

GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERB REICHERT

THIS ISSUE: Herb goes down the idler-drive rabbit hole via a newly acquired Lenco L75 and tries out the new EVO 100 phono preamplifier from PrimaLuna.

The importance of taste

My adoptive mother, Lily Mae, was a retired businesswoman and former fashion model turned stay-at-home mom and artist-painter with famously good taste in everything. She raised me to have good manners, an “active awareness of color and texture,” and “an eye for form.” She expected me to critique her paintings, her decorating, and her wardrobe, urging me constantly to develop “good taste in everything.”

In Lil’s world, a perfect day was for me to skip school and go with her clothes shopping at Marshall Field’s, where it was my job to sit in a plush chair offering comments about which outfits had the best fabrics and best “complimented her form.” She always said “form is bones” and fashion is about “how fabrics hang on people’s bones.”

After lunch at Field’s, we’d have tea at her artist friend Selma’s house. After tea and perusing fancy art books in the living room, we’d move to the dining room, where Selma would show us the latest additions to her blue-onion porcelain collection. After admiring Selma’s dishes, we would move to her back porch painting studio. There, it was my job to notice which paintings were new since our last visit. When I cut school with Mom, my days were devoted to sitting up straight, never looking bored, and noticing how various luxury objects met my eye.

My mother equated good taste with “good breeding” and intelligence.

On the way home from Selma’s, Lil would always compliment me on being “a good shopping partner”—but that was only a preface to her standard lecture on how book-learning, manners, and refined taste “get you a seat at the best tables.” Invariably, she would conclude these class-consciousness sermons saying, “Anybody can have money, but only ‘smart’ people have taste.”

Mom never let me forget that having money creates the *need for taste*.

Lily Mae Iverson was born in 1907, so I presumed every mother who survived two world wars, a plague, and the Depression lectured their sons like that. Fortunately, her admonishments served me well. They became the building blocks for my own version of her philosophy: *What I give my attention to, and what I aspire to understand, reflects the kind of person I am choosing to be.*

For me, taste is literally the thought matrix of all the things I’ve chosen to regard as important.

Garages and museums

I view audio gear first through the eyes of a mechanic like my dad, who, when I took

him to MoMA to see art, all he saw was the pipes. Second, I see it through the eyes of an artist like my mom, who let me cut school so she could show me her favorite paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. After I started painting, we had a show together in Chicago. At the opening, she told one of her collectors, “Pay no attention to his work, he has scrambled brains,” alluding to my use of lysergic acid diethylamide.

Naturally, I grew up to love art and pipes as much as mountains, forests, bodies of water, and violent weather—but none of those things do I now love more than cars, trains, trucks, motorcycles, and boats. To my last breath, I will aspire to having good taste in everything that *moves under power*. I love watching long trains at railroad

crossings and get excited when I spot a prime specimen of a Mack or Peterbilt truck. I love old tractors and the sounds of two-stroke dirt bikes when they downshift in corners. I love watching torque making stuff move.

Right now, my desire to watch torque in action has me exploring a mechanical subcategory of vintage audio gear referred to as idler-drive turntables. I’ve owned a variety of idler drives including my first turntable, a four-speed Dual 1009, a few Garrard 301s, an Elac Miracord 40, and I’ve never been without at least one Thorens TD124. But...

Unlike many of my friends, I never considered idler drives to be inherently superior to direct or belt drives. For years, my Denon DP-3000 direct drive sat right next to my Linn Sondek LP12 belt drive. I never thought to compare them as examples of their drive types. The notion of advocating for or believing in one form of technology over another never appealed to me—until one day last February when I heard my friend Yale’s system sourced by his massive EMT 930 turntable with an EMT arm and cartridge. More than any system I’d ever heard, that system, playing Yale’s really



good records, made my toes tap uncontrollably and kept my mind locked into the music. My experience at Yale's lent serious credibility to his claim that "idlers are close to god" and set me on the path of discovery I'm now on—the path where I can't afford an EMT 930, or for now, a professional rebuild of my 1957 TD124, but I could and did afford a preowned, made-in-Switzerland Lenco L75.

Lenco's rhythm-keeping holiness

Experiencing Yale's drool-worthy EMT 930, followed by my time spent with PTP Audio's Solid9 Lenco-based turntable,¹ forced my mind to wonder: Why do idler drives inspire such fanatical devotion in their adherents? Do believers actually feel some kind of god force behind the high-torque motors, sturdy rubber idler wheels, and heavy platters? Could pushing a platter *feel* different to a listener, or be a more effective use of motor torque, than pulling with a rubber lead?

