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Subject: Critical Listening

Posted by [MWG](#) on Sun, 18 Dec 2005 01:25:06 GMT

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What I would like is your definition of critical listening. Your opinion only and if you disagree with someone else's definition just deal with it and don't post a reply to their definition. I would like opinions not an argument. If I wanted vitriol I'd post this elsewhere on the net I'm trying to find out if it's listening with the intent to "critique" the music, equipment, medium or all of the above. If it is then it's no wonder I'm not a critical listener. However, that's not to say I don't hear flaws in the music or it's reproduction it's just that I choose to listen to the music and only use the critical aspect when I need to fix something or make a change. This probably doesn't make much sense. Then I seldom do anyway

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Subject: Re: Critical Listening

Posted by [akhilesh](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 02:15:41 GMT

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My definition: Get a piece of music you have heard on lots of different systems, and listen on the current system, to see what it sounds like. Given the dependence on Program material, I cannot imagine how we can do critical listening without being familiar with the PM on different equipment. I agree with your assessment about vitriol on "other forums". -akhilesh

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Subject: One of the reasons

Posted by [MWG](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 04:36:40 GMT

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I'm asking the question is I and several others auditioned a pair of the B&W Nautilus racing snail speakers. They were used and going for 17K which I guess is around half what they sold for new. Anyway, I was the only one who didn't like them. I felt the midrange was so forward it was like being slapped in the face at volume. I assumed it was just me as I have had the same speakers for over 30 years and don't have much experience with other speakers. My Altecs are noted for their midrange but you have to crank them up to well over 100db before they are in your face.

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Subject: B&W midrange

Posted by [Duke](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 06:25:51 GMT

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Not long ago I spent some time with a B&W speaker, I think it was the 801, with the kevlar midrange. After listening to the system at low, medium, medium-high, and high volume levels, I came to this conclusion (totally based on my subjective impression and not on measurements, unfortunately): The midrange driver seemed to have different power compression characteristics than the woofer and tweeter; specifically, it had less power compression. The midrange seemed to get loud faster than the other drivers as we cranked the volume up, and to get quiet faster as we turned the volume down. So at low volume levels the midrange was recessed, at medium to medium-high it was about right, and at high volume levels the midrange was forward and borderline shouty. To me, job #1 of a loudspeaker is to get the tonal balance right. If it's not right, I have a very hard time listening past that to focus on dynamics, imaging, clarity, whatever. I think it's well worthwhile to match up the power compression characteristics of the drivers. I've heard quite a few small two-way systems where it seemed like the tonal balance changed significantly with volume level, consistent with the tweeter (which was probably padded down) having less power compression than the woofer. High efficiency systems are usually very good in this respect, as voice coil heating (the primary power compression mechanism) isn't significant at normal home listening levels because of their low input wattage. To address the question of critical listening to loudspeakers, to me it involves music that I'm very familiar with and ideally a wide range of volume levels and two or three listening positions. It's done eyes closed, listening with my left brain instead of with my right brain. I don't particularly enjoy it, as it takes a fair amount of self-discipline. It's almost (but not quite) like doing long division in your head during sex.

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Subject: Re: Critical Listening

Posted by [Bob Brines](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 12:16:26 GMT

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From what I read, it is my impression that "critical listening" means listening to the equipment. More specifically, it is a possess of comparing two amps, two cables, whatever. You will most likely be involved in "critical listening" at an audio meet or when you go to a salesroom. Other than the former, I hardly ever do the latter, I will do "critical listening" when I QC a newly built speaker or as I tweak a new design. Listening to the program material in detail is a totally different process than A/B'ing two components. Now you are listening to the individual performers, their technique and the overall balance of parts. This becomes a highly subjective procedure where objectivity is irrelevant. Who is your favorite singer and why? What sounds better, a Beethoven symphony played on a 100-member modern orchestra or a 40-member period instrument group? One thing about listening to the music rather than the equipment: I can enjoy the music on an atrociously bad system. While listen on a good system, and I think my home system falls into that category, does enhance the experience, the music transcends the equipment. Bob

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Subject: Re: One of the reasons

