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Underwood HiFi

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AUDIO REVIEWS

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MAY 2006



ART AUDIO VINYL REFERENCE

Reviewer: Stephæn Harrell

Analogue Sources: Nottingham Analogue Studio Space Deck; NAS Space Arm; Dynavector 17D2MKII; Dynavector 20xI; AT OC9; Walker Audio Precision Motor Controller

Digital Sources: Tube Research Labs-modded Sony SCD-2000ES; secondary: TRL-modded Sony SCD-CE595, TRL-modded Alesis ML-9600 high-resolution master disk recorder

Preamp: Herron Audio VTSP-1A; Herron Audio VTPH-1MC; secondary: Outlaw Audio RetroReceiver

Amp: Art Audio PX-25 with KR output and Sophia rectifier tubes; secondary: Audio Zone AMP-STi

Speakers: Zu Audio Druid Mk.4; Cain & Cain Company Studio Series Intermediate Ben with cryo'd 168 m. Fostex Sigma drivers; REL Strata III; secondary: Omega Grande 6, Sound Dynamics RTS-3; *Viesulas Audio boXXer7* [on loan]

Cables: Zu Audio Libtec cables; Audience Au24 interconnects; TG Audio Lab custom copper interconnects; secondary: Audience Au24 cables; Analysis Plus cables and interconnects

Stands: Grand Prix Audio Monaco, two three-tier units

Isolation: main, GPA Monaco; secondary, Acoustic Dreams Dead Ball Isolators; Neuance platform

Powerline Conditioning: BPT 3.5 Signature; cryo'd Pass & Seymour wall outlets; Audience powerChords, T.G. Audio Lab SLVR power cords, Analysis Plus Power Oval, *Zu Audio Birth and Bok* [on loan]; secondary: Brick Wall PW8R15AUD

Sundry Accessories: HAL-O® Vacuum Tube Dampers, Herbie's Way Excellent Turntable Mat, VPI 16.5 record cleaner; Shun Mook Valve Resonators; Auric Illuminator, Walker Audio VIVID CD & DVD Enhancer; Walker Audio SST Super Silver Treatment; Epiphone Dot (Gibson ES-335 knock-off) and Epiphone Chet Atkins CE guitars; Fender Blues Jr. amp; 1906 Ellington upright piano

Office System: Gibson J100x

Room size & treatments: 26' x 19' x 9' (a fractured 'L', nominally 16' x 19' with 12' feet of the 19-foot dimension opening to the 20-foot section of the 20' x 12' kitchen/eat-in area) - ASC Tube Traps and Sound Planks; Echo Busters absorbers

Review component retail: \$4,500 standard, \$5,000 as tested (with V-Cap Teflon film and tin foil reference grade capacitors upgrade)



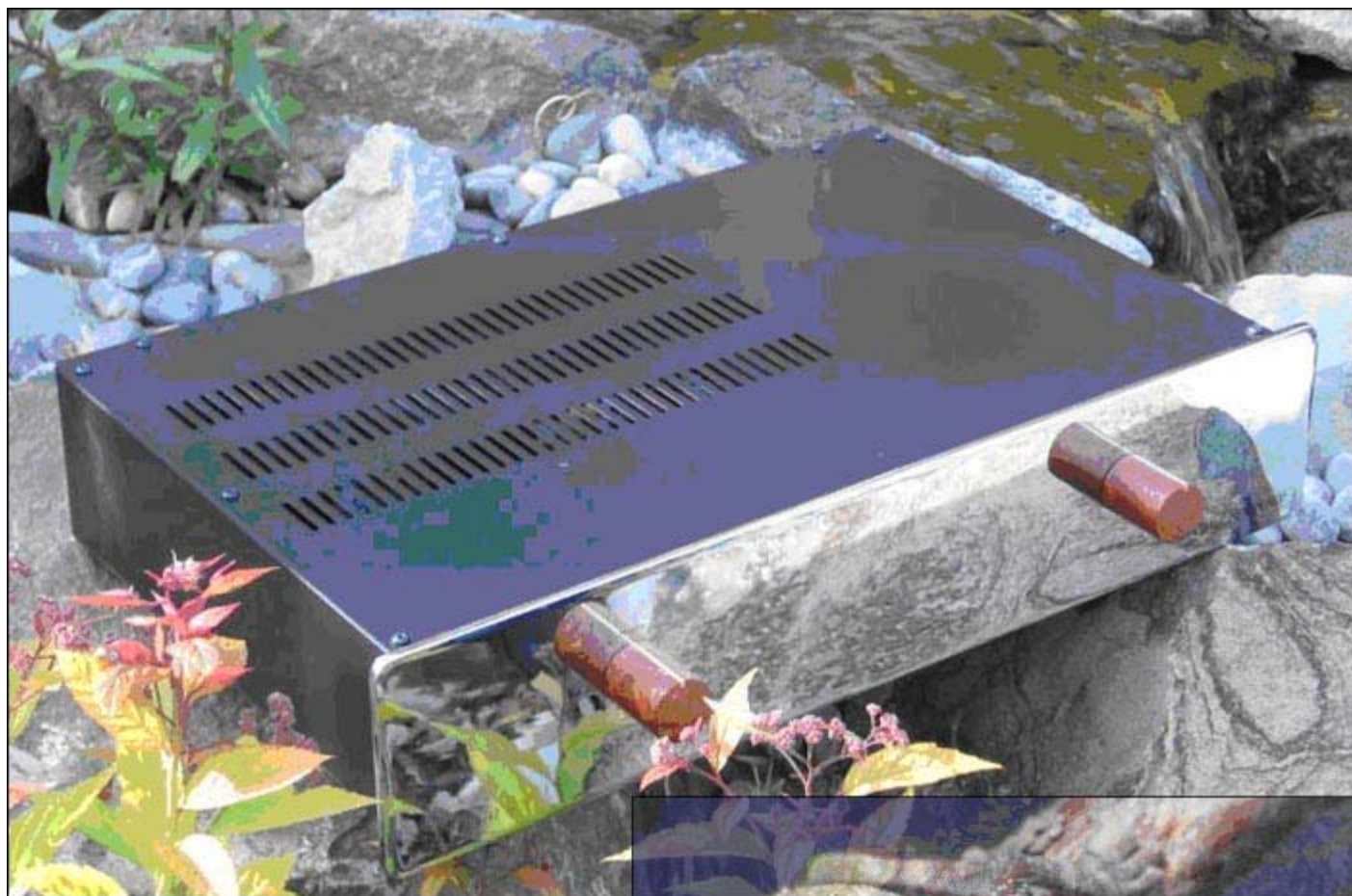
The creature on the right has the ability to change color depending on mood, lighting, temperature and other environmental influences. It also has eyes that move independently from each other and rotate in all directions. What traits might the shiny object on the left display?

