

MAY 2004



Part II: Wherein our daring voyager continues his quest in search of the meaning and madness, sincerity or cynicism behind audio's indigenous Outsider Art..

When we last parted ways, we were but beginning a journey into hi-fi's outer reaches, the products discussed in Part I being to advanced tweakery what scrubbing-up is to modern surgery - an absolute if distrusted breakthrough at first, now accepted without hesitation by all but the most *Sweeny Toddish* of back-alley jack-knife ghouls. Whether or not you now use; aspire to own; or would not be caught dead in the regional vicinity of either the VPI Brick or the Shakti wares - the fact remains that there is no shortage of science to support the claims of their designers. Of course, just because I know a Toyota will start every morning doesn't make me want one, so apathy and even hostility towards such devices by a significant number of audiophiles is just another feature of an endlessly diverse consumer landscape. And if appeals to logic can't always get us to start that 401k before our 60th birthday -- or floss with Dentist-approved regularity -- such arguments sure ain't going to land a Shakti Stone on our wish list at Music Direct if we damn-well don't want to go where such products take us; offending as it were the diet of our minds.

So be it. More than anything, this survey of audio's more curious curios is about this writer's own education, with you the reader -- swinging back to the medical *slimily* used above -- invited to watch from the 'operating theater'. Take from all of this only what you'd have, logic or the lack of it be horse-whipped. If you missed [Part I](#), allow me to suggest you take a glance, if only to acquaint yourself with the ground rules and caveats that are an unavoidable requirement of any undertaking such as this. The rest of us will douse the fires, rake the tracks to conceal our numbers and set back out on the trail less traveled until even that spotty and unkempt path fades away into untrammelled wilderness.

"I still see things.. I just choose not to acknowledge them. It's like a diet of the mind; I choose not to indulge in certain appetites".



Longhufeng is a famous local dish in Guangdong, made with snake, cat and chicken [ChinaDaily]

[John Nash, from *A Beautiful Mind* ©2001 Universal Studios and DreamWorks LLC]

How do we know when we breach the gossamer membrane between creative epiphany and abject madness? Doesn't the primary tenet of true madness dictate that we cannot *know*? Perhaps the best one can do is to keep eyes and ears keen for portals, sudden jogs and passages that lead not from room-to-room but from our accepted reality to another genus of reality, one that may seem every bit as real but where the rules are different and familiar expectations best abandoned. And in the mist-layered Forest Primeval of higher tweekery, there exists just such a passage - more of a bridge, really. A bridge that navigates the yawning span between the pragmatic engineering of the

VPI Brick and the exponentially more complex but still straight-on science of Shakti and -- way over on the opposite shore -- a conceptual netherworld evocative of opium dreams and Druidism. This is a bridge fashioned from African ebony and built to exacting standards by the Three Muses of Shun Mook. And *that* bridge, Monty Python fans, is well guarded.

From what I could ascertain, the people who are Shun Mook do their own thing. And if you and the entire rest of the world were to tell them why you think they shouldn't, they would nod politely and keep right on doing their own thing. Now *that's* freedom; sovereignty of a variety that most of us working lugs can only taste in our most fevered, Lotto jackpot dreams. And that autonomy is a luxury worth ignoring the hecklers for.

"God grants liberty only to those who love it, and are always ready to guard and defend it".

[Daniel Webster - 1782-1852]

Of all the manufacturers with whom I made inquiries over the course of developing this series, none were more tight-lipped, none more cautious or even what could simply be considered shy than my contact at Shun Mook. Yet that was not only no surprise, it made perfect sense. Because of all the creations that can be considered the holy relics of fringe-fi, the tools of Shun Mook are apparently notorious enough to be the ones best known outside audiophilia's creaky gates. And if you think other sound nerds can be brutal when confronted with views and products that strain their conception of reality, ordinary *Lifestyle* system-buying civilians can be downright barbaric.



Take a wincing gander at something called "[The Audiophile B.S. Page](#)". Here we have someone not in any clear way even an audiophile (this is a page of the *Central Florida Ham Radio Club* site, ferkrisakes) who, having somehow tripped over the Shun Mook phenomenon, is compelled to blog (and flog) his offended sense of veracity to the fundamentally disinterested world at large. Of course, when it comes to a world of disinterest, we can thank the Ham Radio guys for making us audio Anoraks appear sexy by comparison. The only reason this churlish sniggering even bears mention is the sorry fact that this page is invariably one of the first several hits to come up when googling 'Shun Mook'. And it's but one example of the small-mindedness with which this company and its goods have been greeted over the years. So I suspected from the outset that it was going to take a lot of honey to get any Shun Mook flies on me. *Honey and patience*. Eventually, both won me a grudging degree of trust and even a home trial of Shun Mook's cornerstone product, the Mpingo Disc.

But before we get into the listening, come with me over the aforementioned bridge into what is the most secretive sanctum, the most cloud-veiled citadel in all of Tweeksylvania, for a conversation with one William Ying, the Mooker charged with managing contact with us of the secular world.



