

Hi-fi

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LOUDSPEAKER GROUPTEST

£1k bookshelf speakers – six of the finest reviewed and rated



The **Acoustic Signature Final Tool** turntable spins a musical spell



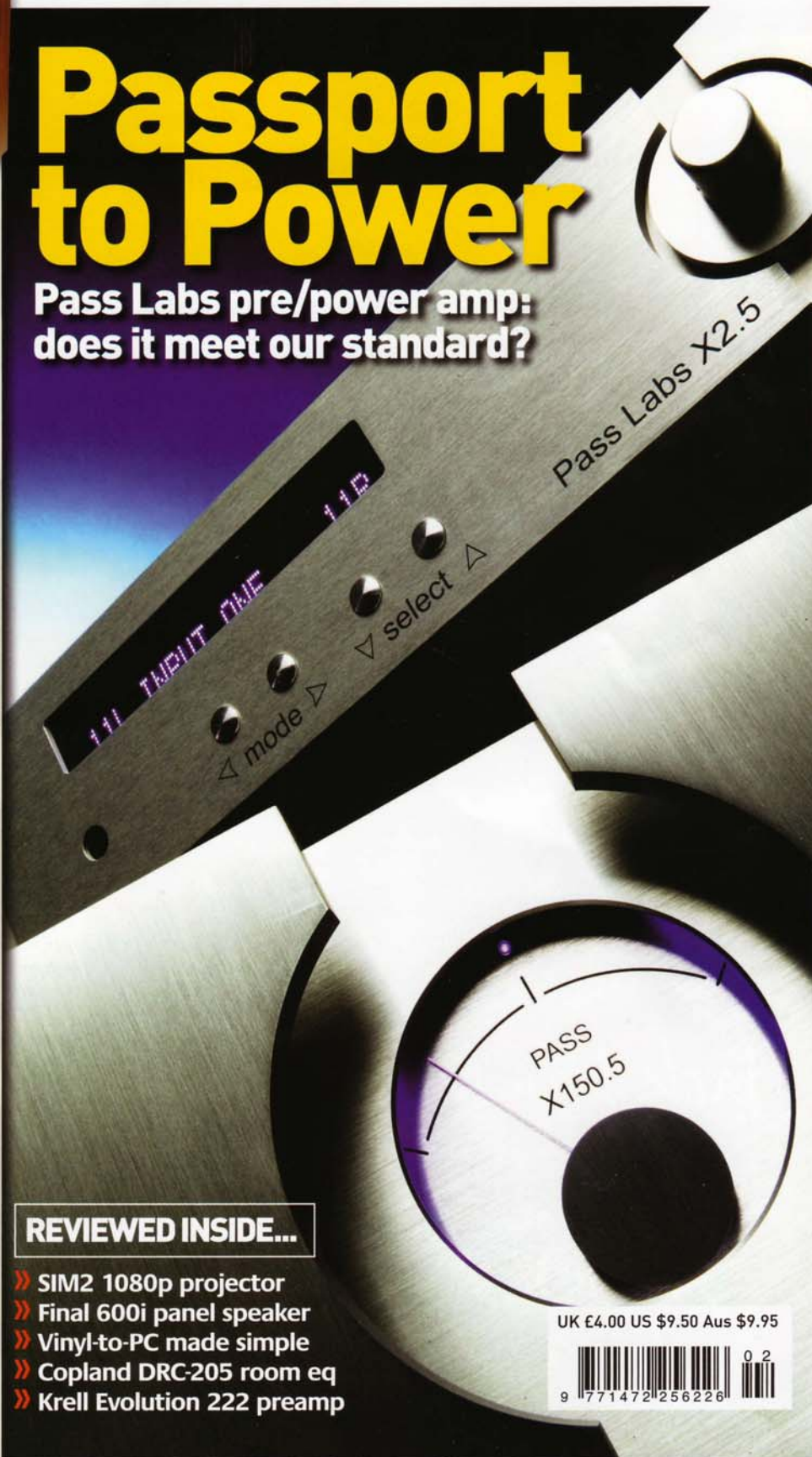
Rega Apollo CD player lifts off



Musical Fidelity X-series CD player and amp get their first lab test

Passport to Power

Pass Labs pre/power amp: does it meet our standard?

