LISTENING BY ART DUDLEY

THIS ISSUE: Art shares some recent gems from the *Stereophile* mail bag and tries yet another new BBC-licensed minimonitor.

The Thirteenth LS3/5a

In my January 2020 Listening[1] column, I wrote about a place where three things overlap: the joys (and benefits) of being a record collector, the natural tendency to grow and challenge ourselves as listeners, and the need to forgive ourselves for the shortcomings of our youth. The hook was the story of how I started out disliking the music of guitarist John Fahey (1939–2001) and ended up loving it. But it could just as easily have been about cooking or hiking or Jethro Tull or any of a number of other things.

At the end of that bit, I invited readers to send in their own such stories, and I'm happy to say that the response was the most extraordinary I've seen since the days of *Listener* Magazine (1995–2003). This outpouring wasn't just the largest volume of mail I've ever received in response to a *Stereophile* piece—although it was that—but also the most heartfelt and overwhelmingly positive. (Only one reader had a negative reply, and even that was from a frequent and reliably good-natured correspondent who expressed annoyance that I drew attention to the out-of-tune instruments on so many recordings by itinerant country blues musicians. Fair enough.) Literally dozens of readers had worthwhile things to say; here is a small sampling of my favorite responses:

I was a radio announcer at the University of New Mexico's KUNM in Albuquerque in the early '70s. Like you, I thought Fahey's music had a sound akin to cotton field, cigar-box, funerary blues, and lacked much, if any, technical glamor.

John Fahey came to a small side venue at the university's Popejoy Hall around that time. I found him to be nervous, temperamental, and generally unfocused during his mesmerizing, nearly two-hour performance. He was sipping from two 16oz cans of 7 UP and who-knows-how-many cigarettes. After a few pieces, some of them from *Blind Joe Death* and others that he seemed to be still in the process of working out, he mused aloud that recording artists like Leo Kottke and Robbie Basho (on his own Takoma label) were colleagues of a sort. Nevertheless, he drew a sharp and memorable distinction between his playing and Leo Kottke's, saying, "Leo Kottke is a better technician, but I'm a better writer." Why he said that, I didn't grasp at the time, but I couldn't help but remember the statement as significant to explaining the sentiment that you expressed in your article, and which I found fascinating.

There are times when a small thing can have a profound effect.

I'm hardly a credentialed audiophile, but I could hear strains of Fahey in the music of both Kottke and Basho, and generally preferred Kottke and Basho when first introduced to the recordings of these two men. It was impossible to avoid comparing the skill sets, or the now-hard-to-ignore raw, enigmatic passion of Fahey compositions when dissected side-by-side with the technically astonishing guitar work of Leo Kottke. In my mind, I hear John Fahey as a busker on a parched Southern California sidewalk and Kottke as a virtuoso concert performer in a large music hall. —*Jim Wellborn*

Beginning in 1967 (when I was 27), I gradually acquired nine Fahey albums, starting with *Blind Joe Death*, which is Vol.1 of the Takoma 1967 reissue. I also have Vols.2, 3, and 6, as well as a Christmas album with no date of issue. My last acquisition was of a 180gm vinyl LP with no date or label (a bootleg, I assume), entitled *Poor Pilgrim's Work*, based on an enclosed reprint of an "historical" brochure.

I still do not know what drew me to Fahey, especially as I was still playing records on a no-name system in the late 1960s. By the early '70s, I had a "proper" playback system (Heathkit AR-1500 receiver, AR turntable, and Large Advent speakers). But by then, the Fahey bloom was starting to fade. Perhaps, in the beginning, I was captivated by something just beyond my grasp. Today, the grasp is not so hard, but I don't seem to find as much "there" there. Or maybe my emotional hot buttons have simply changed.

I realize these comments are the reverse of what you asked for, but maybe they provide grist for the mill if not food for thought. Keep up the good work, though you do sometimes wear me out with your rehabs and reconstructions! —*Michael Bruer*

In the late '60s, I had the good fortune to (sorta) attend Fairfax high school in Los Angeles. Directly across Melrose Blvd. was a new, small record shop called Aron's Records. Behind the counter more often than not was the owner, Manny Aron. I passed far too much time with Manny, as he was generous with both his time and his thoughts.