That robust aura of mystery and mysticism, as it turns out, is something no advertising campaign could create nor any public relations firm fabricate. It appears to this greenhorn gumshoe to be an honestly unintentional byproduct of who these guys are and how they choose to do things: In their own way, and *quietly*. The three men habitually referred to as "the Monks of Shun Mook" by an audio press too oft' enamored of its own monotonous wit are Dr. Yu Wah Tan, Andrew Chow (himself of Cable Jackets fame, not covered here) and my handler, William Ying. Tan and Chow's efforts are now primarily focused on the exceptionally limited-quantity production of Shun Mooks' Bella Voce Loudspeaker (available by special order only; bring your own honey and patience), while Ying is involved in the acoustical design of recording studios and "larger performance spaces" in Asia.

Mystery? Inscrutability? Secrecy? Only insofar as these folks don't play much ball with the press, they seldom trot out for the Shows and not one of them does this for a living. "Shun Mook was never meant to be a full-time business, just a hobby of ours", said Bill Ying, "and making a few things to help audiophiles better utilize their systems and get the best out of them". What's foremost on Mr. Ying's mind these days is his home remodeling project. One even gets the distinct impression he might actually own a weed whacker and a cheerful Golden Labrador. So much for shaved heads bobbing in serene prayer above saffron robes in monastic seclusion. *Ohhhhhmmm sweet ohhhmmm.*

The 6moons 'zine was new- news to Bill & Company and I'm pleased to report that the site was found to be suitably impressive for discussions to continue. "I am pretty much out of touch with the current scene of the high end", Bill was glad to confess. "We have not exhibited at the CES show for the last three years, as we do not have any more new 'toys' for the industry. Plus there's so much hype in the hi-end today that the sound is unbearable at the show. So we'd rather do our own thing."



www.kentonuk.com/products/spindoctor.shtml

Now there's an unexpected, weight-shifting judo move, Cato - one of the proprietors of Shun Mook, purveyors of the hi-fi industry's most enigmatic and unapologetically costly tweaking paraphernalia, bitching about "hype in the high end". Well, you know what they say about *The Best Defense*. And no wonder, it's now dawning on me at this juncture, that Bill Ying is the public voice of this extraordinarily private enterprise.

In whatever the specific incarnation of Shun Mook's individual products, the runaway majority share a basic anatomy of African ebony. *Mpingo ebony* to be precise. "Mpingo" meaning, in one profoundly ancient African dialect or another, "tree that sings". How's that brain diet holding up, doc?



First made available outside the inner circle of friends in 1990 and debuting at the '91 CES, the Mookian line-up is today composed of about ten primary products (by my easily confused count) with a few sub-set varieties scattered within and around, mainly involving the number of discs (but hardly the disc-count) included in the *Spatial Control Kits* ("SCK"; is that a clue?). Starting with the elemental Mpingo disc which is actually made from a combination of Mpingo and another atypical ebony timber called Gaboon, you can move upward in the line (and downward in your kids college fund) to room-acoustic packages of 9, 32 and even 44 discs.



From there we shift from room-tuning to equipment-tuning where we may choose from a collection of mechanical grounding apparatus called the *Ultra Diamond*, *Giant Diamond* and *Super Diamond* Resonators, differentiated principally by their size and the weight of the equipment they can be most effectively used with. On a separate limb of this singing tree grow Shun Mook's *Power Tube Resonators* and *Mini-Valve Resonators*, all fashioned from the company's ubiquitous Mpingo and, in the case of the larger resonators, pliant legs of silver alloy that secure the device atop any power tube so adorned.





The final and most cultishly sought-after artifact in the line is the somewhat redundantly christened "LP Record Clamp". A product that is 'legendary' even by this company's normally diffident estimation, the clamp is popular even among well-bankrolled vinylphiles *outside* Shun Mook's regular fan base. It is prepared from a far rarer version of the already rare ebony that branches its way throughout the catalog: "Extra heavy" pieces of dried ebony briar and gnarled knots of ebony root that have spent a century or more marinating in the foreboding swamps of the dark continent's very Heart of Darkness.

The clamp is said to be made in "very, very limited" numbers due to difficulties of raw material supply and Shun Mook's own promotional material -- such as it is -- even hints that this item may in the foreseeable future vanish into tweak history for this same reason. Hey, are you going to wade into that black, writhing quagmire to stock us up, Tarzan? I didn't think so. Here, I couldn't help pressing Bill on the whole gestalt of basing an entire line of consumer goods on resources many consider to be on the botanical endangered species list; sort of the sound world's equivalent of marketing Panda-skin boots and Spotted Owl teapot cozies.



Just in case you may have assumed that left-field theoreticians couldn't comfortably bunk-mate with right-wing politics, get a load of the gusher that particular probe released: "Ebony supply is limited but not as bad as the eco-nuts are saying", replied Bill rather testily, plunging me snout-first into a *Winnie The Pooh*-like anxiety over my dwindling honey supply. "The rain forest is destroyed but [by] people not related to the use of hardwood. Mostly, the reason [for this sensitivity] is political. These so-called environmental experts have never stepped foot into the rain forest nor have they any idea of [what the situation] is really like. They just base [these scare tactics] upon their own junk science and lie to make a living. Then there are a lot of fools in this country listening to them".

Holy crude in the Artic Preserve, Batman! Seems like maybe Shun Mook has had to field this line of enquiry before, and they're just ever so slightly fed-up with it. "Exotic hardwood use in furniture making and musical instrument manufacturing is so tiny in quantity that it has hardly any effect on the whole picture", Bill Ying concluded. And if I had any hope left of getting more out of this fledgling relationship, "concluded" was what I would be wise to consider this topic. But eco-politics aside, why go through the hassle, expense and wide-ranging vagaries that come with relying on the availability of some of the planet's more singular resources for raw material? The answer is simply because nothing less, nothing more and nothing else will do.