When the Solid9 departed, I decided to see if a stock Lenco L75 could be as exciting and PRaTish as the PTP or EMT. And because I'm a lucky guy, no sooner had I made that decision than a friend of a friend offered me his stock Lenco L75 for \$750. I said yes immediately, and two days later,

a 1969 L75 was sitting on my rack looking fresh and only slightly used. It came in its original box, with its original plinth, tonearm, and owner's manual. Best of all, I could start playing it immediately because it had been recently "refreshed" by turntable specialist Michael Trei, who tweaked and adjusted the drive system, oiled the platter bearing, and replaced the tonearm's rubber V-blocks with new brass ones.² The only nonstock parts on the L75 were a bendably soft after-market aluminum headshell and Shure's iconic M3D "Stereo Dynetic" cartridge, which Shure introduced in 1958 and which, according to Shure's advertising, was the world's first "Dynetic" (moving magnet) cartridge.

I tried running the M3D into the moving magnet inputs of the SunValley SV-EQ1616D and PrimaLuna's new EVO 100 phono stage. It sounded the most fluid and detailed through the 10-tube PrimaLuna (see the description below) and the most tone-correct through the four-tube SunValley equipped with smooth-plate Telefunken 12AX7s. Inexplicably, with both preamps I noticed a faint, grainy hiss that haunted the background of whatever disc the cartridge was playing. This noise wasn't obvious, and it wasn't hum. It seemed magnetic. Once I noticed it, I couldn't stop thinking about it,

so I swapped in an AudioTechnica VM95E moving magnet cartridge, which dramatically raised the Lenco's excitement factor, manufacturing slurries of quick-punching, hard-hitting bass and an upper-octave transparency that made the Gen-X Lenco sound young, smartly dressed, and fully caffeinated. My Lenco fun had begun.

With the VM95E, recordings were presented with bright, clear, noise-free excitements, but vocal and instrumental tones were not as dense, intense, or real-sounding as they had been with the Shure M3D, which showed real talent in those areas. Noticing that caused me to remember how solid and colorful the PTP Solid9—an extensively rebuilt Lenco—with the Sorane SA1-2 arm sounded with a stock, plastic-bodied, moving coil Denon DL-103.

The quality of my Lenco listening jumped up several levels when I installed the 40 ohm, 0.3mV DL-103. This cartridge-tonearm marriage was ordained by the same god that blesses idler drives. At first, I connected the 103's output to the SunValley SV-EQ1616D's moving coil input, which is loaded with a 50 ohm shunt. That's a 40 ohm cartridge driving a 50 ohm load! With the SunValley and its 50 ohm load, I heard a tsunami of naturally presented low-level detail, strong rhythms, and a

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more Duke and Mel star power. Distortion seemed lower. Which made me wonder if over all those boomer-decades my brain had adapted to the brighter, higher-presence sound of the generally accepted load of 300–400 ohms. Or maybe at 50 ohms, some Lenz's law damping was helping the Denon's conical stylus ride the groove better? More questions I can't answer.

Dave Slagle has used AnalogMagik software and test records to show that loading the DL-103 down lowers its IM distortion measurably, and that this added damping improves trackability.³

This Lenco-Denon-SunValley front end did a fantastic job representing the voices and the hip sentiments of Duke Ellington

1 See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-73-ptp-audio-solid9-turntable-sorane-sa-12-tonarm.

2 See lencoheaven.net/forum/index.php?topic=13.0.

3 Recently, Herb's claim led to an interesting three-way exchange between Herb, JCA, and EMIA's Dave Slagle. Herb and Slagle both pointed to a 1980 paper by Peter Moncrieff, published in the *International Audio Review*, which concluded on the basis of actual experiment that when a resistor loads a phono cartridge directly—not via a step-up transformer—it doesn't affect the bandwidth or damp resonant peaks (which in any case, with an MC cartridge, are very high in frequency) as is, or was, commonly assumed. Slagle has corroborated Moncrieff's result. What loading does do, Moncrieff discovered, is reduce intermodulation distortion. The mechanism is uncertain, but Moncrieff speculates that it could be due to electromagnetic damping of subtle cartridge mistracking—hence Herb's reference to Lenz's law in the previous paragraph.—**Jim Austin**

benign, rolled-off top end. Response-wise, the 50 ohm load caused some of the Denon's 4kHz energy to move down to 400Hz. The sound with this nearly 1:1 loading lacked the transient edge and brightness and fast, sharp resolution I've come to associate with

punchy moving coil dynamics, but over time my brain adapted to this unusually rich and relaxed sound. Duke Ellington's *Blues in Orbit* (Columbia MOVLP 443) and *Mel Tormé at the Crescendo* (Bethlehem BCP 6020) sounded quieter, easier flowing, with

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and Mel Tormé, but how would it do with a more earthbound poet like Louis-Jacques Rondeleux? *Troubadours*, his fantastic album of secular 12th and 13th century song (Harmonia Mundi France HM 566), is a record I use to get a preliminary read on a new cartridge. With the SunValley at 50 ohms, Rondeleux's baritone was presented in a strikingly vibrant manner. Roger Lepauw's *vielle* (a largish, violinlike five-stringed instrument) came through pure of tone and LSD-detailed against deep, silent, black backgrounds. The Lenco's reproduction of the somber tones and hesitant pace of Rondeleux's singing made this recording a high point of my early Lenco listening.