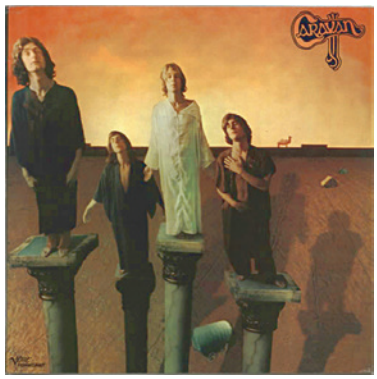
After cruising the new arrivals section (which was frequently filled with promo records dropped off by the local reps), I'd ask Manny's opinion of the new Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, Doors, etc., albums. He'd likely steer me in the right direction. On occasion he'd make a suggestion, and one day he put the first Caravan album in my hand. I didn't like the looks of it, the vibes weren't right, and I handed it back to him. He told me to take it home and listen to it, and not wanting to annoy him, I did so. That evening I gave it a listen and confirmed everything that I felt about it—too weird—and brought it back to the store. Manny wouldn't take it back until I took it home and listened to it again. I had plans for the $2 tied up in that record but reluctantly gave it another shot; I liked it even less. It was progressive, bombastic, and much too British, so I brought it back to the

1 See stereophile.com/content/listening-199-falcon-graham-ls35a.

store again, and again Manny refused to put it back into stock, telling me that I needed to keep listening to it until I *heard* it.

That record remained, unheard, in my record collection forever. Finally, other record stores opened, and I was able to trade it in for something, anything, and be done with it.

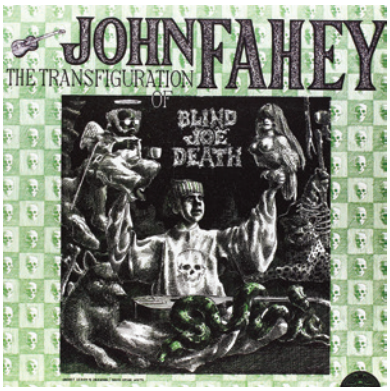
Jump forward 15 years, and I was now the owner of Bow Wow Records, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The kind of interchange that I had had with Manny was now part of my every day. I made suggestions, some of which were accepted willingly, others coming back later as used LPs.



One day, for reasons unknown, something in the back of my head made me think about that Caravan album, long out of print. I began searching for it in stores and record shows. By then it had moved to the top of my "want list," but I couldn't find it anywhere. One day, at a local record show, going from vendor to vendor, asking for the first Caravan record, I found not one copy but two! Bought them both, took them home and excitedly put one on the turntable. As I sat there my mind wandered back to those high school days, but, more importantly, as I listened, I heard what it was that Manny wanted me to hear. For those who don't know that album, search it out and discover a foundational record in the Canterbury tradition. Rejoice to the melodies, the harmonies, the inventiveness and creativity of a group at the forefront of a new musical scene. The first Caravan record is a masterpiece, and I have a visceral response whenever I hear it. Hell, just writing about it makes me a bit misty-eyed.

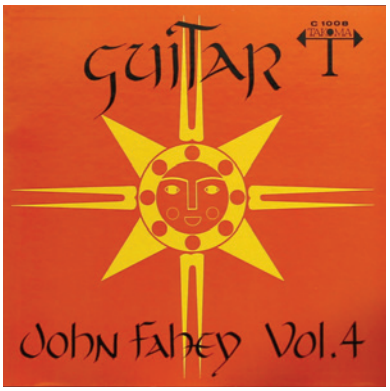
There are times when a small thing can have a profound effect. Thank you, Manny: Aron's records has shaped my life. —*Andrew Horwitz*

I was taking in my Sony T-3000 to be serviced when my tech gave me this month's issue of *Stereophile* and pointed out the John Fahey piece. He mentioned this because I wrote a biography on him, *Dance of Death—The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist* (Chicago Review Press, hardcover 2014, paperback 2018). I'm glad you came around to Fahey's music, and it's somewhat understandable if you started with *VOT*, as it's really a hodgepodge of



various recording leftovers and jokes. The most fascinating part of that album is the liner notes and 20-page booklet with his bizarre, semiautobiographical ramblings. Fahey (and I) would consider *America* or *Fare Forward Voyagers* to be his finest recorded performances, but I greatly enjoy all his early records. Still looking for a copy of the original *Blind Joe Death*. I did manage to find an original *Dance of Death* that he pressed 300 copies of in 1964. Perhaps one day I'll find that holy grail.