"Here we must mention the awe felt for this plant by the Gauls. The Druids -- or so their magicians are called -- held nothing more sacred."
[Pliny (A.D. 23-79)--from *Historia Naturalis*]



The 'superstitious' canonization of any number of naturally occurring but uncommon elements is nothing new in the Annals Of Man. And sure 'nuff, contemporary studies reveal a fair helping of astute, aboriginal intuition at work behind many of them. Careful examination of an ebony cross-section will reveal that this wood has a cellular structure consisting of countless hollow shafts reminiscent, according to one of the very few Shun Mook scriptures obtainable, of a "micro-sized pipe organ". Due to this unique biology, the designers assert, ebony displays the most musical properties of all woods in its resonant behavior. A claim that puts your scribe roughly in mind of the even-order/odd-order harmonic conduct at the heart of the Tubes vs Solid State hostilities (such subjects as Shakti, Shun Mook and even bare-naked, unicycle-riding offshoots of Kabbala representing passionless small talk when compared to that dynamic contretemps, so forget I mentioned it, k?).

It is for this reason, Shun Mook tells us, that ebony is the unchallenged material of choice for the fingerboards of stringed instruments and the bodies of the woodwinds. This in turn leads us to the founding principal of the Mook method: *Sympathetic resonance*.

The concept of sympathetic resonance is familiar to those of us who have ever toyed with tuning forks or attempted a reverberating rendition of "Innagoddadavida" on the Thanksgiving crystal after too far a swallow of mulled cider. And the reason these misunderstood mavens of musical magicks want us to be sympathetic to resonance is simply because, like it or not, resonance will always be with us. It is a basic law of physics that energy cannot be destroyed, Shun Mook would remind us. And devices designed to dampen, absorb or isolate the resonances associated with recreating music are often times up to more mischief than miracles (I would soon discover that Shun Mook finds the current crop of higher-end vinyl spinners especially guilty in this regard. More later).

Reacting not unlike a musical instrument, the Mpingo disc is said to become sympathetically charged with the musical resonance output of the loud-speakers. Singing along in response, the disc radiates vibes of a tonally complimentary quality into the surrounding atmosphere (I'm struggling not to visualize a Disney movie, with ordinarily inanimate things like cups, saucers and black wooden discs boogying along in full voice with the soundtrack). Placed strategically throughout the listening room and on-or-near sundry electronics, these discs are meant to redirect normally unexploited "musical resonances" back into the main aural attraction. All this as our wee disc goes about "overriding harmonic distortion" and, one can reasonably infer, reciting *The Song of Hiawatha* from memory whilst juggling roaring chain saws. But seriously folks, these effects are further purported to allow the listener a broad palate for the fine tuning of soundstage width, depth and center focus merely by adjusting the location and directional orientation of the discs themselves.



www.authenticafrika.com/makondeetre



Of course, not all resonances are of the desirable musical variety. Mechanical resonance is no more welcome at the Mpingo Pagoda than it is at your place or mine, and it is into this mêlée that the *Diamond Resonators* are deployed. The only items in the Shun Mook line to be covered by US Patent

(#D364168), the *Ultra*, *Giant* and *Super* Diamond Resonators are said to provide an unusually encompassing service compared to more conventional equipment support options. Here, in one seemingly lifeless puck, we find the musically sympathetic and -- in the case of the Resonators -- distortion-filtering properties of a Mpingo "reservoir" coupled with mechanical grounding courtesy of a steel shank tipped with a natural (i.e. not a faux or *cultured*) diamond (Oh baby. Diamonds. Yet another political potboiler of an African natural resource). This diamond is of 1/10, 1/4 or 1/2 carat weight depending on the variety of Resonator employed. And speaking of employed, you'd better be. Gainfully so.

An admittedly hasty check on Shun Mook pricing turns up approximately zip, with retailers typically penning in only "various" or "call" in the price column of any Mook merchandise they may carry. If you have to ask... figure roughly \$50 - \$60/pop for the basic Mpingo disc, \$40 - \$475-ish per 3-count set for the "Super" version of the Diamond Resonators. The LP clamp goes for just about Two Large. Don't quote me (and if you're budgeting for this black magic, err on the higher side for safety). I guess at the very least, you must accept that for your investment, you're coming into ownership of small works of Zen art that are hewn from precious hardwoods occasionally festooned with genuine diamonds, laser-etched and honed by hand, one at a time and with no small effort (this lumber is tough) by someone who really wants you to get the most from your music and doesn't give a right rodent's rectum who might say otherwise.



"This is only a sideline for me", Bill felt compelled to remind me in another recent exchange, "and now if anything, we have *too much* business. So anything good or bad [said] about Shun Mook does not concern me". Vive la liberte. "I just want you to find out for yourself the result of the disc and go from there". And as if on cue, the promised package at last arrives. But let us first take a moment to reset our scopes squarely upon what it is we are gathered here to do.

Tweak: verb 1 twist or pull with a small but sharp movement | 2 informal: improve by making fine adjustments - noun an act of tweaking - **ORIGIN** probably from dialect *twick* pull sharply; related to TWITCH.

