for this group, R&B, blues and jazz were also key elements, and to this day, singer Paul Jones presents a weekly blues radio program on BBC’s Radio Four, but the band was also an early interpreter of Bob Dylan songs, recording “If You Gotta Go, Go Now,” “With God On Our Side” and even having a hit with “Mighty Quinn”. Additionally, they covered Burt Bacharach’s “My Little Red Book” before Love and dug into the Great American Songbook years before other rock musicians did. Remember that whenever anyone credits Ringo Starr, Nilsson, Rod Stewart or Bryan Ferry for adapting the likes of Cole Porter to the rock milieu.

40.) The Cardinals

Fewer than 40 songs are believed to exist from this most sublime of doo-wop outfits, and less than 30 were released. You may have seen their name among other “bird” groups, whom only the experts can keep straight: Orioles vs Penguins vs Flamingos. You may argue convincingly that doo-wop is even less varied a genre than the blues, which is a natural reaction from those who have not made the leap and cannot hear the difference between Howlin’ Wolf and Elmore James. But this outfit featured what for some might be the most exquisite voices outside of Billy Ward & the Dominoes’ line-ups with either Clyde McPhatter or Jackie Wilson. If the Cardinals only ever recorded “The Door Is Still Open To My Heart,” written by the phenomenal Chuck Willis, and later a huge hit for Dean Martin when he transposed it to a grandiose, if a tad smarmy belter with a C&W tang, this is still a must-hear. The sax solo in the Cardinals’ version is utterly transcendent. Stream it – please. You will thank me. The good news is that a brand-new compilation, Their Complete Recordings, has just appeared on amazon.com from Southern Routes. Buy it if you want to hear what the angels really do sound like.
Most of us squander far too much of our time engaged in “self-talk”. Our minds are continually preoccupied with “what if” scenarios and how to resolve them, even though these scenarios seldom materialize. From an evolutionary perspective, predetermined responses to potential threats is an effective survival strategy, but it also keeps our minds trapped in the temporal plane of existence.

A “koan” is a Zen Buddhist tool designed to help the devotee transcend the temporal plane. It usually takes the form of a question. For example, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The mind doggedly seeks an answer, but there is none. That’s the point, to tie the logical mind into such a knot that it short-circuits the endless flow of self-talk. Once the mind is in a state of “non-thinking”, it is free to experience bliss.

Pondering the sound of one hand clapping has never led me to bliss. Neither has contemplating whether or not a tree falling in the forest makes a sound if there is no one around to hear it. Koans frustrate me like child-proof containers.

Music is my koan. It wipes out self-talk like a tsunami washes away beach huts. It can carry me from the mundane to a state of transcendental bliss faster than Owsley’s elixir. Twenty minutes in that state is as refreshing as a good night’s sleep.

But it’s not sleeping, as my wife once assumed. She would see me motionless in my recliner for most of a symphony and believe I was dozing. One day, she decided to walk across the listening
room. As soon as she blocked the sound of one speaker, I addressed her, eyes still closed, “Hi Sweetie.” She was startled. I was meditating, not comatose.

If music is my koan, then my music system is my guru. I want to hear it as clearly and unambiguously as possible. Finding the right guru has been a long search.

Like most audiophiles, my first few systems consisted of “off-the-shelf” components that did some things well, and other things not so well. Over the years, I traded up to more expensive equipment that did other things well, but then I would miss some of the things at which my old systems excelled.

So I started scrutinizing components. It didn’t take long to determine that electronic components which offered a neutral response, and distortion and noise below audible levels, sounded similar. By definition, they should. (The only qualifier is that amplifiers must have sufficient power to drive the load.)

That wasn’t the case with loudspeakers. At the dozen or so Consumer Electronics Shows I attended in Las Vegas, I found that most loudspeakers sounded radically different from one another — even if their manufacturers professed similar design objectives.

Surprisingly, the most expensive speakers were seldom my favorites. As they rarely won the “Best Sound of Show” award, many others must have felt the same way. Audiophiles choose what elements of reproduced sound are most important to them, and prefer a system which caters to those preferences. The choice of best loudspeaker, like best restaurant or movie, is dependent on the sensibilities of the beholder. Different strokes for different folks.

My sensibilities must be idiosyncratic. I never found a speaker system at the CES that did everything I sought. Like the systems I’d owned in the past, they usually did some things really well, and other things not so well, regardless of their price. In the next room, those strengths and weaknesses might be reversed.

When I realized this, a light went off. Why not build a custom speaker system catering to my sensibilities?

I attended the next CES with a single minded purpose, to discover my personal preferences. As I auditioned various systems, I wrote pages of notes. When I reviewed them in the evening, these patterns emerged:
- 3 way/3 driver systems sounded cleaner to me than systems using more (or fewer) drivers.
- high efficiency systems seemed:
- more resolving at low volumes.
- better at holding a note’s decay to its conclusion — especially noticeable on piano.
- more dynamic than those that needed big power.
- wide cabinets also appeared to offer superior midrange dynamics.
- the smoothest high frequencies emanated from ribbon tweeters.
- big bass-reflex bins utilizing large, low-excursion woofers best reproduced effortless, natural-
sounding bass.
- most highly resolving midrange drivers soon became fatiguing — except those with paper cones.
The loveliest midrange frequencies emanated from a system that had no midrange driver at all.
No, it wasn’t a two way system. It came from a single, full range paper driver designed to cover the entire frequency spectrum. This driver turned coarse at high frequencies (where it broke up) and produced no real bass, but the midrange resolution and imaging were enchanting. I was able to buy a matched pair from the exhibitor.