As for your question regarding music I hated when younger and grew to

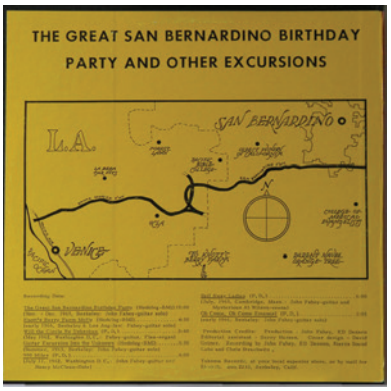


appreciate: Oddly enough, growing up in the 1990s, I really disliked the Ramones. As a wannabe pseudo-intellectual teen who was reading Beat poetry and listening to My Bloody Valentine and ambient techno (admittedly an odd combo in retrospect), I found the Ramones to be sophomoric and uninteresting musically. Somewhere postcollege, I heard their cover of "Do You Wanna Dance," and I heard an ennui that had never registered to me in their music. "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend" had a similar longing, and it drew me into the subtlety of all their music, not to mention the fantastic recordings. It was after watching the Ramones documentary *End of the Century* that I can understand the pathos and suffering in Joey's ballads. While still sophomoric at times, they had a remarkably varied emotional range for a group who essentially made the same record their whole career. Fun fact to tie it together: The first Ramones album was recorded by Craig Leon, who at the time was best known for recording orchestras for classical recordings, and Leon ended up recording a solo LP of electronic music for Fahey's Takoma label in 1981. The album is called *Nommos* and is fantastic. It was recently reissued by the RVNG label out of NYC.

—Steve Lowenthal

After I read the sentence in Listening #205 (w.r.t. Fahey): "Or did he consciously invent punk folk decades before the emergence of punk rock?," I punched the air twice and shouted, "Yes!"

I keep telling this to people who pretend to be interested—I don't think Fahey is a household name anywhere on the globe, and it's definitely not the case here in Hungary—that for



me Fahey was the first true punk. He learned the rules very well then discarded or adapted them, thereby pushing the boundaries of the art. He experimented with and juxtaposed stuff that must have seemed downright crazy at the time and still does not sound dated. Folk and turntablism (as in recordings played backwards) on *Vol. 4/The Great San Bernardino Birthday Party* field recordings, different tuning systems, inspiration from Indian classical music and Bartók, etc. (Fahey was a huge Bartók fan.)

As for tuning specifically, I believe he is always in tune, albeit sometimes it's in an unusual one. Unfortunately, I lack the musical knowledge to properly explain what's going on, but there's a comprehensive list of the tunings that he used. For you, as a guitar player, hopefully it will be informative.

Plus, Fahey being an avid record collector, his contribution to studying and preserving early blues is invaluable. I find it an interesting and fascinating coincidence that Bartók played a very similar role with Hungarian folk music.

I honestly think that Fahey was one of the greatest American composers/musicians of the 20th century. And it breaks my heart that the quality of some of the reissues is a total disservice to his art. Are you happy with your copy in terms of sound and manufacturing quality?

Ok, I'll stop gushing over Fahey and answer the question that you actually addressed to your readers. The music I really hated as a kid was electro/synth-based pop music, Kraftwerk and the like. I grew up in a socialist model town with lots of gray concrete buildings, and that music somehow telegraphed the picture of a hopeless, rainy November morning when the gray concrete is even grayer. In other words, it made me depressed.

Today, the first word that comes to mind when I think about Kraftwerk is "funk," and I find their techno-optimism heartwarmingly innocent.