[Compact Oxford English Dictionary]

My colorful stereo-pair colleagues from The Netherlands, Marja & Henk, recently related a native account on the origin of tweakery. It is thought-provoking indeed to imagine that this anal-retentive activity of often exorbitant outlay for sometimes miniscule returns was hatched in what is commonly thought of as the most frugal and down-to-earth of all nations. Holland, even technically is, as nations go, a measure or two *below* the earth. But I digress...



Tweakville, the flying Dutch duo maintain, is a small fortified village founded around the year 1550 by "the first Tweaks", brothers Jan and Kees Twykinga. These siblings were but two of dozens in the impoverished but pious family of a preacher and his long-suffering wife, a woman forever engaged in the reliably fruitless labor of making domestic ends meet on a meager clerics' wages. One fateful day, the legend goes, Jan found a penny on the way home from church. He showed his treasure proudly to Kees exclaiming "Look! A penny! Now with one, I can save for more!"

"No!" protested Kees, "that's not yours! I saw it first!" "Fibber!" protested Jan. "Looser!" howled Kees. "Doofus!" "Dweeb!" "Puke!" "Double dog puke!" and so on. It degenerated into a scene not unfamiliar to parents throughout the ages. Dear mother tried but could not separate the two brothers as they set upon one another, rolling in the sodden Dutch dirt, flattening tulips, flailing wildly and swearing juvenile oaths that scandalized any and all priggish patrons of the congregation still in earshot.

At length, both boys staggered to their wooden-clogged feet, each still holding his own half of the penny and each pulling for all his worth. They pulled and they pulled and, one more stubborn than the other, neither would relinquish his pincer-like grip on the coin. The most firmly set of molecules, when subjected to such constant and steady stress, must eventually yield and become pliant; especially in antique European morality plays. So in due course, the penny grew longer and longer, stretching from its originally minted roundness first into an ellipse, which only served to allow the brothers to redouble their pulling efforts, now able as they were to apply both hands to the innocent currency at the axis of this tireless Twykinga tug-o-war. The brothers were at last nearly three sweaty meters apart, the penny now wholly unrecognizable as such and solid-core, gently room-temp extruded single-crystal 100% copper wire -- seen at least by our in-house Netherlanders as the world's first tweak -- was born.



Tweakville

What the brothers Twyk or anybody else were supposed to do with an electrical conductor of any sort in 1550AD is up for grabs, but it is certainly not the purpose of an article such as this to trod upon anyone's enthusiasm for the sake of pinch-faced, bookish coherence.

Holy shit! Didn't you guys see that? The Underpants Gnomes were just here stealing my goddamn underpants again!"

[Tweek - from *South Park* ©Comedy Central]

I have an alternate take on the genesis of the word *tweek*: Do enough of it and you'll end up twicking out ragged fistfuls of your own hair, twitching like a blunt trauma case and pouncing sporadically in hallucinatory hope of capturing one of the goblins spotted lurking near your underwear drawer. And gazing down into one's hand at a rude wooden plug claimed to have the power to transform the listening experience is where for this audio auteur such spasms are liable to begin, well before any component is warmed up or boxers burgled.

As was stated ad nauseum in Part I -- yay incessantly and with undisguised insecurity -- it is critical that the reader does not consider the product evaluations contained herein to be formal reviews. Rather these are casual, personal experiences with the featured goods on a plane perhaps even more subjective and less scientific than the frequently hurried appraisals we as audiophiles are so inured to. But they gotta be here. For as William Ying so eloquently put it, "If you were to attempt to write about [the] Shun Mook tweak, you should try it out first".

Try it out first. What nervy and even novel assumption in Web-based hi-fi scholarship at least when the spittle-spraying, agenda-added vigilantism of some on-line 'review' sites is considered. But what the heck, this is a respectable magazine. And I'll try anything once. Even this.



Did I mention this little puck-er is dense? I mean, it'll never pin the VPI Brick in Greco Roman wrestling, but for all its unassuming size, your standard Mpingo disc is no mere wisp o' the willow. Protectively encased in a somewhat ironically rose-tinted plastic *pillbox* of the kind likely familiar to numismatists, the disc itself is subtly, even beautifully engraved with Shun Mook's omnipresent Chinese characters connoting "divine wood", a tiny service mark insignia and, on the side surface, a punched dot indicating the alleged directionality of the item which gives every appearance of not knowing true north from a turkey sandwich but who am I to say?



I couldn't resist asking Bill about that darn dot: By what formulae or divination is its location established? Might it be the wood's grain? A delicate difference in organic mass? The position of Mercury in the night sky at the precise time of harvesting? "The pointer of the disc is not with the grain. Your ear will tell you what you hear," was the terse, somehow suitably cryptic reply. "Most people will hear [the directional qualities] but some don't, especially the hi-end listener who is searching for a sound effect". Now there he goes again. For the life of me, I can't reconcile this company's derisive stance on the high-end of the hobby with its categorically, unapologetically exotic wares. Then again, could it be this lot are quite a bit more sophisticated in PR management than I had originally given them credit for? "Direction of the pointer is [decided by] flow of energy, something you probably do not understand now". Ghee. Why not call me *infidel* and get it done with? But the all-time classic capper had to be: "It is too early for you to ask these questions."