When I grew out of shopping with mom, I began fitting pipe with my father and making hay every June with my uncles. Before I drove cars, I drove tractors in Wisconsin. The fields with the cut hay were about a half-mile from the shed where the tractors were stored, which meant I drove on the paved road dragging an empty wood wagon

behind me. In one of the upper gears, with the throttle partway open, I'd space out listening to the deep-volumed rap-rap-rap of power issuing from the tractor's exhaust stack while making my way slowly up and down the rolling hills. The tractor's mass was so large, its torque so great, its gearing so stiff that its speed never seemed to waver. This sensation of inertia produced a calming, trance-inducing effect that I'm feeling once again while playing records on the Lenco. Now I'm wondering if this *tangible sense of inertia* is what makes idler drives so devotion-worthy.

Alone at night, I swear I can sometimes feel the Lenco's geared-down idler exerting its forward pressure on the platter's rotation. This sensation of pressure was easiest to observe on quiet solo piano and chamber music recordings. This is something I don't remember noticing with low-torque direct drives, or generic belt drives, where each belt-platter combination affects the sound differently, depending on how heavy the

platter is and how many horses are pulling its belt. When a stylus is traversing the groove and a loud passage comes, the heavier platter will slow down less, but it will always slow down a little if the torque is insufficient for a fast response.

I know the reality of these spinning-platter epiphenomena is debatable and that my experiences of them are borderline subliminal. But if you've ever driven a tractor on blacktop, you'll know what I'm talking about.

I'm sitting here watching myself falling into a rabbit hole named Lenco that feels a lot like one of those project cars of my youth, a time when I could hang over a fender for hours and break-dance on a creeper. But for geezer Herb, this L75 is the right size, shape, and weight and requires the right size tools for me to pretend I'm working on a project car—without the oil-stained garage floor, sore back, or barked knuckles. Maybe I'll try hot-rodding it with a tonearm swap next.

PRIMALUNA'S EVO 100 PHONO STAGE

As I experimented with cartridges on the Lenco, I was reminded how almost all commercially available phono stages use either a step-up transformer or a JFET at the input of their moving coil circuit. Almost none of the world's tubed phono stages have a tube at the moving coil input. One of those very few, PrimaLuna's new EVO 100, was in a box in my hallway begging to be connected to my Lenco-Denon DL-103 setup.

As I unpacked the heavy, triple-boxed PrimaLuna, I thought how few tube phono preamps have tube rectification and how even fewer have tube-regulated power supplies.

PrimaLuna's \$3695 EVO 100 features all these deluxe tube accoutrements: dual-mono 5AR4 tube rectification; dual-mono choke-input EL34-regulated power supplies; and two 12AX7 twin triodes per channel for the RIAA stage and one 6922 twin triode per channel for its moving coil input stage, which sits in its own shielded, cushioned box at the back of the preamp, just above the input jacks.

I'm always saying how everything sounds like what it's made of, and how this applies to vacuum tubes and power supplies as much as it does to transformers, resistors, capacitors, or wire. The more tubes there are in an amplifier's circuitry, the more likely it will sound liquid and radiant—like tubes. The bigger and more responsive its power supply, the more the amplifier will weigh and the more punch, liquidity, depth, and dimensionality it will deliver.

I was intrigued and excited to audition PrimaLuna's EVO 100 phono preamp because the last time I experienced a tubed input for a moving coil was in the early 1990s when I built a few Arthur Loesch phono stages that used a separate power transformer, tube rectifier, and choke-input, high-capacitance power supply for each of its six WE417A tubes.

PrimaLuna's EVO 100 takes the Loesch preamp's extremism even further. It is built on an octal-tube-rectified, *power-tube-regulated* power supply. I wanted to see how that combination of expensive-to-implement features would contribute to the sound of my system using low-output

cartridges.

The EVO 100 looks like a narrower version of the company's \$5295 EVO 400 pre-amplifier (11" vs 15" wide), which I reviewed in June 2019. The EVO 100 weighs 27.9lb. Together, these two components make a unique 81.9lb, 18-tube, \$8999 preamp/phono stage combo that was, by virtue of these engineering choices, guaranteed to sound different than any previous phono amplification I've used since I started writing for *Stereophile*.

When I wrote, a few paragraphs ago, that "the more tubes there are in an amplifier's circuitry, the more it will sound liquid and radiant—like tubes," I did not mean to



imply that more tubes automatically mean better sound. In fact, I was hinting that “too much of a good thing” might apply here: 18 tubes in front of a tubed power amplifier *might* be too many. The reason I’ve never favored tubes or transistors is that too many of either is like too much butter or salt. Historically, I’ve preferred a transistor preamp with a tube-based power amp, or vice-versa, depending on the speakers. I call this “yin-yang-ing suppleness” because I don’t like my music to sound tubey or transistory.