The most effortless deep bass I heard filled the room of a European exhibitor. His system employed 15” Italian woofers in large, bass reflex cabinets. He was kind enough to provide the information I needed to source a pair.

One speaker, showing crossover and auxiliary damping animals.

The smoothest high frequencies came from the ribbon tweeters of an Asian system. The exhibitor didn’t even know the name of the manufacturer……or wasn’t willing to reveal it. After a considerable amount of time and research back home, I was able pinpoint the
manufacturer. I had to buy a dozen and import them myself.

Once I had the drivers, it was time to acquire the cabinets. I’d planned to construct them myself, but with a stroke of luck, came across a pair of 7 cu. ft. bass bins originating from a recording studio. They weigh over 200 lbs. each and are much better built than my limited carpentry skills and equipment would allow. All I had to do was tailor the ports and internal damping to my Italian drivers.

The ports were easy, there are formulas for that.

The internal damping took several months. Too much and the sound was lifeless. Too little and the bass sounded like it was coming from a bathroom. I tried foam, shredded cotton, wool felt, and various types of fiberglass damping material. The most natural bass resulted from sparcely applied sheets of 1” O/C 705 high-density fiberglass. This is the yellow stuff often found behind ovens and fridges (nasty to work with, wear gloves and a respirator).

The midrange boxes are re-purposed EPI 100 loudspeaker cabinets. I removed the drivers, covered the baffle with MDF, and laid them on their sides. Then I cut a hole in what was the top to accommodate my 8” midrange driver. There is a similar hole in the other end (backside). The cabinets are stuffed with increasing-density damping material, like a transmission line. That way, the backwaves have no opportunity to reflect back into the lightweight cone to cause distortion.

The heavy ribbon tweeter is simply set on top of the midrange driver and braced. Being a line source, it has controlled vertical dispersion. This design keeps high frequencies from bouncing off the ceiling and floor.

Diffraction causes sound waves to re-radiate from cabinet edges and splash off nearby surfaces. It makes drivers sound muddy. The custom-cut acoustic foam in the photo extends the baffle size thereby reducing diffraction. It also directs the sound waves away from the walls and to the listener for superior dynamics.

Once the drivers and cabinets were sorted out, the next challenge was the crossover. I studied passive crossovers for a couple of years and built several, but was never satisfied with the results. This could have been due to my lack of expertise and experience, or, as an EE friend suggested, the inherent limitations of passive-crossover design.

At his urging, I purchased an active digital crossover. It splits each stereo channel into 3 signals: bass, midrange and highs. These signals are then fed into six amplifiers, one for each driver. This way, there is nothing between the amps and the drivers except the speaker cables. It allows the amps to do their best work. Complicated passive crossovers can suck the life out of amplifiers and dull the sound.

Because active crossovers are capable of steep slopes, there is little intermodulation distortion between the drivers, and they can be crossed-over closer to the edge of their bandwidths.
without hitting their break-up or resonance modes.

Another benefit of a digital crossover is how easily crossover frequencies and slopes can be manipulated. I set mine “by the book” initially, then tweaked until I got the sound that most pleased me.

My crossover unit includes digital equalization (EQ). I use it to compensate for room modes. Without such equalization, the most accurate speakers in the world will sound colored in most domestic rooms. For example, in a recent issue of an audio mag, the in-room frequency response of a well-reviewed pair of $100,000+ loudspeakers showed a 15 db variation in bass response. Making accurate listener assessments of any audio product with such a handicap is like testing a sports car in a hockey rink.

EQ can also compensate for poor recordings. Some of my favorite recordings from the ’60s were mastered with too much bass, a midrange peak for ‘presence’, and treble frequencies accompanied by lots of distortion. On a highly resolving system, they are unlistenable. Applying some EQ can make those “oldies” enjoyable again.
My goal was to recreate (in-home) a sound that most closely approximates the experience of live orchestral music in a concert hall. I failed miserably. No-one will ever mistake the sound in my little room for the glorious sound of symphony hall. The laws of physics preclude it. But I got closer than any other system I’ve heard in an equivalently sized space.

Some audiophiles who don’t attend symphony concerts seem to prefer a disparate sound. I don’t know what standard they use to measure audio quality — perhaps the memory of their own equipment. Different strokes for different folks.

However, a few well-known audio engineers have also auditioned my system. These were their responses:

“I was impressed with Jan’s system when I visited his home. It was very-well balanced, clean, and had excellent imaging. He played a choral piece that was particularly impressive. He did a great job on his system!”

“One of the best dynamic loudspeaker systems I’ve heard. The imaging is startling.”

“This is among the lowest distortion systems I’ve listened to, I’ll bet it’s under 1% all the way to the lowest notes.”

“This system sounds like live music. The bass is as realistic as I’ve ever heard in-home.”

“No idea how you get such analogue sound from a completely digital/solid-state system.”

I’m gratified that my callow quest to enhance “the sound of one hand clapping” has garnered such informed applause.

Enjoy the view.
Spring is in the Air

By Vasilis Lakakis | Issue 33

Sometimes our own backyards are too picture postcard-perfect to resist.