Is it just me, or is this starting to remind anyone else of the popular '70s TV series starring a pre-rehab David Caradine? Of course, being a New Yorker for most of my adult life, I pushed right on asking anyway. What I finally got wasn't an answer so much as a Temple novice's trial. Sifu William exhaled a soft, cleansing sigh I could detect from the opposite coast and announced: "A simple test: If you weigh the disc on top of your palm, then turn it over and weigh it again the same way, what is the result?" Here

goes a solid ten minutes of intensely focused disc-weighing. Then I'm back conferring with my Master: "Okay, the disc is marginally, as in *minutely* heavier when held [information expunged under warrant of the Mysterious Tweak Anomaly Security Act DDXIIV2] side-down. Am I right?" You could have driven your Shaolin fist-of-iron through the tension and torn out its still beating heart as I waited for the answer. After all, my application for admittance to the Shun Mook Seminary of Sacred Sonics was now riding on the outcome - and I hadn't even listened to the rizzum-frizzum gizmo yet.

Would he even tell me? Not right away as it turned out. Bill had reverted to his customary contemplative silence. Hey. Bet there's a test in that stony silence too, right? Like, "if such a question were to be answered, Grasshopper, would a feather no longer float upon the wind?" That's not bad, really. I want you to think about that one, write a short report and we'll talk about whether or not you can read Part 3 - assuming we ever make it out of Part 2. Shun Mook aren't the only ones who can dish out the homework.

The simple fact is the disc does seem to present a fractionally heavier load when held with one of its two flat sides palm-down (I don't want to spoil your own fun by revealing which). And if you think that's weird, I just came back from the patio where I noted that this morning's coffee cup had, on the glass-topped table there, left a ring that looks

exactly -- not a little, not even a lot, but *exactly* -- like that famous calligraphy-brush profile of Alfred Hitchcock. I guess once you're open to these things, the paranormal hits keep right on comin'.



Irritatingly, there would at this very moment arise an unanticipated conundrum. In his shipment, Bill Ying had helpfully included product usage instructions. Unhelpfully, every placement suggestion sans one required the use of *three* (or more) discs - and Bill had released only *one* to my care. The sole single-disc application outlined being the wall-side plug of an AC cord, so that's where I'd have to begin while awaiting guidance in this most awkward matter from my man in the Municipality of Mook (nestled, for the record, in the not-so-hidden environs of suburban sea-level Oakland/California - as opposed to the commonly imagined heaven-high crests of the holy Himalayas). As it would turn out, Bill got back to me in what qualifies for that reticent representative as Mach 5; we're talking cheek-rippling, world-beating time.

"One disc should allow you to test all of the 3-disc positions laid out in the instructions", Bill reassured me. "You actually put one disc in the middle position of any 3-disc formation and [you should] be able to hear an effect" he said. "Of course the 3-disc is much better." You wanna supersize that order, mister? One suggestion posed a conflict with my previously stated decision to stick with my digital source (for ease and consistency) for all these trials. "Also," Bill added in defense of my lone'n'lonely Mpingo disc, "you can put one disc on your turntable's arm board, standing vertically next to the pivot of the tone arm. The cheaper the turntable, the better it will sound" said Bill, further asserting that "the more expensive 'tables are damped to their death with high-tech material and hence nothing will happen." Take *that*, ye prideful possessors of analog's arriveste aristocracy! Your posh, starship-stylish, vibration-immune players are, as it turns out, "damped to their *deaths*". "Additionally," Bill continued as if making such riot-inciting proclamations as that last one were just in a day's work, "you can apply the one disc to the metal door of your house's electrical panel, stick it there using tape and be able to hear a difference in your hi-fi." And here I was, barely moments before, thinking my options in exploring but one disc were sorely limited.

"On [your] CD machine, of course, one on top will give you one effect and putting one on the fuse holder -- touching it --will give another. Better yet if you dare to open the cover [of the CDP] and put the disc on top of the IC chips, any one, or behind the LED display". Okay, I'm drawing the line right there. Not that Bosh is, as we were heard to accuse in the Twykinga-style double-dare matches of childhood, *ascared* to pry wide open the occasional component. It's just that I seem to have suddenly

gone from zero to sixty in my solo Mpingo listening options and it's liable to be Israeli Easter before I can give even the majority of them a proper hearing.

Once again Mr. Ying's parting wisdom on the subject made me wonder just who was really being tested here and if there was, from Shun Mook's perspective, ever any doubt: "The purpose of our sending one sample is not to tune your system" - which would clearly call many more discs into play. The single disc is to introduce and expose "the [most basic] effect only", he said. Left unsaid was "and for us to be able to tell if you can even appreciate that most basic effect, little pilgrim". And if so and only if so we can perhaps, as Bill had implied in that earlier communiqué, "take it from there". Hmmm. Does one buy these products? Or apply for them? And Bill, which side of the thing if *either* is actually heavier? Hello? Piff. All that's left of our conversation is a frail wisp of incense hanging in the air. *How does he do that?*

The possibility plainly loomed that all this "monk" malarkey wasn't a cock of poppy, with this whole thing instead feeling more and more like the Mongol Ordeals of Manhood than your typical audio test drive with every passing day. So fetch my bow and war pony and take cover in the yurt, Bert - 'cause here come them tunes. My listening sessions began in the same way they always do; with about an hour's warm-up of all components to be engaged and a quick spin of the frequency sweep track on my Ayre/Cardas sound enhancement CD ("Irrational but Efficacious!") just to blow out any carbon that may have collected in the fuel lines since last time.