When I first heard about it, I began wondering whether the EVO 100 could somehow become my new reference phono stage. Despite having only one input (a major defect at this price point), it has done that. Loading and gain are selectable from the front panel. Its five MC loading choices—50, 100, 200, 500, and 1000 ohms—are well-chosen. The gain choices—40dB for MM, 52, 56, and 60dB for MC—make it convenient for someone who changes cartridges often, as I do. I wish there was 10dB more gain, but that might be pushing the noise factor too far. In concert, these loading and gain choices should properly serve any moving coil cartridge with an output of 0.3mV to 0.6mV without overloading on loud transients.⁴

Tube forest wonderland

The minute I got it, I connected up the EVO 100. I tried it with the Denon DL-103 on the Lenco and with EMT’s JSD 6 moving coil cartridge and EMT 912 tonearm on my Dr. Feickert Blackbird turntable.

The results were disappointing. I thought the PrimaLuna made both cartridges sound off, or at least not like they sounded with my Tavish or SunValley preamps. But PrimaLuna importer Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio had already warned me that the EVO needs three days powered on to sound its best, so I reinstalled the SunValley equalizer and left the EVO 100 plugged in and turned on for seven days. After really digging the Denon DL-103 with the 50 ohm JFET load on the EQ1616D, I was curious to see how the Denon would respond to a “tube” 50 ohm load like the one on the PrimaLuna. Dang me if the fully warmed-up EVO didn’t up the 103’s dynamics and vividness by at least 50%. I’ve loaded the DL-103 in every imaginable way, and I still prefer it with my EMIA SUT, but the EVO 100 at 50 ohms sounded surprisingly musical and engaging.

Then I played Duke Ellington’s *Blues in Orbit* (Columbia MOVLP 443) with EMT’s JSD 6 into the EVO 100, loaded at 200 ohms. I’ve heard that record a thousand times, on some of the world’s most expensive



turntables, sporting \$10k+ cartridges, and I can’t say it ever sounded bigger, bolder, richer, faster, or more thrilling than it did through PrimaLuna’s all-tube phono stage. The PrimaLuna completely eliminated the JSD 6’s tendency to sound tight and analytical, giving me instead a cartridge-phono stage combination that was both lush and heart-pounding fun.

Because the tube input EVO 100 sounds so different from generic JFET stages, I fear many audiophiles will hear it once, pass judgment, and move on. They’d be missing the cake and ice cream at the end of the party. I don’t exactly know what is changing while an amp is cooking for days, but I do know that Kevin Deal was right: The EVO 100 needs to be left on 24/7 for *at least* three days to sound as bold and magic-mushroom wonderful as what I just experienced with the EMT JSD 6. The JSD 6–EVO 100 combo produced room-filling, big-wave power and sublime clarity. It made me feel like I could see to the bottom of a deep crater lake filled with perfectly clear water.

It’s impossible to be sure, but I attribute this largely to the EVO’s tube-rectified, tube-regulated power supply. It takes more than a giant power transformer and a ton of capacitance to make a responsive power supply that doesn’t lose small-signal data and generalize big-signal data.

That much deep-water clarity and big-wave power production felt new to my senses. The sound character was *all-tube* in a way I was uncomfortable with at first. But PrimaLuna’s uncompromised power supply and high-transconductance 6922 tubes at its MC input forced me to recalibrate my

JFET/SUT-informed taste to accommodate a radically different, new type of sound I had not previously imagined. Like the Heretic AD614 speakers, which thrill me more with each passing day, the EVO 100 is a revelation, and, for the moment at least, my new reference phono stage. But please remember, neither of these products were designed to sound like anything we’ve ever heard before.

If it ain’t one thing, it’s the mother

To keep my tastes evolving, I try to listen with a child’s mind, wherein I don’t care who made the audio equipment, when it was made, how much it costs, or how it measures. I only care if it looks cool, sounds like real humans making music, and, most importantly, if I feel pleasure and contentment while it’s playing my records. The Gen-X Lenco L75 with the baby boomer Denon DL-103 and PrimaLuna’s brand-new, all-tube EVO 100 excelled at all these things.

My plan for next month: to compare PrimaLuna’s EVO 100 to Mobile Fidelity’s new MasterPhono solid state phono stage. ■

⁴ See hifinews.com/content/primaluna-evo-100-tube-phono-preamplifier-making-headroom.

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BRILLIANT CORNERS

BY ALEX HALBERSTADT

THIS ISSUE: Two outstanding tubed phono stages with contrasting personalities.

Realizing the analog you

“The phonograph record is an art form itself,” Lester Koenig wrote in March 1959, “and one of its advantages is the performance that exists uniquely of, by and for the record.” Remarkably, when Koenig included this pronouncement in his liner notes to *Sonny Rollins and the Contemporary Leaders*, the 12" long-play record had been the dominant carrier of recorded music for less than a decade, and stereo discs had been mass produced for just over a year.