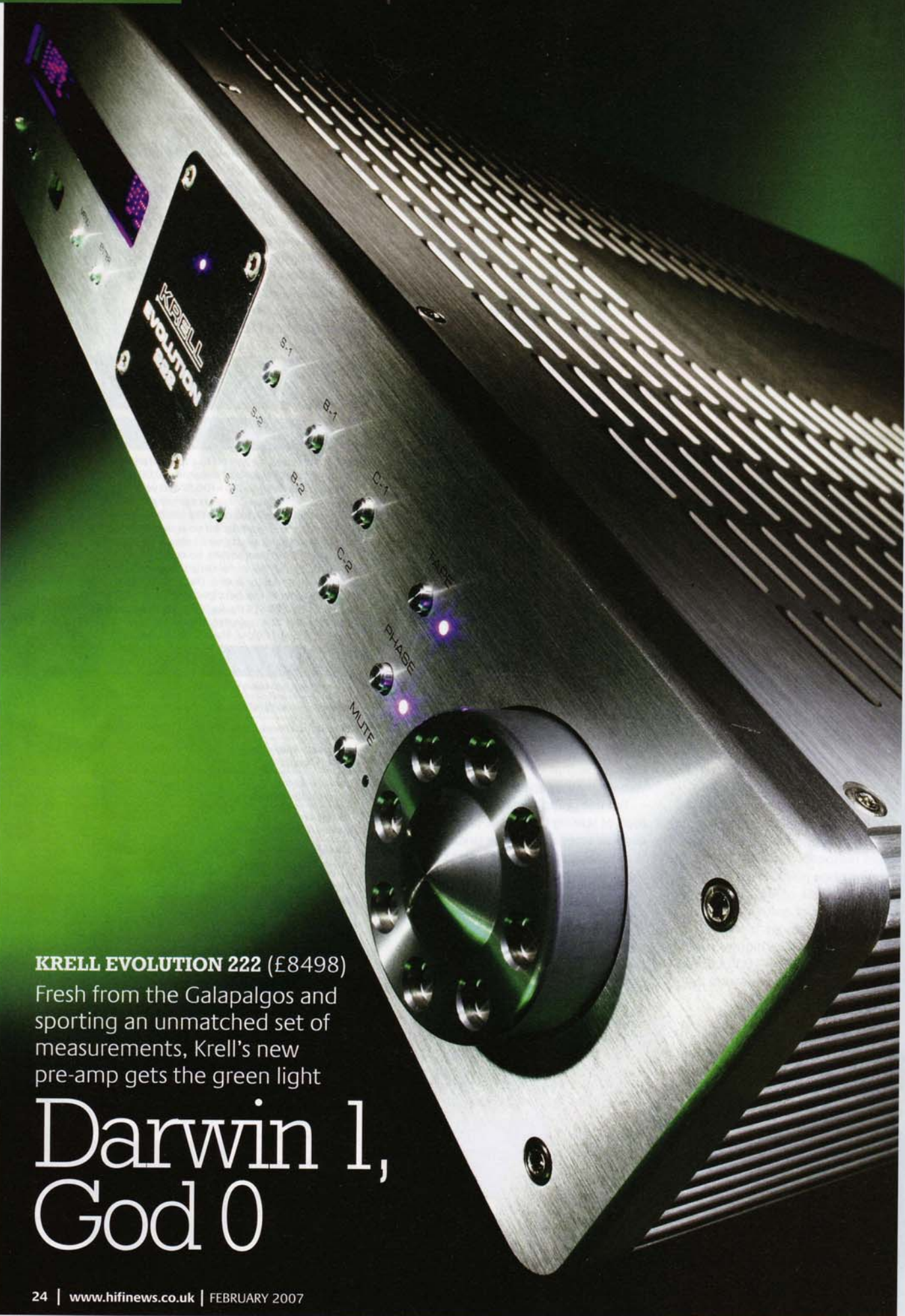


REVIEWED INSIDE...