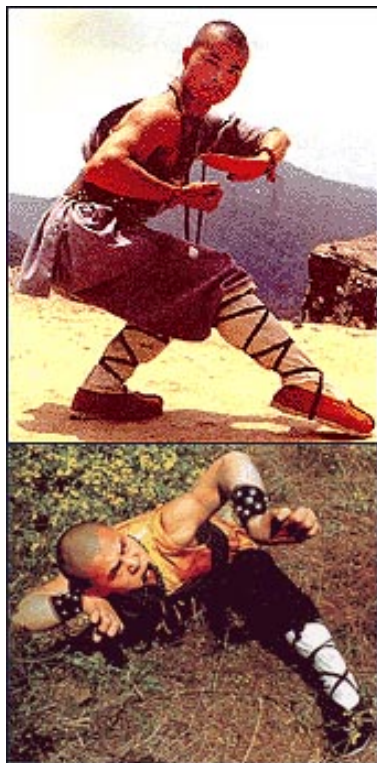
After a few listens to the same way-dynamic but not overly-over-produced song without the Mpingo thingo (John Mayer's "Clarity" from *Heavier Things* [Aware/ Columbia CK86185], I placed the product at the AC cord location, logo facing the wall and directional dot facing the floor at its 6 o'clock position as specified.



"You could've knocked me clean over with a plastic travel-size Tibetan prayer wheel."

[Chögyam Boscha upon dropping his cherry on the floor]

On first, second and even tenth listenings, A/B-ing the whole way, the results were of a gently yet almost spookily clarified inner light now seemingly allowed to escape -- and I do think that's the word for it -- from the recording. The system I know so well, merely by my resting the Mpingo in contact with the wall plug, appeared to be displaying in vocal nuance and the strum-and-pluck of each individual string a newfound ability to illuminate rather than just capably demonstrate. The sound took on a degree of ease I would never know was missing until I actually heard it. How could this even be possible? The fact is that switching from the stock AC cord to the aftermarket, cryo-treated Hubbell and Watt Gate fire hose hadn't had nearly this degree of consequence. The last alteration to come close was having the dedicated lines installed.



Rather than allow myself to get too wrapped up in the apparent, and I do mean *apparent*, effect the Mpingo Disc was exerting so placed at the mouth of the power flow, I figured it might be prudent to start moving the disc around the system. Maybe finding no or at least less impactful results elsewhere in the chain would be a calming influence and I could hop a plane back to Normal?

When placed on the amp in the suggested center position of the normal 3-disc configuration, again logo down and again with the indicator at 6PM, the disc ended up just forward of the power and directly between the signal tubes. And the sound? Not so much.

By this time I had expanded my listening lineup to include some small ensemble Jazz, more demanding Pop than young Mr. Mayer's and the requisite *female vocals* it seems every Tweak merchant wants us to use in our evaluations. Perhaps due to the Mpingo disc's very near proximity to the signal tubes on my small integrated amp, its placement there seemed to impart a noticeable quantity of rasp to the higher frequencies, especially the upper mids. David Bowie's artistically brilliant *Reality* album [ISO/Columbia CK90660] --a rather overly vivid and tizzy production to begin with -- was rendered just short of unlistenable. But by an oversized wooden checker piece? King me.

Taking the disc off the amp's top plate in mid-song was enough to reassure me that, if I was indeed nuts, at least I wasn't deaf. After a weird 2 or 2.5 second delay -- about the time it took to snatch the disc off the amp and (almost) return to my chair -- a slightly more fleshed and less bleating presentation of the music would return. You could basically hear it click back in. I decided that this must certainly be the by-product of the disc's heralded resonant abilities: Only in this case that resonance was backfiring in the form of added microphonics. Every coin (and disc) has two sides, little one!

"This is the craziest party that could ever be. Don't turn on the lights 'cause I don't wanna see."

[Three Dog Night, Momma Told Me (Not to Come) - from "It Ain't Easy" (1970)]

What was it we said about stepping accidentally from one version of reality into another? 'Cause it just happened, and to spite what you may assume, that ain't no way to have fun, son. To be honest, I didn't expect it to happen and I'm still not sure I ever wanted to watch my own diet-of-the-mind sinking south into the ebony embrace of this enigmatic African swamp root delicacy.

As in many other areas of life, it's easier to be a cynic about this stuff. Cynics, we all know, have a way of coming off all worldly, watchful and so very *University of the Street*, like lace-collar riverboat gamblers or that cigary-smelling guy who runs the mail room. But the way I see it, one of the best things about being so spanking new to audio reportage is that it's impossible for me to lose my credibility. I don't have any yet. So as screwy as it may be turning out, I'll just calls 'em as I hears 'em and, as to whether Heaven or Hell-bound each perceived enhancement (or product) may eventually be, we'll just have to let St. Peter of the Afterlife Audio Society sort 'em out.