For Koenig, this issue wasn't merely academic. Before making his name as head of Contemporary Records in Los Angeles, he had attended Yale Law School, worked as a screenwriter and producer at Paramount, and gotten blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. At Contemporary, he set out to become a leading practitioner of the art of phonography. The label's smart record jackets often used William Claxton's now-classic photographs, Robert Guidi's playful drawings and layouts, and matterful liner notes by Nat Hentoff and Leonard Feather. And in his search for an ideal sound, Koenig procured exotic, state-of-the-recording-art gear—Neumann and EKG condenser mikes and Ampex tape recorders—and in 1956 hired a young engineer named Roy DuNann away from Capitol Records, where he (DuNann) had worked as an assistant to the brilliant John Palladino. (Years later, Koenig brought on another promising young engineer, Bernie Grundman.)

For many listeners, me included, the records Koenig and DuNann made at Contemporary's converted-shipping-room studio on LA's Melrose Place stand as the finest-sounding jazz records ever made. In their clarity, spaciousness, naturalness, and lack of needless effects, they seem almost Japanese. It's possible that DuNann's fame might have eclipsed that of his East Coast colleague, Rudy Van Gelder, if not for the fact that Los Angeles simply couldn't compete with New York as a home for top jazz talent. As terrific as the sides by Contemporary regulars like Shelly Manne, Hampton Hawes, and Art Pepper often were, they lacked the era-defining significance of the records Van Gelder was cutting with Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Thelonious Monk.

Fundamental to Koenig's insight about the art of record making was the recognition that LPs weren't simulacra of reality but an esthetic world unto themselves that differed from live music in important and delicious ways. Working in a studio allowed engineers and producers to create soundscapes that couldn't exist anywhere else—the hyperreal experience of hearing Nat King Cole singing from several inches away into an RCA 77 ribbon microphone was available only on a hi-fi. The 44-minute span of the LP's two sides allowed for extended

suites and thematic explorations. Stereo enabled another set of sonic constructs—chief among them the soundstage and panning. Multitracking added further possibilities. What emerged was a narrative medium that vastly outstripped the creative potential of live performance; it was constructed entirely in the studio and constrained only by the artist's imagination.

Koenig recognized that recording—often conceived of as primarily a technical

process—was mostly a matter of sensibility and taste. I think the same applies to the other side of the audio equation: Listening to music at home touches on just as many issues of sensibility. Beyond the simple scale of good, better, and best sound, a hi-fi component is a result of thousands of esthetic decisions reflecting its maker's vision of what the ideal listening experience should be.

Nowhere is this truer than in the neurosis-sowing world of record players and their supporting accoutrements. For the past several months, I've been listening to two phono stages that reveal the contrasting visions of beauty and fidelity of the individuals who conceived them. Spoiler alert: Both devices are pretty great at making music, though in distinctly different ways, both of which I found difficult to describe relying on the conventional glossary of audio writing.

TRON ELECTRIC CONVERGENCE SIGNATURE PHONO STAGE

The Tron Electric Convergence Signature is a rather unassuming object assembled in Uxbridge, a suburb of London, by self-described “master craftsman” Graham



Tricker.¹ Perusing the copy on his company's website confirms that Tricker is not a man broken by a lack of confidence—the words “perfection” and “perfect,” referring to his designs, appear with numbing regularity. As my grandmother liked to say, nobody's going to blow your horn unless you blow it first.

The Signature is a souped-up version of the stock Convergence, Tron's entry-level phono stage; Tricker told me its name refers to “converging high performance and realistic pricing.” The website further tells us that the Signature, which costs \$4000, “has selected components fitted, plus a few other improvements incorporated that Graham found to improve the audio fidelity even further.” What these components and improvements are I wasn't able to ascertain.

Glimpsed from the outside, the Tron is a rather plain-looking thing about the size and shape of a small shoebox. There's a power switch on the front and on the back the expected two sets of RCA jacks and a ground lug. On the bottom of the chassis is a switch allowing the ground to be lifted. There are no options for setting loading or anything else. The moving coil version, which I auditioned, has 68dB of gain; versions designed for moving magnet and mono cartridges are available.

Curious about what lay inside this enigmatic box, I unscrewed an army of Torx screws and removed the lid, which revealed a pristinely populated circuit board. On it, two adorable, potted step-up transformers of unspecified origin precede three tubes—a pair of 12AX7s and a 12AU7—sourced from Russia. Nearby is a pair of unidentified and fancy-looking film capacitors and a well-shielded choke. The layout and workmanship are orderly and surgically neat.

I listened to the Tron using three low-output moving coil cartridges—a Dynavec Te Kaitora Rua, a rebuilt Ortofon SPU Classic G, and a Hana Umami Red—and despite the lack of loading options, its personality remained unnervingly constant.