Enter the chameleon...

Getting straight to the point, I was altogether engaged on the musical front. Given the amount of ink already spilled on this unit, I won't venture into construction or design chatter other than to say that emblematic of Art Audio and their well-vetted partners -- in this case, Kevin Carter of K & K Audio -- the fit and finish are first rate and the chassis offers a effortless yet graceful look. I will also note two kewl functionality factors: switchable signal polarity and MM/MC loading impedance. No, it's not nearly as decked out with loading and gain choices as the Manley Steelhead but you can still contentedly play with a mixture of MM and MC carts. This unit's elasticity extends to both single-ended and balanced systems.

To read some of the talk on various Internet fora, one could easily come away with the impression that the Vinyl Reference (VR) is an excellent phonostage, the ticket for people who listen predominantly to classical and vocal music - but that it doesn't get it up for those who groove on rock, jazz and soul. So, I set out to determine for myself whether the VR was a one-trick member of the *Equidae* family or a dexterous affiliate of the family *Chamaeleonidae*.

After three months of listening, alone and with other trusted ears, I have two things to report: It *is* an excellent phonostage. And, it is *not* limited in its ability to convey various classifications of music. With respect to what you read below, please be aware that while I did (with great pleasure) assess the VR's competency on classical and vocal works, my decision to limit musical examples to the genres you will encounter was intentional.



Vinyl Reference

Can you tie tension and flow?

The very first thing that jumped out at me through this dead-quiet device was on the very first album played. It was the morning after. I had hooked her up on Saturday night, just to settle in so I could have a long day of listening come daybreak. True to form, I woke up early with food on the brain. My dreams of eggs over easy with flour tortillas naturally led to a craving to hear "Nobody Knows Me". So before firing up the stove, I nudged the needle towards the midpoint of the slow side of Lyle Lovett's ... *and his Large Band*. It became instantaneously evident that sliding the VR into the signal corridor had created what appeared to be an elongating of measures in the music.

It struck me -- and registered as odd -- because it seemed, at first glance, to have the effect of making the tempo more leisurely - *maybe* even slow. Not plodding, mind you, but, shall we say, *lingering*. Yes, that's the right feeling. Then I listened to the fast face (side one) and found that while the phrasing remained farther-reaching, the music moved along with more ambition than I'd before experienced from this slice of licorice pizza. There were also persuasively produced bends and drawn-out decays on guitars, plus a differentiation of voices both within and among. Meaning, in part, that Lovett's voice had more texture and scope of character while brass both cried and caressed. All this was liberated in the context of what some loaded-for-bear sonic fiends might describe as *mellifluous management*. Heathens! I would call it a liquid emancipation of potential: the release of those goods in the grooves that often elude us. Since I am familiar with presentations that *are* overly silky, I can assure you that there was no Velveeta® in the dip here. So, this was not that. This was like a great tequila that goes down smooth but still completes its more primal assignment. Besides, who wants to be assaulted with sounds? I want music. Call it passion over reason.

