



Editor | Paul Messenger

Writers

Colin Anderson
Chris Bryant
Martin Colloms
Stan Curtis
Greg Drygala
Andrew Everard
Nigel Finn
Chris Frankland
Steve Harris
Jose Victor Henriques
Keith Howard
Jason Kennedy
Paul Messenger
Paul Rigby

Publisher | Martin Colloms

Design | Philippa Steward

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29 Flask Walk
London
NW3 1HH
info@hificritic.com
www.hificritic.com

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I'd like to ask readers to spare a thought for Malcolm Steward, a regular contributor to these pages and the dear husband of our makeup artist and designer Philippa, who suffered a very serious road accident back in July. Malcolm is still in intensive care, and the prognosis at the time of writing remains uncertain.

HIFICRITIC wants some feedback from readers, on the sort of content that would be most valued. I'll continue to try and include worthwhile features to counterbalance the inevitable hardware reviews, but am particularly interested in finding out whether readers want to read more about analogue or digital sources, and if digital whether it's about DACs, servers, downloading or streaming services.

The hi-fi world has become fragmented, and the dividing line seems to be related to the prime music source being used. That in turn seems to vary according to the age of the individual reader and customer. Those born before the mid-1960s will probably have accumulated a fair amount of vinyl before CD became the dominant carrier in the late-1980s. (It might have started in 1983, but took some years to get going.)

Barely a decade later, file-sharing began to erode the primacy of CD as the most universal music storage medium, even though the widespread use of MP3-coded material was well short of hi-fi (or for that matter CD) quality. However, MP3 file-sharing helped home computers get their foot in the music door, which has had huge implications. The continuing development of both computers and the internet constantly increases the range of possibilities.

But this constant change can also be a problem, albeit one that seems to be a characteristic of a 21st century, where nothing has to be right first time, as it can always be fixed by a subsequent update. Although Paul Rigby's piece on page 48 did give me pause for thought, it's undeniable that a vinyl disc made more than 50 years ago is still playable today. One reason why the guys who invented vinyl got it right first time (apart from the mono-to-stereo change) was maybe because they didn't have the option to go back and change it later. In contrast, digital media in general seems to be in a constant state of flux today, always changing from one day to the next *via* further software upgrades.

This ability to download updates from the internet may perhaps bring improvements, but the negatives are no less valid. Indeed, a neighbour who works at the very sharp end of computer technologies recently told me that he never installs updates on his computer because they simply slow it down and clog it up. (This view is not generally accepted due to the need for up to date virus protection.)

Furthermore, despite the considerable growth of new digital prospects and techniques, the last few years have also seen a significant revival in enthusiasm for analogue vinyl for music storage and replay. The reasons are numerous and various, but among the more significant observations are that the customers for new vinyl replay equipment are not merely 'old fogeys' resuscitating their record collections, but cover a wide range of ages. Whether analogue vinyl simply sounds more natural and musical than digitally processed material will doubtless remain a bone of contention for the foreseeable future.

Paul Messenger
Editor