How can I best describe for you the experience of listening to the Tron? Imagine cooking a simple beef chili—ground chuck,

beans, tomato sauce, onion, chiles—and then serving it right away. You'd probably have something tasty but a bit unremarkable. But what if you added to it cocoa powder, cloves, cumin, and red wine? Or maybe you went crazy and replaced the chuck with short rib, and then added ground coffee or porcini powder or even a good Thai fish sauce, and then kept it in the fridge for two



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ALPHA DESIGN LABS
ANALOGMAGIK
ANALOGUE PRODUCTION
ANALYSIS PLUS
AUDIENCE
AUDIO DESK SYSTEME
AUDIO MAGIC
AUDIO REPLAS
AUDIOQUEST
AUDIOSHIELD
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BDR SOUND ENHANCEMENT
BELLA SOUND
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BLUE HORIZON
BOB'S DEVICES
BUTCHER BLOCK ACOUSTICS

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CHANG LIGHTSPEED
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CHORD ELECTRONICS
CLEARAUDIO
CONTACT ENHANCER
CRYSTAL CABLE
DAN CLARK AUDIO
DH LABS SILVER SONIC
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DYNAVECTOR
ELEVEN XI AUDIO
ELROD POWER SYSTEMS
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ENTREQ
ESP ESSENTIAL SOUND
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FEICKERT
FERRUM
FINITE ELEMENTE
FOCAL
FOSGATE
FURUTECH
GINGKO AUDIO
GOLD NOTE
GOLDEN SOUND

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GRAHAM ENGINEERING
GUTWIRE
HANA CARTRIDGES
HARBETH
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HERBIE'S AUDIO LAB
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IFI AUDIO
IKEDA
ISOACOUSTICS INC
ISOCLEAN POWER
ISOTEK
JORMA DESIGN
JPS LABS
KAB
KIMBER KABLE
KOETSU
KR AUDIO
L'ART DU SON
LAB12
LAMM INDUSTRIES
LEHMANN AUDIO
LESSLOSS AUDIO
LITTLE FWEND
LYRA
MAGNAN AUDIO CABLES

MARIGO LAB
MEZE HEADPHONES
MOBILE FIDELITY MOFI
MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS
NEOTECH
NITTY GRITTY
NORDOST
NUPRIME AUDIO
ONZOW
ORTOFON
OYAIDE
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STILLPOINTS
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days before serving it? Quite possibly, now you'd have a dish with a memorably deep, caramelized, and lingering flavor. If you replace "flavor" with "tone," you'll begin getting a sense of the Tron's sound.

On the title track from *On the Beach* (Reprise R 2180), the Tron lent Neil Young's sorrowful electric guitar a thick, chocolaty tone; along with his haunted singing, it came through the speakers with spooky, astonishing presence. The Tron also excelled at chunk, deep color, drive, and drama, and conveyed this album's desolate-yet-inspired songwriting with all of its emotional charge intact. If you've read this column before, you must know that this excited and pleased me, playing directly to my preferences or, speaking less charitably, my prejudices.

Fortunately for the Tron, this burnished, rich sound doesn't include bloated bass, slow transients, or the other sonically gooey artifacts associated with some vintage-style tube circuits. This British phono stage sounds clear, fast, and articulate, never losing track of the music's heartbeat. During my time with it, it was admirably quiet and operated with zero disturbances or hiccups.

What I enjoyed even more about the Tron is that it reproduced music with what

I can only describe as palpable beauty, lending textures a certain euphony and golden-hour glow. On "I've Told Ev'ry Little Star," an obscure Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein number from a mid-1970s repress of the aforementioned *Sonny Rollins and the Contemporary Leaders* (Contemporary S 7564), Rollins's tenor, played at a sprint, somehow managed to sound both agile and maximally dense. "Wow, it sounds like it's *right there*," said Ken Micallef, who was over for a visit. But Barney Kessel's guitar, panned hard left, may have sounded even more wondrous: it was as colorful as a Matisse canvas and achingly lovely, a testament to Roy DuNann's artistry and craft.

If you enjoy harmonic richness, saturated tone color, and presence as much as I do, you will likely love the Tron. It has a sound I associate with phono stages that first route the signal through a transformer. SUTs tend to offer this type of tonally rich presentation, which sometimes comes at the expense of fine detail, and the Tron is not totally exempt from this tradeoff.

In comparison with the Manley Steelhead RC phono stage I've been using, the Tron produced richer, more colorful images and simply sounded more beautiful. But it omitted some of the ambient information and long decays that the considerably

more expensive Manley extracted from my records. After Ken and I listened to the title track from an early stereo pressing of Miles Davis's *Someday My Prince Will Come* (Columbia CS 8456) on the Manley, we switched to the Tron. "The halo around Davis's trumpet is gone," Ken remarked, and sure enough, the distinctive reverberant presence of Columbia's 30th Street studio was no longer as audible. The air around the instruments didn't sound as charged, nor were they as audibly separate. And, compared to the Manley, the Tron's images were not as billowy or large. Do note that these omissions became obvious only during direct comparison.

