



## A Sumiko Cartridge for the Birds

Sumiko established a benchmark phono cartridge with their high-output Blue Point MC cartridge (\$250), then stripped it bare and refined it into the Blue Point Special (\$349). Now they've gone one step further and designed a cartridge for the tricky \$500–\$1000 range. When they showed me a prototype at the 2003 Consumer Electronics Show, I suggested naming it the Sumiko Giant Clam, the Oysters Rockefeller, the Sumiko Red Tide, or the Sumiko Slug (the cartridge has no outer shell). Oddly, all of my suggestions were rejected, and eventually Sumiko dropped the mollusk motif altogether and advanced a rung on the evolutionary ladder by calling the new cartridge the Blackbird (\$750).

The Blackbird is another “bare” design, lacking a body around the generator. If you're uncomfortable with such a design you'll have to look elsewhere, but you'd be missing an extraordinary bargain. Though it outwardly resembles the Blue Point Special and has the same output of 2.5mV, the Blackbird's performance is in another league entirely.

Like the most expensive cartridges, the Blackbird is said to be hand-calibrated and individually auditioned to ensure unit-to-unit consistency. Its open design saves the cost of an expensive non-resonant body, and is surely superior to a cheap body that vibrates. In addition, the generator system is attached to a vibration-reducing “inertia block.” The cantilever is made of long-grain boron, used for its low mass and high rigidity, and the low-mass elliptical stylus is hand-ground (the grinder must have *very* small hands). Sumiko's rationale for using an elliptical rather than a more severe stylus profile with potentially better tracing ability is that a less finicky elliptical shape should result in higher overall performance in less-than-perfect “real world” setups.

The Blackbird's highish output means that it can be used with a standard moving-magnet (MM) phono preamplifier, thus avoiding extra gain stages, as well as the noise and RFI that can enter when you use anything but the best—and most expensive—phono preamps. Who's going to be using a \$750 cartridge with a multi-kilobuck phono preamp? Yet the Blackbird's output—about half that of the typical MM cartridge—is achieved

with low enough coil mass that the resolution does not go to hell. Weighing 9.6gm and having a compliance of 12cu, the Blackbird, which tracks at between 1.8 and 2.2gm, should mate well with a wide variety of tonearms.

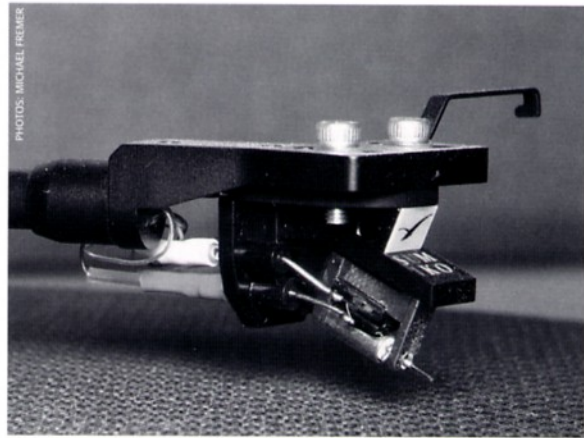
Sumiko's packaging is super-deluxe. When you open the box, you'll get a taste of how the other half lives: a nicely turned outer corrugated box, an inner foam insert cut out to receive a sweet-smelling wooden box in which is stashed the Blackbird itself, and a round metal pillbox containing high-quality hex-head screws for the tapped mounting platform. Nice.

Even nicer are the 26 pages of installation instructions, obviously written by Sumiko's chatty analog guru, Jim Alexander. The instructions define the setup parameters, tell you how to achieve them, then how to *listen* to your work to ensure that you've done it correctly. There are even drawings. No other cartridge in my experience, regardless of price, comes with such detailed, helpful instructions. Bravo! Way to go, Jim!

But all of these outer trappings would be pointless if this Blackbird did not sing. I'm not here to tell you this \$750 cartridge is as good as the \$4500 Lyra Titan—it's not. But the Blackbird is so damn good that, unless you compare it directly with something like the Titan, you might wonder just how much better analog can get. It's *that* good.

The Blackbird's strongest points are its background quiet and the power, extension, and focus of its bass. I played Classic Records' 200gm Quiex SV-P pressing of Billie Holiday's *Songs for Distingue Lovers* (Verve/Classic MG VS-6021) with the Blackbird plugged into an under-\$1000 MM phono stage (more about that later). The kick drum wowed me big time.

With stereo recordings, the Blackbird threw a big, wide-open, very transparent soundstage, revealing plenty of low-level detail. What separates it from the



Sumiko Blackbird cartridge

far more expensive cartridges, and perhaps some similarly priced ones that have different balances of strengths and weaknesses? Spend more money (and then more for a phono preamp) and you can get more supple mids and highs, more delicacy and palpability. I've heard some cartridges at or near the Blackbird's price that can give you a richer midrange, but they can't compete with the Blackbird's bass extension and focus, or with its shimmering, well-balanced top end and clean—but not at all brittle—transients. It gave no hint of brightness or edge. While the Blackbird might *look* like a Blue Point Special, and as good as that cartridge is for its price, the Blackbird is in a different league. And in the Graham 2.2 tonearm, it was an excellent tracker.

The Sumiko Blackbird is a strong Class B cartridge. I highly recommend it. If you're currently living with a \$300–\$350 cartridge, move up to this and your world will be rocked—though if you're fixated on midband riches to the exclusion of everything else, you might be happier elsewhere. Even so, I'd confidently put the Blackbird up against some \$1000 cartridges. Its sound is as sumptuous as its packaging.

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