Posted by [Bob Brines](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 12:24:39 GMT

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There are a couple of things going on here which may or may not apply to the particular speakers you auditioned, but I think make pretty good generalities. First, there are any number of hobbyists , particularly in the single-driver camp that prefer a somewhat exaggerated midrange. They feel that this adds "detail" and sparkle to the sound. Second, a manufacturer may only get five minutes of your attention in a showroom. A speaker with heavy bass and exaggerated midrange will stand out over a flat FR speaker. Many commercial products are designed this way. Bob

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Subject: Re: B&W midrange

Posted by [Manualblock](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 12:43:58 GMT

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I lived with B&W DM 12's for years. They have a specific sweet spot regarding position, level and equipment. If you find the right parameters they are excellent; very revealing but not etched and glassy. Smooth and musical. Extraordinary definition. I hear them occasionally because they are still around and I still like them. Can't use them with cheap amps though; they need refinement. And they do have a slight upper mid-bass hump.

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Subject: Re: Critical Listening

Posted by [Wayne Parham](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 14:33:50 GMT

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When I'm evaluating a new piece of equipment, I'm clearly listening to the machine. When I build a loudspeaker from a new design, I always listen for things like bass note progressions, expecting those recorded at the same amplitude to be heard at the same amplitude, not one note exaggerated above the others. I listen to voices, to hear if they are shrill or distorted. And I listen for overall balance and things like that. I'm sort of listening in a reductionist fashion, evaluating the sound based on each component part. After I am satisfied with a design, or if I'm using something that I've already found tried and true, I revert back to a more normal mode where I'm not listening to the machine anymore. I am just enjoying the music. It's a much more relaxed mode. That's the way I listen most of the time, listening to the performance rather than trying to find flaws. It's sort of like holistic listening.

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Subject: long division in your head during sex

Posted by [Wayne Parham](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 14:37:48 GMT

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Subject: Re: Critical Listening  
Posted by [elektrartig](#) on Mon, 19 Dec 2005 17:09:02 GMT  
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MWG,I wasn't going to respond, because I probably have nothing useful to add. But what the heck.I am a total subjectivist. I've never heard all the wonderful things that Stereophile says you should hear from particular speakers. Maybe I just don't have "golden ears." I used to try like crazy to hear all the things that learned reviewers heard: that peak at 400 HZ, that trough at 1500. No luck. This used to embarrass me, but I've gotten over it.The bottom line, I audition speakers, or electronics, by playing music I know and love and seeing if my hair stands on end. The output may be a travesty when viewed via one of those Stereophile graphs, but I just don't care. If Jimi Hendrix doesn't make me shake my head in wonder, the equipment is out. If Frank Zappa doesn't make me laugh or snarl, it's out. If the trio in Rosenkavalier (three soprano voices from God) doesn't make me cry, it's out. If Mahler's Ninth (complex orchestra) doesn't make me melt, it's out. If the Big Aria in Pagliacci (tenor) doesn't stun me, it's out. If Hagen's Lament in Gotterdammerung (bass) doesn't give me the heebiejeebees (sp?), it's out.On (perhaps) a somewhat more practical note, I tend to think the human voice is a particularly good test vehicle. If a good soprano sounds harsh and screechy, there's something wrong. If a tenor doesn't sound the way I "know" he sounds, there's something wrong. etc. Notwithstanding that at my age my treble hearing should be going, I continue to find many or most speakers overly bright. That's probably my fault; the Stereophile readouts are probably ruler-flat, but unfortunately it is I who am listening to the recording, not a test mike.I'm not, by the way, criticizing others. To the contrary, I'm jealous of those who can hear with more precision. Unfortunately, as Clint would say, a man's got to know his limitations. The good news is that I love music and that reproduced music can me laugh or cry or whatever. If I can't have both, I suppose I rather have that than the ability to detect that peak at 400 HZ.