The Manley Steelhead, which uses a transistor instead of a transformer in its first gain stage, makes for a wonderful reference because of its balanced sound and (at least) excellent performance in every sonic and musical category, as well as its unparalleled flexibility. The Tron Convergence Signature is a more niche product—a glorious-sounding companion to low-output moving coil cartridges for listeners who value tone, presence, and

1 Tron Electric. Web: tron-electric.co.uk. US distributor: High Water Sound/Jeffrey Catalano, 274 Water St., New York, NY 10038. Tel: (212) 608-8841. Email: jeffrey@highwatersound.com. Web: highwatersound.com.

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beauty above all. I could live with it quite happily forever.

PRIMALUNA EVO 100 TUBE PHONOSTAGE

I've never met PrimaLuna's Herman van den Dungen, but he must be as stubborn as a stuck zipper. Just look at the way he spells "phonostage," smushing the two words together. And who else would make a nearly 30lb phono stage with 10 (!) tubes in it?

Despite PrimaLuna's rather humdrum case design, one look at the EVO 100,² which costs \$3695, reveals that it's a decidedly out-there product. Its chassis resembles that of the superb EVO 400 line stage that sat on the shelf above it³ but is only half as wide, and it has the same huge (for a phono stage) power transformer. Pop off the bottom cover and you can take in the neat point-to-point construction. The PrimaLuna's side panels contain a switch for power and another for setting capacitance loading. On the front are knobs that allow a user to select from three settings for gain and five for resistive loading (ranging from 50 to 500 ohms), and buttons for muting and for choosing between moving magnet and moving coil modes. Also visible from the front are eight tubes: two 5AR4 rectifiers, two EL34s for power supply filtering, and four 12AX7s under spring-loaded metal shields for RIAA decoding and amplification. And get this—a little metal door held in place by four fasteners on the back of the unit reveals a Faraday cage holding two more tubes: a pair of 6922s that provide additional gain for the moving coil section. The whole thing feels as elaborate and whimsical as a dollhouse.

An *all-tube* phono stage—one without transformers or transistors providing some of the gain—is a decidedly rare animal. According to PrimaLuna importer Kevin Deal, the EVO 100 was a collaboration between van den Dungen and Jan de Groot, with inspiration from ex-Goldmund designer Marcel Croese, the man behind the EVO 400 (which itself uses a whopping eight tubes, including two rectifiers). Deal also told me that one of the main design objectives was lowering noise, which explains the Faraday cage, the tube shields, and the rubber mounts for the tubes. It also explains one of the most unexpected things about this phono stage (or phonostage): it is the quietest one I've heard, ever. With the preamp



volume set to listening volume (and I like to listen loud), I put my ear to the 105dB-sensitive Klipsch La Scalas and heard only the faintest rush, like a breeze on a summer night blowing through the almond trees in a distant valley.

My initial listening impressions of the PrimaLuna were hardly positive. It sounded listless, grayish, and shut down and emphasized groove noise to a perverse degree. Whatever it was supposed to be doing just wasn't happening. I called Deal, who told me that the review unit was fully broken in. But he also told me that it needed to be left on for three days straight to shake whatever malaise or evil eye it might have picked up during shipping—a procedure he recommends with all tubed gear. I've owned tube gear for nearly 30 years and have never heard of such a thing, but Deal has been selling tubes and hi-fi for even longer, so I decided to take a drink from his cup of mystery brew.

To cut to the chase, Deal is on to something. I left the PrimaLuna on for about 100 hours, then sat down to encounter a

completely different product. Something inside it had woken up—and I mean all the way up. The music in front of me pulsed and shimmered on a huge soundstage and had a liquid, luminous character I associate with great tube circuits.

The only factor that detracted from my enjoyment of the sound was a slight but persistent glassiness, so I replaced the inner pair of PrimaLuna-branded (presumably Chinese) 12AX7s with early-1960s RCAs, and the stock 6922s with made-in-Holland Amperex Bugle Boys. While this substitution made the EVO 100 slightly noisier—clearly the stock tubes had been carefully selected—it also got rid of the glassiness and, tonally speaking, thickened the sauce. If you're bristling at using holier-than-thou vintage tubes in this product, I submit that spending \$300 to \$600 with a reputable tube dealer to improve the sound of a \$3700 phono stage is not an utterly insane use of your hard-earned money.

The broken-in, warmed-up, pimped-out EVO 100 proved to be a delight. It paid particular dividends with acoustic instruments and reverberant spaces, so I listened to more Ravi Shankar than might be advisable, reveling in the textures of his sitar

and the meditative drone of the tanpura. On Raga Hameer from *Ragas Hameer & Gara* (Deutsche Grammophon 2531 216), Shankar's sitar resounded seemingly forever, especially in the slower early section, showing off the instrument's plaintive, complex harmonics with particularly keen insight.