- » SIM2 1080p projector
- » Final 600i panel speaker
- » Vinyl-to-PC made simple
- » Copland DRC-205 room eq
- » Krell Evolution 222 preamp

UK £4.00 US \$9.50 Aus \$9.95





KRELL EVOLUTION 222 (£8498)

Fresh from the Galapagos and sporting an unmatched set of measurements, Krell's new pre-amp gets the green light

Darwin 1, God 0

Tested by Ken Kessler



Krell truly welcomed the 21st Century with a radical range dubbed Evolution. The pre/power Evolution One and Two combination that heralded the line's arrival stunned everyone who saw it at CES in January 2005. New styling, zero-compromise build, spec and pricing – those of us old enough to remember the good old days when Dan D' was lean, mean and hungry figured, hey, maybe the magic is back! (He's actually a few stone leaner now, but that's another story.)

In the intervening few years, I've heard Evolution all over the place, but the defining moment for me was an all-Evo demo in Tokyo. It was the overall coherence, the sit-up-straight-and-listen command of it that sent the tingles to all extremities. What was not anticipated was a trickle-down range that would possess so much of the big ticket, multi-chassis Evolution One and Two debut combination. When I heard the same in Italy at another show, I was convinced: Krell Was Back.

In the meantime, the line has delivered winner after winner, right up to a multi-channel controller and two disc spinners. One assumes that the Evolution 222 pre-amp will constitute the entry level, because at £8498, this unit narrows the gap between Evolution and the company's other two ranges – KAV and the multi-channel Showcase lines. But the 222 two-channel pre-amp isn't just entry level. It's almost a leap of faith.

TALKING ABOUT AN EVOLUTION

Krell bills the 222 as bringing 'the advanced technologies and inspired design of the Evolution 202 to single chassis format,' the 202 being the 'middle' pre-amp between this and the Evolution Two. Aside from fitting everything into a 439x97x464 (whd) case, with the obvious loss of the benefits of a separate power supply, it's pure Evolution all the way: 1.5MHz open-loop bandwidth in a zero feedback, balanced, Krell Current Mode design, terminating in Krell's CAST connection format. All signal gain paths feed through surface-mount topology, using Krell's 'proprietary multiple-output current mirrors with nearly 500 times the open loop linearity of other designs.' Absolute zero negative feedback applies to the entire pre-amp, Krell adding, 'nor is it necessary. Open-loop distortion is typically less than 50 parts per million.'

Your main tactile contact, the volume control, features a 16-bit balanced resistor ladder, and its

feel was clearly 'tuned' by someone who's wound a fine watch or two in his day. The 222's bandwidth and transient response are 'virtually unaffected by the volume setting.' And despite the reduction in real estate, the unit is driven by a 150VA toroidal transformer, feeding four 6-amp bridge rectifiers and 19,800 microfarads of filter capacitance. Additionally, a Krell-designed digital control circuit monitors and optimises all operating parameters.

Don't let the slim-as-Dan casework (he works out like a demon, hence the constant, jealous references) fool you into expecting a lack of features. The accessories box within reveals a 34-button, machined-from-metal remote control that covers every function, including phase inversion, the worth of which this pre-amp demonstrates vividly. I'm not about to open up that can of worms, but anyone who bought into the need for

ABOVE: Tiny, near-flush buttons pepper the fascia while a light in the middle of the Krell nameplate glows red or blue to show operation mode

BELOW: Blue display shows various status messages and configuration selections

'Suddenly, I had a hankering for beans and beer. And the trashiest, big-busted blonde ever to pole dance in 'Vegas'



correct polarity when it was topical will appreciate this immediately. And the very instant this is demonstrated to you in the audio salon of your choice, you'll kick yourself for not having it before.