On *You Get More Bounce with Curtis Counce*, percussion on the first track was more communicative due to better timbral differentiation and a genuine extension in frequency response. That, combined with a level of insistence to the rhythm that never caught my ear before, had me asking, "How did I ever miss this?" On track two, I was offered up my favorite kind of sax: a three-dimensional body sending out visceral waves of sultry seduction underscored with insightful microdynamic fluency.

If you come to expect this level of - um, *culmination* in every session, you'll need to pay attention to your partner's needs, too. In this case, take advantage of her mutually satisfying pleas that you develop an appetite for properly tweaking the polarity switch as required. Since it can -- to roughly paraphrase Tammy Wynette -- make the difference between an angel on Sunday morning and a devil on Saturday night, experimentation is highly recommended. *Just do it.*



Intimacy and room to breathe

While it can and has, Allison Krauss's pure and transparent voice never ever sounded pinched through the Vinyl Reference. Team her up with musicians who can pull strings so they both lull and sting and you've got the makings of a serious musical brew. Some of you familiar with the first track on *New Favorite* and so inclined to, um - *daydreaming* already know that the second track, "The Boy Who Wouldn't Hoe Corn" comes up just about the time your fantasy date with Alison singing "... let me touch you for awhile..." is starting to get steamy. "The Boy" shakes you right out of that and before you know it -- and as if fused with yet another set of lyrics -- not only is all the young man's corn lost, so are you ... in such a so well-defined, three-dimensional sea of guitar strings, dobro twangs and fiddle accents that it makes you wonder why would anyone "give that boy the devil" when there's all this music to behold? The answer: Because many phonostages, when faced with this onslaught of energy, will give you more glare than goods.

Long story short, if you've got a yang-ish system and look for some relief that doesn't compromise detail, look no further. There's certainly enough musical and consistently unfolding deep resolution to keep your attention without ever putting you on edge. If you are already at ease with your stellar vinyl rig and wonder just how far the sonic seduction can go, take the VR for a spin.

Next up is Laurie Anderson's *Strange Angels*. How does the VR reproduce electronica with the "I'm sick of hearing 'bout your problems" kind of edge, grit, grain or gravitas? Very well, thank you. The AA VR gives you all four, in proper proportions, all the while keeping you in the groove.

So, Joe, how do you balance grit and groove? "Hey man, you start by paying attention to amplifier noise, ya know? Then take a look at sensitivity to RF interference, gain, output stage drive capability, overload and flat frequency response. Next you gotta design a hybrid FET/triode circuit to meet the requirements of low noise and high gain with a minimum of amplifying stages. Lastly, add a transformer-coupled MOSFET/triode output stage, a high-voltage, choke loaded and seriously filtered and shunt regulated massive power supply to minimize the creation and transmission of noise. Okay?"

Wow. No wonder Laurie sounds sweet and savage. Laurie both growls and purrs - and does so on a stage much larger and airier than you may have previously been aware of. You, too, may also hear more (and more plainly) some of the interesting electronica (programmed percussion) and natural hidden musical nuances (accordions, violins, pedal steel guitars and vocal murmurs) she tucks into the sub terrain of this recording.

Next up, Isaac Hayes and some *Hot Buttered Soul*. Where else will you hear a hipper inflected version of "Walk on By"? Hayes, the sweet backup vocals and the Bar-Kays rhythm section create a soundscape that will immerse you in a level of suave and never dry detail that leaves you breathless. And in this case, the almost (but never fully) out-of-place biting, acid Jazz inflected guitar won't shut your ears down.

Within a week of taking it out of the box, I dubbed the unit "the SET of phonostages". And not your hackneyed, overly-ripe midrange, mushy-bass, roll-off-at-the-extremes coloration-inducing machine but a well-executed design. It's smooth, intimate and dark in the best way possible. Think Isaac Hayes and *Hot Buttered Soul* in the studio. It's propulsive, perceptive and dynamically adept. Think Laurie Anderson and *Strange Angels* on the stage. Consider the differences in those two styles and you may agree with the chameleon simile. The VR will, in a synergistic context, adapt to and then perform according to the impulse provided.

Last, I just want to mention a recording that offered an unusual surprise. Even as someone with an affirmative mindset about the value of properly executed SETs, I found the experience of listening to Daniel Lanois' *Acadie* somewhat counter-intuitive and instructive indeed. From the predictable -- read: rather dense -- production values emerged a more coherent level of instrumental articulation and vocal finesse. On "Where the Hawkwind Kills" came a level of definition to the drums that was anything but veiled, contrary to what I've heard with other such devices under test. Full yet tight, closure to words like *night* and *flight* brought finality to the verse with the 't'. Texture is always something I expect from

this disc. Such speed emerging from the built-in distortion I did not.