The next location for the Mpingo disc would be atop the CDP. Looking at the diagram for such placement, I see that this will require a backward shift of the Shakti Stone already in residence there. I'd do that first, listening for a while with the Stone in its new position before adding the disc to the mix. When I at last did so, there was no effect this listener could detect. The same non-effect was present with the Stone entirely removed. But this could be caused by rack realities; there being barely three inches of space available between the top of my CD player and the bottom of the shelf above it; just barely enough to house the Shakti. And since these things are claimed to work by manipulating and reflecting resonance (and so far that's looking and sounding like the truth), I wouldn't be at all shocked to find that's far too confining a venue for suitable results.



Moving the disc around back of the player had a more definitive outcome, with an improvised placement of the disc just above (and resting on) the analog outputs having the most positive result. In fact that location was almost as good, if not every bit as good as the AC plug. But the wall plug position seemed marginally superior, would serve the most components and even made some conventional 'sense' in that this arrangement put the disc directly behind the heart of the system and equidistant between the loudspeakers. Hey, when it comes to clawing at shreds of logic in this surreal category, it's every man for himself and any port in a storm.

With only one disc at my disc-posal it was impossible to experiment with the "spatial control" benefits said to come with placing them atop the speakers and/or in different formations fore and aft in the listening space. Nor was I able to investigate the effect of putting discs on the speaker binding posts or any of the several recommended uses that call for a poker table stack of these babies. Or at least two of 'em, anyway.

Next up would be the analog department. Momma, just before telling me not to come, said vibration is as vibration does, so the needle tracing the singing groove seemed like a particularly promising scene for the Shun Mook concept. I would try the compromised single disc version of the suggested turntable placement as well as Bill Ying's suggestion of standing the disc up vertically, close to the arm's pivot point.

The VPI Scout is a justly celebrated but still (by hi-end standards) yeoman product. Yet given Shun Mook's displeasure with "hi price hi tech" analog decks, would it be crappy enough to carry the day when sporting the disc? You might say I was ambivalent about receiving the verdict.

First to spin was Micatone's sumptuous *Is You Is* [Sonar Kollektiv SK004LP]. If you don't have this album, find it. The Mpingo disc started here perched on its side as close to the arm assembly as it could go without causing obstruction of movement, and the effect was negligible. I moved it around to occupy each of the locations pinpointed in the 3-disc layout, finally stopping at about 1 o'clock on the plinth, the disc laying face down between platter and arm base (and almost touching the JMW's mounting collar), oriented so as to point along the platter's clockwise orbit.



Here was not only a detectable contribution but one I couldn't help but take pleasure in. Realizing full well that what I'm about to say is fashionably used as a derogatory term, I'm going to say it anyway: the Mpingo Disc on this turntable and in this position yielded a sound that was a step more *hi fi* than the disc-less presentation. And I mean that in a good way. The timbre was tastefully enriched and fine details given a baby's hair more breathing room. And there, coming from the speakers, was that gentle illumination of the music's interior again; the lights, however soft and unflashy, had come on. In the main, after repeated attempts to prove otherwise to myself, the essence of the sound now had an effervescence that even the moody Berliners of Micatone could naught but benefit from. What we are faced with, collegial listener, is an incremental but firm advancement in the Holy Crap Factor guaranteed to assist in astounding the peasants who believe the LP is but a comical Vitalis' Age relic.

Next and last I tried a combination of the 1PM plinth placement and what was clearly the arrangement Mr. Ying assumed would be most rewarding; the disc returned to vertical (balanced on edge) orientation with pointer at 12 and logo facing outward, toward the front of the deck. This put the disc almost flat up against the RCA junction box on the VPI and within a cultured lady's pinky-tip of the arm mounting collar. I can't say the result was in any lavish way 'better' than the face-down orientation in the same location, but it was easily as good and had what I decided to decide was the added advantage of presenting the broadest surface area -- more of the disc's "radiating" surface if the Shun Mook proposition is to be believed -- to the listener. Bugger it. She's staying here.

Euphonic? Probably a smidgen But as you'll see in my bio, I don't necessarily hold much truck with being forever lashed to the mast of any given producer's conception of the music in his charge; nor is it my stated conceit to always strive for the satisfaction of my own notion of "live music in a real space" when seated before a collection of rude electronics. For that, I tend to turn to live music in a real space (as I did the other night, craning my neck to see *The Lemonheads* and power pop juggernaut *Fountains of Wayne* at New York's Roseland; or earlier this week, enjoying an unexpectedly talented bluegrass trio at a local Spring fair). There's live. Then there's the listening room. And if the only difference between the two in your own experience is a shorter bathroom line at home, I salute you but don't necessarily envy you. Except for the uncrowded bathroom part, that's always an advantage. Unamplified bathrooms are good, too.

Recall as well that we're working with a solitary Mpingo disc. And I decided that had I but one disc from here to eternity I would move it between the 'table and the AC outlet depending on which source was to be used. If the Gods of Hypothetical Laws and Conditions for some reason decreed that I had

to pick one placement and stick to it forevermore, then on the Scout this ebony cutting would take root.



Next up came Rollins, Mulligan, Radiohead and (I kid you not) a glisteningly mint Peter, Paul & Mary recently rescued from a thrift shop (for two bits) and I didn't even come close to a change of heart. But while I can certainly "tell the difference" when hamfistedly taking the disc in and out of the action, I'm willing to concede that it might take a couple weeks of acclimation until I might instantly notice its "blind" removal. Shoot me. However, I'll add a caveat to that caveat by saying that the Mpingo disc -- especially in this geography on my personal analog map -- has officially become the next product I am reluctant to pack up and return. Indeed on the turntable, I'd be anxious to try out three or more as I reap a potentially cumulative effect with a fourth on that AC leg.