On the fascia is a display that shows various status messages, choice of source input, volume level, balance offset and menu selections. These include various methods of configuring the unit to your specific needs or preferences, such as naming the inputs, trimming levels, selecting theatre mode throughput, etc.

Below it are the power-on button, infrared emitters and sensors for communication to and from remotes, and menu and enter buttons for navigating the former. In the middle of the Krell nameplate is an LED that glows red in standby mode and blue when operational. Clustered to the right of this are buttons to choose between three single-ended, two balanced or two CAST inputs, while the last three buttons operate tape monitoring, phase selection and mute.

So filled with apertures for ingress and egress is the back panel that you might mistake the 222 for a multi-channel controller. All of the aforementioned inputs are addressed with the necessary RCA, XLR or CAST connectors as required, while the additional socketry consists of phono inputs for tape in and tape out, plus primary outputs in phono (single-ended), XLR (balanced) and CAST modes. To the extreme right (as you look at the back panel) are the mains input and the necessary connections for powering a Krell phono stage, integrating the 222 into complex systems with RS-232 and RC-5 formats, and 12V triggers.

CAST AWAY

I did not audition the unit in CAST mode, only in balanced and single-ended forms. Why? Because I didn't have a Krell power amp to hand and, besides, the brief was to assess this solely as a pre-amp, and that meant using it in place of the three or four I use as references: McIntosh C2200, Quad 99 CDP II, Melody 1688 and the rest. This amounts to a testament to the unit's value



outside of the context of a full Evolution set-up.

Even from ice-cold, after a few hours in transit in early December, it sounded great after one hour, magnificent after three, downright salacious after 24. Yes, 'salacious'. And that's coming from a known vacuum tube devotee.

Sometimes, I guess, you need to sample the other side to appreciate what you have, know or tend to prefer. (I draw the line at drinking white wine, or anything French.) Every time some gear-head mentions paddle shifts, the automotive equivalent of audiophile flat-earthers start whining about the superiority of a manual gearbox and a pedal clutch. Well, try driving a Lamborghini Gallardo in rush-hour Italian traffic with the three-pedal version. You'll *pray* for the paddles. So there's room for both, just as valves and transistors can live side-by-side.

Slotted into my review system of long-standing, the 222 was immediately at home, no mismatches and no reasons to miss CAST's benefits. After the usual dancing around with various options, I settled on the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player, McIntosh C2200 and Sonus faber Guarneris. And you – or most of you with narrow tastes and scant regard for American culture – are gonna hate the first of the tracks that made me fall in love with the 222. Dwight Yoakum may look like a redneck dickhead with his 10-gallon cowboy ☺



hat and pointy boots, but the boy can sing and twang with the gloriously oily, nasal finesse of no less than the great Buck Owens. The anniversary reissue of his stunning debut, *Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc., Etc.*, contains a live bonus CD with so much air and atmosphere that the set deserved stand-alone release two decades ago. It was the tacky, cheesy snare and dry kick drum, the fluid guitar-work and the edgy fiddle underscoring his Bakersfield-by-way-of-Kentucky vocals that convinced me of the 222's merit.

This pre-amp slid from plucking to raunch without a hitch, a textbook lesson in the versatility of the electric guitar. All the while, that country screech from the fiddle stood stage right, Yoakum dead-centre, the guitars having a field day on the left. When he reaches 'Ring of Fire', you can only imagine that Johnny Cash is up there right now, murmuring, 'Well done, D.Y.' Suddenly, I had a hankering for ribs, beans and beer. And a '59 Eldorado. And the trashiest, big-busted blonde ever to pole dance in 'Vegas.