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Subject: For me it would have to be short division :) (NT)  
Posted by [MWG](#) on Tue, 20 Dec 2005 02:31:56 GMT  
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Subject: Re: Critical Listening  
Posted by [MWG](#) on Tue, 20 Dec 2005 13:44:11 GMT  
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I'm glad you responded and thank you. Every post has given me something different to think about. I, like you have gotten to the point where I either like the sound of something or I don't. I usually can't accurately articulate why but it no longer matters to me. I'm comfortable with what I am so that I can appreciate others opinions and try and see how they arrived at them. Whereas

before I was more concerned with keeping with those that seemed to agree with what I was thinking at the time. As an aside I was listening to Mark Knopfler & Chet Atkins Neck & Neck CD last night and it just seems so soothing even at higher volume I just flop back in my chair and close my eyes and enjoy the whole thing. Those two obviously are enjoying every minute of what they are doing. It really shows in the sound. In case anyone really likes guitar music and hasn't heard this CD. I heartily recommend it.

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Subject: Re: Critical Listening

Posted by [Manualblock](#) on Tue, 20 Dec 2005 18:24:15 GMT

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Can I join the chorus? I like you'all am not an engineer and don't particularly keep up with methodology of measuring practice. What I am is an amateur musician for 35 yrs. We try to remain neutral in these types of discussions because as I say we don't have the background to argue specific measured abilities of loudspeakers. But I ask; why are we relegated to this second-class status? We all have extensive experience listening to live and recorded music and we all have good systems; so what exactly is the criteria we are not privy too? So we can't derive a frequency response plot or undertake to establish what constitutes a proper waterfall plot. What we can do is hear. So the question should really be; what is the criteria for having the ability to make good judgements concerning what sounds good? Do we need to explain the exact number of half-tones represented in the middle C on the keyboard? Is someone who has perfect pitch more qualified than any engineer to design loudspeakers? Can all engineers sing on key? I have heard a few that when they sing it sounds like two cats fighting. Should part of the requirements for setting yourself up as a designer be that you know how to follow a musical train of thought and replicate it somehow on your own without instruments of measurement? Curious how this is the only hobby where you don't have to be expert in the point of the hobby; only in the ability to map it mathematically or measure it with instruments. Sort of like someone taking up golf and just studying how to map the putting greens or wrap a club handle.

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Subject: Chet was the second coming nt

Posted by [Leland Crooks](#) on Wed, 21 Dec 2005 11:28:29 GMT

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nt

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Subject: If you like Chet

Posted by [MWG](#) on Wed, 21 Dec 2005 13:57:06 GMT

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Then listen to Mark Knopfler. He does many types of music and a lot of the music scores. Get his Shangra-La cd and give it a listen. It has a couple of rock tunes on it but none of the white noise you hear today. It's very melodic. Golden Heart is another good one also. Ragpicker's Dream has a lot of depression era type music on it. You probably already know he was the driving force behind the band Dire Straits which was popular a few years back. Their music is pretty good. A mixture of rock, Jazz and other things. Money for Nothing was their biggest hit but not their best song by a long ways. Chet & Mark did at least two albums together. I forget the name o the other one.

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Subject: Re: If you like Chet

Posted by [Leland Crooks](#) on Wed, 21 Dec 2005 14:33:55 GMT

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About all I've heard from Knopfler is Dire Straits. I knew he collaborated with Chet. I need to pick that up. Chet was the second coming. Joe Pass was the first

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Subject: Re: Critical Listening