Buhwayaseconhere...

Bill had also suggested I try the disc balanced on the amps control knobs, logo inward and pointer set for Noon. I liked that, too. Maybe, just maybe even more than in the power cord slot. It came down to a matter of trading some inner glow for a touch more vigor in the presence of the assorted players, and it was becoming plainer by the measure that -- like that first, free taste from the schoolyard pusher we were all cautioned about -- one Mpingo disc will lead by its very nature to another. And another. Yo, Srajan? About that raise?

The final frontier for the disc and the one I've been least looking forward to, would be the door of the house's electrical service panel. This would demand enlistment of the somewhat surly, pre-teen services of my eldest son. I would have him, with the aid of a strap of painter's tape, apply and remove the disc -- first on my command and lastly at his discretion -- while we kept in touch by (you guessed it) cell phone. Kids of this age are just starting to be hyper-aware of the perceptions and judgments of their friends so I asked him what he might say by way of explanation should a neighborhood homey of his appear while we were so engaged. "I'd tell him the truth," he said without missing a beat. "I'd tell him my dad is insane and I'll be finished in a few minutes." Overhearing, the middle child may have put it best: "I'd say that my crazy daddy thinks doing this will fix his stereo, but it's okay. He's just like that." Oh, the unflinching cruelty of youth. Don't they know any basic-issue, bog-standard excuse for a father could take them fishing? Camping? To the (yawn) Baseball Hall of Fame? Sweet arrow of an offspring's admiration, where is thy pierce for the audiophile?

"Wax on. Wax off."

-[Pat Morita as Mr. Miyagi - *The Karate Kid* © 1984 Columbia Pictures (US)]



Disc on. Disc off. So went the listening room to garage phone conversation. If I wanted my child to doubt his father's soundness of mind, you'd think I could create a more imaginative scenario than this. Then there was the added excitement of fearing for my soundness of skull should the child's mother come upon her first-born all up close and personal with a big juicy electrical panel. But this job is not without its risks, for me or the kids.

Both eyes wide open and in the blind, there would prove to be no clear effect either disc on or disc off in this location, something that inspired little surprise in my assistant, but then he's an iPod guy. And the dedicated AC lines feeding all the audio stuff may mitigate the potential benefits. Or my brain needs a shot of Pro Gold. Or a wooden coin many rooms and a full story away producing a clear effect on household current is simply too ambitious a revelation for your humble penitent to hope for in this, the infancy of his training. Speaking of which: How did I do on that "weigh it in your palm" trial? An email from the Ebonyiffic Elders at last pinged through:

Hi Jim,

Yes, you are correct. The human senses can tell the difference.
It is not that the weight is really different, but the flow of "Chi"
energy in reaction to your body.

Yes! You're all invited to my Graduation kegger at the Temple. Oh, they'd never believe it if my friends... *could... chi.. me...now!*

"Mommy, we're nearly out of jelly beans in the Oval."

[Ronald Reagan, 40th President of the United States (1981-1989)]

Machina Dynamica. I like the sound of that. I like what happens to my mouth when I say it. I've taken to repeating it out of the blue now and again: MachinA DynamicA. You try it. You know you want to.

Machina Dynamica is Geoff Kait's company, an outfit that specializes in "Vibration Isolation and Resonance Control Research" and a seemingly flourishing commercial concern that proclaims proudly to be "Makers of the Nimbus Sub-Hertz Isolation Platform & other Super-Toys". The super-toys we will, for this article, limit our play date to are known as *The Brilliant Pebbles*. Not the Reagan-era, missile-chasing, space-umbrella Star Wars program of the same (code) name, but room and equipment tuning tweaks that, according to the inventors, possess both mechanical and acoustic vibration dissipation characteristics while simultaneously exhibiting electromagnetic properties that aid in RFI/EMI absorption. Whew!

Where have we heard that before? Actually, unless we were to suture together the assertions of both Shun Mook and Shakti, thereby creating a Tweakenstein's monster worthy of Mary Shelly's own Goth imagination, the fact is we've encountered this comprehensive confederacy of assurances in No One Place before. So what's Geoff got that the other guys ain't? Dude's got rocks: Hard little spheroids brighter and more colorful than those observable on the zoo's head baboon. Except Geoff's are in glass jars, a condition the baboon would probably just as soon not entertain.



Mr. Kait also has some seriously deep if patently out-of-the-ordinary chops in both his formal education and applied experience. Of course, could not the same be said of Herr Doktor Barron Von Frankenstein himself? Cue thunder clap. Fade to Black disturbed by erratic flashes of lightening and the quavering shadows of torches on cobwebs. Glide camera in long, slow move through massive, medieval doors and into Machina Dynamica laboratory (pronounced, as in all cases such as this, laBOREaTORee).

As James Brown in his bad self might say, *Somebody Stop Me!* Okay, I hear ya, James. Until next time then when the pebble hits the metal and your trusty scribe surrounds himself with glassen jars like Pharaos of old before their descent into the eternal Underworld of the Necropolis.



Jim Bosha