My current standby, Mr Big's 'To Be With You', transported the performances to the studio. That huge acoustic guitar sound retained the same presence as the stage-bound fingerings of the Yoakum disc. So, too, the assorted stringed instruments on

Keb' Mo's masterpiece, *Peace... Back by Popular Demand*. Both Mr Big and Keb' Mo' confirmed as well that this pre-amp leaves voices untainted, every detail and tic present and accounted for with such total retention of the emotional content that you start doubting your allegiance to tubes, if only for a moment.

FOR: Sound as naked as Godiva

AGAINST: Sound as naked as Godiva

DEVOLUTION

Even with the heavily-engineered sounds of studio creations like Art Garfunkel's *Breakaway*, the Krell was able to balance the artifice with the actual. Unlike some pre-amps, whose designers seemed to think that the role is to dissect rather than coordinate, the music never loses its sense of the whole.

Imaging, always a Krell strength, is truly multi-dimensional, while the transient attack and bass extension are as you'd expect: above and beyond reproach.

Krell made only one mistake with this series: calling it Evolution. It should have called it Devolution, because Krell is back making what are probably the best-sounding solid-state components money can buy. After a few years as merely another upper-level brand, Krell has returned to the glory days of the KMAs and KSAs and KRCs.

And the 222? I think we have a modern classic on our hands. ☺

Hifi news
Verdict

**KRELL
EVOLUTION 222**
(£8498)

For those too lazy to read the entire review, the 222 is one of the most commanding pre-amps I've ever used, neutral and transparent to a level only bettered by rivals at five figures and above, including the darTZeel and the other Evolutions. Musical? You'll wallow in it. It lacks nothing features-wise, either; custom-installers and tape enthusiasts haven't been ignored. Consider it a genuine win-win situation for anyone after a single-box pre-amp below £10,000.

SPEC/FEATURES



SOUND QUALITY



BUILD QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



Hifi news
OVERALL RATING **19/20**

Lab report

Without doubt, this is the most technically proficient preamplifier to have been tested on the QC Suite. Distortion is vanishingly low at ~0.00045% through bass and midrange, rising to just 0.001% at 20kHz. Noise is also banished thanks to the wide 95dB A-wtd S/N ratio while DC offsets are in the microvolt rather than millivolt range. Its response redefines the term 'ruler flat' with a dip of just three-hundredths of a dB at 100kHz!

The volume control may have 151 discrete steps, but its effective range amounts to about 60dB (between 005-151), with 30dB covered up to 048, followed by 10dB ranges to 070, 104 and 151. Over the top 10dB of its dynamic range, every 10 fine steps represents a change of just 2.1dB, enabling very subtle changes in level to be achieved. Channel matching is better than 0.01dB over this entire 60dB span, I might add. Spectacular. (see report on www.milleraudioresearch.com/avtech).

Hi-fi News lab specifications

Maximum Output Level	>15Vrms
Maximum Gain	+11.8dB
Input Sensitivity (for 0dBV Output)	256mV
Distortion (0dBV, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.00045-0.0011%
A-wtd S/N Ratio (re. 0dBV)	95dB
Frequency Response (20Hz-100kHz)	0.00dB to -0.03dB
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	>86dB

Contact numbers

UK DISTRIBUTOR: Absolute Sounds **TEL:** 020 8971 3909
WEB: www.absolutesounds.com

Review system breakdown

SOURCES: Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player
SME Series V arm, ClearAudio Goldfinger m-c/SME 20/12 turntable
AMPS: Audio Research PH5 phono stage, McIntosh C2200, Quad 909
SPEAKERS: Sonus faber Guarneri, Rogers LS3/5A
CABLES: Kimber Select (balanced), Yter (single-ended)

We listened to

DWIGHT YOKUM
Guitars, Cadillacs,
Etc, Etc
Reprise 8122 74135 5

MR. BIG
Lean Into It
Atlantic 7567-82209-1 LP

KEB' MO'
Peace...Back by
Popular Demand
Okeh/Epic EK92687 CD