Posted by [hurdy\\_gurdyman](#) on Wed, 21 Dec 2005 15:43:20 GMT

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I'm also one of those who listen with my emotions rather than with test equipment. It either sounds right or it doesn't. My own background is that of being a musician since age 12 (I'm 50 now, you do the math) and being an audiophile a year or two longer than that. For years I religiously followed mainstream audio magazines in how to evaluate and choose equipment. I went from listening to old tubed consoles in my teens to new ss components. Old open backed speakers with 8-12 inch fullrange/widerange drivers (sometimes with tweeters added, sometimes not) to air suspension and bass reflex boxes. I've been to places with big horn systems on down and have heard almost every kind of speaker technology. Back in the early 80's I got a philosophical (sp) shock. A friend gave me a little 12 watt tube amp (Bogen, I think). This ancient thing amazed me with it's good, musical sound. Since then, I've worked my way back from complex three way speakers to simpler two way with simple crossover and a separate sub to fullrange driver. I've tried alternative enclosures (like TQWP's) and am presently with open baffle. The conclusion I have to draw is that good sound comes in all shapes and sizes, but doesn't come just because a computer designed it. I've heard speakers that done nothing to me emotionally that were rather expensive scientifically designed wonders, and I've heard simple designs that had little science applied that I drooled to the music. It just looks like, to me, that it's still not just a matter of plugging the specs into a computer and saying, "here's a good sounding speaker". I think good sound that is true to the music is something that the designers need to use their own ears to fine tune after the design has been built, and the willingness to change it if it just doesn't do it emotionally. Nothing against science, I think it's needed, but the "human factor" still needs to make the final

call. The speaker needs to hit the emotional bone, which is more important than the spec graph. If the two can come together, great! if not, I'll go with emotional satisfaction every time. BTW, I'm still listening to a late 50's 12" fullrange driver with a high crossed tweeter on an open baffle with a sub below 60 Hz. Simply haven't heard anything remotely affordable that is inspiring me to buy (or build) anything different (even though I've thought about it a few times). My musical emotion bone just tingles to good when I listen to what I already have, so why risk disappointment? I'm equally sure that this system wouldn't measure as well as some of the steril sounding ones I've heard. I just don't care anymore. And I'm in agreement with the poster who mentioned many modern speakers have too much treble. That's something that has bothered both me and my non-audiophile wife many times in the past. She's also happy with the sound I get from my rolled off speakers. Whew! Biggest post I've made in ages! Dave

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Subject: Re: If you like Chet  
Posted by [MWG](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 01:28:36 GMT  
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Mark Knopfler must have input into how his albums are mastered as they all sound very good without any of the shrillness associated with some of today's CD's. I saw three very good guitar players on one show once. It was the Jose Feliciano show and he had Roy Clark and Glenn Campbell on. All three played a couple of songs together. I never knew that Campbell was that good.

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Subject: For the record :)  
Posted by [MWG](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 01:30:31 GMT  
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I'm not a musician but I did stay at a Holiday Inn once

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [Manualblock](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 01:42:26 GMT  
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I spent a week there one night. Kills me that they equate these measurements with ad hoc good sound. Silly.

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Subject: Re: If you like Chet

Posted by [Leland Crooks](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 02:01:14 GMT

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I knew Glen could play, but didn't think he was in Roy or Jose's leaue. Roy Clark's backup guitarist is a customer at my store. He retired a couple of years ago. Really good guy. I don't know how he played, he as sausage fingers, like a construction worker.

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Subject: Re: If you like Chet

Posted by [MWG](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 02:35:39 GMT

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About the only thing I play is the stereo.....and that rather poorly In a time long forgotten I played the French Horn for awhile until we moved and the new school didn't have a music program.

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Subject: Re: For the record :)

Posted by [MWG](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 02:41:34 GMT

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It's kind of like when they used to say if amps measure the same they sound the same. Most didn't to me but what do I know?It's off to the shop to listen to some old LPs that I came accross. Benny Goodman sure had a sweet sound.

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Subject: Re: For the record :)

Posted by [Manualblock](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 15:57:10 GMT

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Say; you have touched on a topic that has been bugging me lately. I have invested in a series of older vinyl consisting of Jazz recordings of individuals from the 30/40's such as Benny and Artie Shaw, Ben Webster etc. They are recorded by a Japanese label and sold through a German distributor. All re-mastered from mono recordings. They sound good but they also don't have that prescence that we strive so hard to accomplish with our systems. So I listen on the walkman. Now Prestige has come out with a set of similar type archival recordings; Coltrane and Red Garland etc. Sold in Borders for 10\$ a pop.Here's my point; do you like the re-recorded mono stuff and can you listen to it for extended periods? Or do you get bored with the sound?