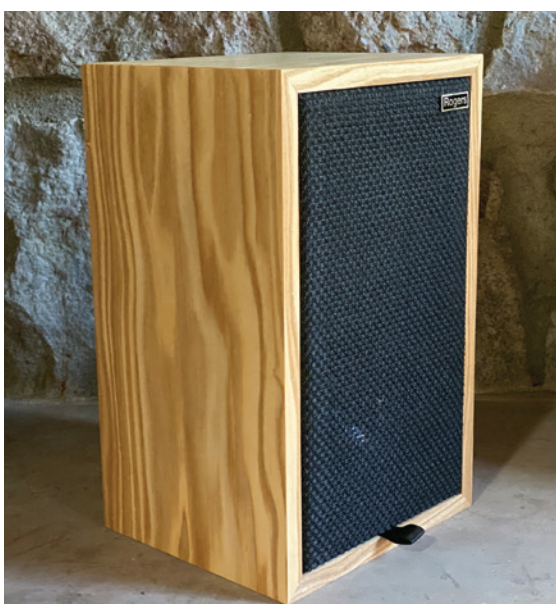
—Dexler Poppe

ROOM AT THE TABLE FOR ONE MORE

You knew it was coming—or at least you *should* have known.

In my July 2019 Listening column,[2] I wrote about the then-most-recent iteration of the classic BBC-designed LS3/5a, the 12"-tall location monitor that has, in the 45-plus years since its introduction, gained a following for its suitability as a domestic loudspeaker. That newly introduced speaker was the Graham Chartwell LS3/5a ($2990/pair)—by my count, the 12th-ever commercial version of this classic design—which is offered alongside the same company's slightly different LS3/5 ($2990/pair), also BBC-designed. Thus, for a while, and taking into consideration the enduringly available Falcon LS3/5a ($2995/pair), lucky consumers could choose between three different contemporary versions of the most influential minimonitor in history.

Now I have in hand the 13th LS3/5a, which is manufactured by Rogers International UK Ltd. As it happens, the very first commercially produced LS3/5a was manufactured by Rogers—or, more accurately, it was made under the name Rogers by British manufacturer Swisstone. But in the early 1990s, Rogers was sold to Wo Kee Hong Holdings Ltd. of Hong Kong—and later that same decade, owing to the economic turndown, Wo Kee Hong shut down their UK manufacturing facility. And that was it: There would be no more Rogers LS3/5a's.



You knew it was coming—or at least you should have known.

Or so it seemed. But then, in 2018, an engineer named Andy Whittle approached Wo Kee Hong with an idea: Whittle, who had served as Rogers's technical director prior to working for Exposure HiFi and then serving a 10-year stint at Audio Note UK, believed that Rogers should once again manufacture the LS3/5a in the UK. The owners agreed, a plan was drawn up, and in March 2019 the first new samples went on sale.

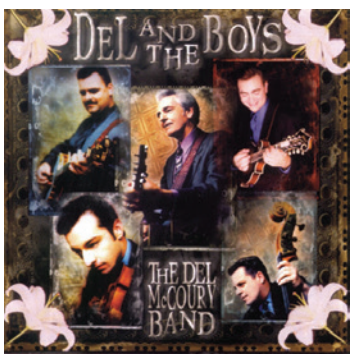
The new Rogers LS3/5a ($3350/pair), like the one manufactured by Falcon Acoustics, adheres to the pre-1987 BBC specification: It is a 15 ohm loudspeaker that connects to its partnering amplifier by means of banana-only sockets installed flush to the rear panel, and whose 19mm tweeter has a doped Mylar-dome tweeter. For its part, the Graham Chartwell LS3/5a is an 11 ohm (post-1987 spec) unit with a fabric dome tweeter and multiway connectors of the more common sort. Beyond those distinctions, the design brief is more or less the same: Both speakers employ a balance-veneered enclosure made of 12mm plywood, a 110mm midwoofer with a doped Bextrene cone, a fabric grille, and a slightly complex phase-correcting crossover network made to the BBC's very precise specifications.