The EVO 100's quicksil-



ver character also made me reach for *The Milk-Eyed Mender* (Drag City DC263), Joanna Newsom's suite of songs for voice and harp from 2004. One of that record's pleasures is the contrast between Newsom's adenoidal, somewhat creaky singing and the pellucid and altogether grand sounds created by the 46 strings of her Lyon & Healy Style 15 harp. I've never heard that instrument sound as stirring as it did on that record through the PrimaLuna, playing in the air between my speakers like an apparition and roiling my body with goosebumps.

And here's where we get back to design esthetics: No component can be superb at everything, which is why designers have to make choices. In the case of the PrimaLuna, van den Dungen and de Groot worked hard to achieve the ethereal, lit-from-within quality that can only come from an all-tube circuit, and one of the areas that received less of their attention is drive. On the hot slab of classic reggae that is "Confirm Reservation," from Gregory Isaacs's *More Gregory* (Charisma 6203 103), the PrimaLuna excelled at splaying the vocal against the rear wall of my loft and capturing every last iota of ambient information, but

the bass, drums, and rhythm guitar of the Roots Radics sounded tuneful rather than commanding. If your musical predilections run toward mostly rock, reggae, hip hop, or—God love you—EDM, then the EVO 100 may not scratch your deepest musical itch. On the other hand, fans of classical, folk, jazz, and other mostly acoustic music will likely rejoice at everything it does so beguilingly well.

In a way, the PrimaLuna turned out to be the inverse of the Tron: instead of highlighting the physicality and tonal richness of voices and instruments, it drew my

attention to the speed, pitch, and realistic decay of notes and their interaction with the spaces in which they were recorded.

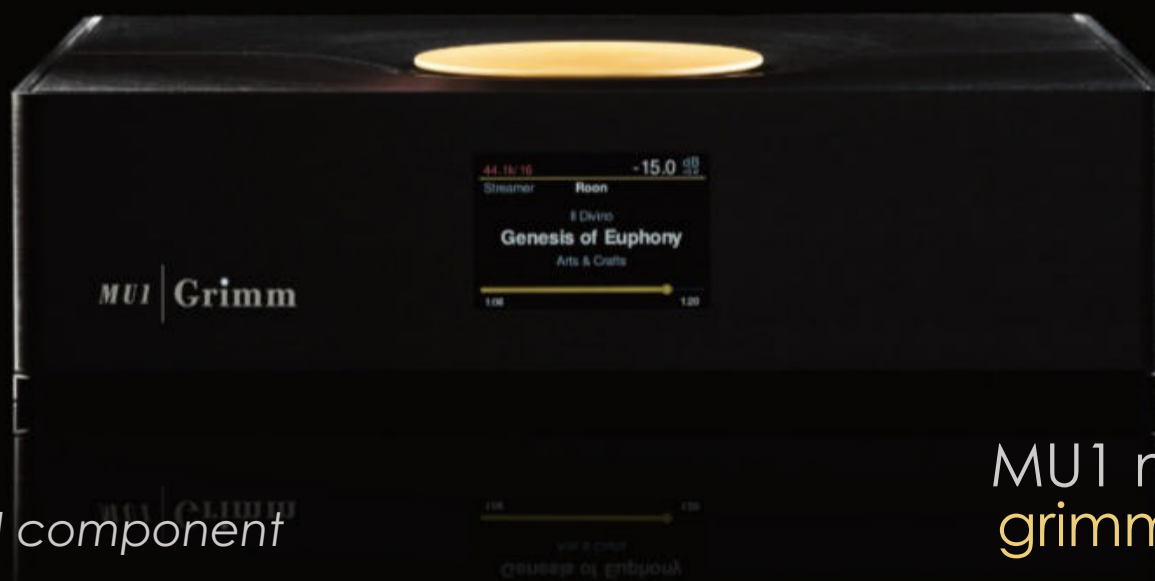
If you're a headphone listener, you might compare the Tron to a great dynamic-driver like the Sony MDR-R10, and the PrimaLuna to a classic electrostatic one like the Stax SR-007.

What matters is that both of these phono stages reveal vacuum tubes to be the futureproof devices they are, capable of fulfilling nearly any sonic and musical brief when placed in the right hands. Both will show you exotic levels of performance—as long as your musical priorities are in line with theirs—and offer high value for your outlay. And both encourage you to understand and more fully inhabit your sensibility. The music and the gear you choose offer clues about the person you're becoming—who do you want to be? ■

2 PrimaLuna USA/Upscale Distribution, 1712 Corrigan Ct., La Verne, CA 91750. Tel: (909) 310-8540. Email: info@upscaleaudio.com. Web: upscaledistribution.com. See Herb Reichert's take on the EVO 100 in his Gramophone Dreams column in the December 2023 issue of *Stereophile*, p.23.

3 See Herb's review of the line stage at [stereophile.com/content/primalu-na-evo-400-preamplifier](https://www.stereophile.com/content/primalu-na-evo-400-preamplifier).

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