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [Bob Brines](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 16:13:57 GMT  
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WELL, yea but....To say that good measurements guarantees good sound both misses the point and is silly. There are too many things going on that either cannot be measured or at least cannot be measured with the equipment available to most hobbyists. The reverse, if everything can't be measured, than all measurements are worthless is equally silly. There are any number of things that can and will go wrong with an audio system in any reasonable listening room. Properly taken measurements can help eliminate reflection, resonances and large deviations from flat in the room and in the speaker itself. Once the incidentals are taken care of, then the listener can make judgments as to whether the system has that magic or not. "There are liars, damned liars and statisticians". (Mark Twain) Those who rely solely on measurements are statisticians. Measurements are only a tool, but a very valuable tool. At least in the process of building audio components, doing without measurements is going in blind. Bob

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [Manualblock](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 17:19:47 GMT  
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I'll buy that. I see it in this order; source/room/speaker/equipment. From the point of veiw of someone w/o an EE degree it seems that the parameters are so finely sliced that there is no way the results can have any intrinsic meaning left. I understand the roadmap concept but cannot define how ever more finely gauged models help produce viable and positive change.

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [elektrartig](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 18:48:09 GMT  
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MB, Many of the cds I listen to are remakes of old mono recordings, often 78s. Most are classical and opera, and old-time country and blues, with some jazz. To the extent vinyl reissues of the same recordings exist, I don't have them and thus can't compare. But I will say that many are very well produced. Assuming care was taken in the production of the cd, I don't have a problem listening through the recordings and don't get tired of them. I don't know the series you're referring to, but my suggestion would be to get one and see how it strikes you.

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [Bob Brines](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 20:18:23 GMT

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Agreed!One you get all of the graphs and charts laid out, the black arts take over. Some stuff you see you can fix, some you can't. Then you hear stuff that you can't see. The same goes for modeling. If you don't start with a good set of assumptions, you will never achieve a good design. I see it all of the time. Guys will come up with a reasonable FR plot and announce to the world how good it will be, but when you look at the design parameters, you know it will never work.Modeling and measuring are just tools, and I need all of the help I can get, but in the end I have to sit down and listen.Bob

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [Manualblock](#) on Thu, 22 Dec 2005 21:34:21 GMT  
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Black Arts; thats the tag line. I think that applies to any design process. In a perfect world we could design by measurement. Thats pretty much the extent of my knowledge concerning design. I give everyone doing the grunt work plenty of credit.

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [Bob Brines](#) on Fri, 23 Dec 2005 02:45:01 GMT  
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Actually, we design by modeling. The problem is that every model, by its very nature, is a simplification of reality. Simplification allows us to run the models on finite, limited computers. Simplification makes modeling possible, but soon or later, simplifications come back to bite you. Models always either diverge or blow up at the extremes.Bob

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Subject: Re: For the record :)  
Posted by [Manualblock](#) on Fri, 23 Dec 2005 12:26:26 GMT  
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Oh yes; I have most of them. I think the digital processing used to make the transfers may be the problem. While the music and recordings sound very good compared to what they would have in the original condition the tapes or vinyl was in, they also have this very flat sound. I geuss if you want this material you have to accept that as part of the bargain.I honestly would probably be happier to get this stuff in mono and play it back that way.

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Subject: Re: If you like Chet  
Posted by [steve f](#) on Fri, 23 Dec 2005 19:19:17 GMT  
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Isn't it amazing that some really big guys can play guitar so well? Many years ago I saw Leslie West (Mountain) in concert, and couldn't believe that such a big guy could really play, on a Les Paul Jr. no less. Of course I have the long thin fingers my musician friends wish they had; but my playing ability is well below almost inadequate!Steve

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Subject: Re: If you like Chet  
Posted by [lelandcrooks](#) on Fri, 23 Dec 2005 19:44:17 GMT  
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I still get out nantucket sleighride once in a while. Never got to see them. I'm envious.

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Subject: Re: If you like Chet  
Posted by [steve f](#) on Sat, 24 Dec 2005 00:16:59 GMT  
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When I was a kid, I'm fifty-three now, there were a lot of good venues, and even some great free concerts. I was lucky enough to hear most of the great groups of the late 60's- early 70's. Sadly, these days I'm lucky to attend only one or two concerts a year. Steve

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