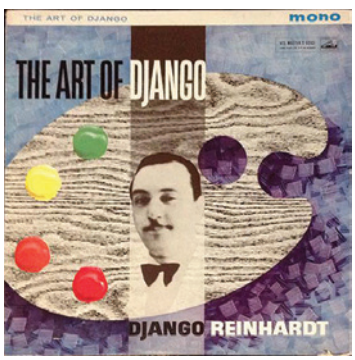
Other, subtler distinctions exist.

2 See stereophile.com/content/listening-205-john-fahey-naim-nac-32-5-naim-nap-250.

On the Graham Chartwell speaker, the tweeter's perforated-metal *cappello saturno* grilles were held in place magnetically; on the Rogers speakers they are cemented in place. The banana sockets on the Rogers speakers, which I happen to like *a lot*, are silver plated, in contrast with the gold plating used on the Graham Chartwell (and most other manufacturers') connectors. The Tygan-fabric grilles on both speakers are held in place with Velcro, yet the grilles on the Rogers speakers are far easier to remove, thanks to the addition of fabric pull loops.

There are also differences in the sourcing of the drivers. Loudspeaker manufacturer KEF no longer offers the exact same tweeter and mid/woofer originally specified by the BBC—so, Graham Audio commissioned well-known designer Derek Hughes to engineer their replacement drivers, the provenance of which I don't know. For the new Rogers LS3/5a, Andy Whittle reverse-engineered both drivers. He told me via email: "The bass unit has the correct Bextrene cone and is made in Asia. The bass units come to the UK, where they are QC'd and then hand-doped with two layers of damping and then pair-matched. The tweeter is the correct Mylar material; the coil/dome assembly is made in Asia and comes to the UK where we assemble it into the magnet system, QC [it], and then pair-match." The manufacturing of the crossovers and cabinets, and all loudspeaker assembly work, is performed in the UK, at Rogers's facility in Virginia Water, which sounds like an ingredient in Mountain Dew but is actually a very posh suburb to the south of London.





I made my stand

Unfortunately, by the time I requested a review pair of the Rogers LS3/5a, the excellent 24" Gig Harbor loudspeaker stands ($599/pair), which I used in my earlier review, were no longer in my possession; likewise the undeniably complementary[3] Naim NAIT 2 integrated amplifier, reconditioned by AV Options, which I also used with the other LS3/5a's: gone, gone, gone.

For the former, I had to improvise, pressing into service a pair of 20"-tall open-frame metal stands that have followed me through one apartment and four houses—and I have no recollection whatsoever who made them. These I topped with stacked-plywood scraps from some long-ago plinth project, to bring their height near to the required 24": an imperfect solution but a solution nonetheless. Amplification was more straightforward: I had already been running in my review sample of the Naim NAIT XS 3 integrated amp ($2999 including built-in phono stage; review coming soon), and I felt sufficiently familiar with its contribution to the sound that I could use it to describe, with confidence, the character of the new speakers. Speaker cables were the same 21' pair of AV Options Twisted 56 speaker cable I used for the earlier review ($674 plus $195 for the Deep Cryo treatment).

From the first notes of the first song I played through the Rogers speakers—the Byrds' "Eight Miles High," from the David Crosby box set *Voyage* (3 CDs, Atlantic/Rhino R2 77628)—I was enchanted by the combination of the NAIT's rhythmic forthrightness and speed (what some wags refer to as the Naim Audio *happy sound*) and the trippy explicitness of the Rogers speakers. The latter also performed the archetypal LS3/5a trick of fooling my ears into thinking that Chris Hillman's electric bass sounded deeper and more powerful than those tiny woofers could ever manage, and presented the singing voices of Crosby, Gene Clark, and Roger McGuinn with utterly convincing spatial presence.

Rest assured, here was that LS3/5a explicitness at its smoothest and easiest to take. There was no sonic edge tagging along with those crisply realistic and perfectly aligned note attacks. One song into the game, and I already felt *uplifted*.

Turning to one of my favorite collections of shorter orchestral pieces by Elgar—that by Paul Goodwin and the English Chamber Orchestra (CD, Harmonia Mundi HMU 907258)—the composer's *Nursery Suite* sounded especially fine, with great momentum (not to mention an appropriate degree of *clatter*) in Part Five ("The Wagon Passes"), decent if not astonishingly tactile pizzicato notes in Part Six ("The Merry Doll"), and nice string tone and texture in Part Seven ("Dreaming–Envoy"). As for the last bit, yes, Shindo tubes and DeVore O/93 speakers gave better texture and color, but the Naim/Rogers combo almost made up for it with their nonsterile details of playing and conducting technique. The *Suite* sounded so good that I left the disc in all the way to the end—Elgar's *Elegy*, composed in response to the death of his dear friend (and "Nimrod" inspiration) August Jaeger—and again the LS3/5a gave refreshingly good insight into Goodwin's conducting and the manner in which he kept the poignant little piece from bogging down.

Richard Thompson's "1952 Vincent Black Lightning," in the masterful version by the Del McCoury Band (*Del and the Boys*, CD, Ceili CEIL2006), along with the same album's "All Aboard," provided more examples of how well the Rogers LS3/5a served up a convincing illusion of extended low-frequency response. Mike Bub's double bass had nicely rounded tone and surprising weight. Far less surprisingly, the sound of that instrument had tremendously good rhythmic snap: Through this amplifier/speaker combination, it *drove* the song to a fare-thee-well. At the other end of the spectrum, Del's wonderful tenor voice came across with all its texture intact—an iota more would have been too much. Imaging specificity (not to mention the presence and wholeness) of the lead vocal were exceptional.

Stereo imaging is all very nice, but I get more force and touch from some of my favorite mono recordings, so I turned to my favorite Mahler Symphony No.1, by Dimitri Mitropoulos and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra

3 That's a joke. Sort of.

(CD, Sony Classical MHK 62342). The pizzicato strings at 2:44 were wonderfully tactile, and the colors of the woodwinds and the lower strings in particular were well-saturated. Better still, even with such a microscopic perspective on the recording, the glories of the sound did not detract from the flow of the music. And here, as with most other recordings I tried through the Rogers LS3/5a's, scale was shockingly good for such a tiny speaker. Scale was also huge on another mono favorite: Django Reinhardt's "Body and Soul" from *The Art of Django* (CD, BGO Records BGOCD 198). The sound was also in perfect tonal balance, and again I heard relentless musical momentum.

The only recordings I played through the speakers with less-than-enjoyable results were contemporary (and mostly digitally recorded and/or mixed) pop recordings. For example, the lead voice and autoharp on the title song from PJ Harvey's *Let England Shake* (CD, Vagrant VR651) were brittle. Here was the only time this speaker's pro-audio origin raised its techy little head and intruded upon the music making—although I suppose that's what you want if you're a recording engineer who needs to hear what's going on in the mix. (Would that they might act on that information from time to time.)

Pressed to offer a quick'n'dirty sum-up of the new Rogers LS3/5a, especially with an ear to its standing among other contemporary examples of the breed, I would describe this one as closer in character to the Falcon than the Graham Chartwell LS3/5a: It was every bit as open and detailed as the former, with perhaps slightly more freedom from audible stress at the loud end of the dynamic spectrum—without having both on hand for a side-by-side comparison, it's impossible to say for sure—and not as rounded and forgiving as the latter. But the Rogers speaker was consistently free from unnatural texture: Those wide-open trebles were never the least bit distorted. And although its bass range was less powerful-sounding and rich than that of the Graham Chartwell LS3/5, the Rogers had the clearest, most explicit, and most temporally involving bass range of any minimonitor of my experience.

Yes, any so casual a comparison puts the reviewer at risk of the sort of bias that favors the newer, more recently experienced sample. As I write this, although I could live happily ever after with any one of the three extant true LS3/5a's—the Falcon, the Graham, and the Rogers—it seems the Rogers produced the most smiles, an impression that might be colored by my pro–banana-jack bias, the samples' distinctive olivewood veneers, or any number of other nonessentials. So, compare them yourself if you can manage it. I guarantee that time spent comparing these three superb speakers will be a hell of a lot of fun. ■

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