



Review: EAR Phono Classic MM/MC Phono Preamplifier

March 30, 2023 Michael Lavorgna



Back in high school I bought my first motorcycle, the agreement with my father being nothing over 350 cc so with the help of a mechanic friend, he found and I bought a lovely minty fresh green 1972 Honda CB350.

Polite and quiet, that Honda was like riding an electric sled. "I'll never go over 50mph!" I said after riding it home.

Paul D, a friend for life, was a motorcycle mechanic and collector, and within a few short months of riding and him admiring my minty fresh Honda, he offered me an even trade—his 2-stroke

Kawasaki 750 for my quiet, polite Honda. Since Paul had stripped all badges from this smoking beast of a bike (0 to 60 in 4.3 seconds) and spray painted the dented gas tank a deep blood red, I said "Sure!"

The first time I started it up in our driveway after quietly sneaking it into our garage the night before, it blew gobs of blue smoke while emitting a ferocious chugging growl.

"What's that?" My father asked.

"It's my new bike! I traded Paul for the Honda."

"How many cc's?"

"350?"

My father didn't respond and just walked back into the house shaking his head with an all-too-familiar *no* back and forth motion.

The thing about that 2-stroke Kawasaki was you had to be gentle, very gentle on the throttle in lower gears because if you weren't, the front wheel came off the ground in direct proportion to how ungentle you were. Our friend Brian S asked if he could take my new bike for a spin and I said "Sure, just be gentle on the throttle especially in the lower gears." Brian wasn't known to be gentle about anything so sure enough he twisted that throttle with a hard snap in first gear, and my smoke-belching 2-stroke growler's front tire jerked off the ground with equal force, the gas tank smacking Brian smack in the nose, throwing him back off the bike. Yea, he dumped the bike but we howled, doubled over with laughter, for what seemed like forever as Brian wheeled it back to where he started.



Listening to PJ Harvey's debut album *Dry* at copious volume levels through the EAR Phono Classic brought my 2-stroke Kawasaki to mind because PJ and Co. leapt from the DeVore O/96 with more force and growl than I'd yet heard, with this powerful music feeling powerful enough to rear up and knock me off my Eames Red chair. I mean real power, real grunt, real drive that made me sit up and smile while I shook my head front to back so hard, the remaining hairs whipped to and fro. To *and* fro. These early PJ Harvey records including the follow up *Rid of Me* are among my favorites and they make it difficult for me to relax into her more recent music. Not impossible, just difficult.

Let's get something straight up front—while that Kawasaki lacked anything resembling finesse, all beast all the time, the EAR Phono Classic is much more dexterous, as we'll soon see, but hot damn! It sure can growl.



The MM/MC capable EAR Phono Classic, called the 'PhonoBox' outside the US market, is a direct descendant of the legendary EAR 834P, designed by the late great Tim De Paravicini. The 834P first hit the hifi market in 1994 (!), and the updated Phono Classic features upgraded circuitry, a larger case, and three 13D16 vacuum tubes inside, an ECC83 variant which came in the original 834P, while an internal switch allows for 12AX7s for those inclined to roll.

The review unit came fully loaded with an ALPS volume control (which comes at no additional cost), the ability to use high output MC cartridges that adds an internal transformer and MM/MC selector button around back, and the upgraded very smart looking mirror'd chrome faceplate. The Moving Magnet input has a 47k Ohm input impedance and 55dB of gain, while the Moving Coil input offers a 470 Ohm input impedance and 72dB of gain.



Two pair of single-ended RCAs take care of in and out connectivity with a grounding terminal between the input and output sides, while an IEC inlet completes the simple backside story.



The EAR Phono Classic sat where every other phono stage in this mini Phono Stage Survey took up residence on the Box Furniture 'Fallen A' rack in a system comprised of the Michell Gyro SE

table/Michell TA8 tonearm/Ortofon 2M Black MM cartridge, Leben CS600X integrated amp, DeVore O/96 speakers with cabling from AudioQuest.



A side-long re-visit to Adrienne Lenker's wondrous beauty *Songs* and the EAR effect was both easy to hear from the first few notes and welcome for all of its richness, body, weight, and billowy sound image, bringing the sense of Lenker's presence that much more embodied in Barn. I have a few guitars around, acoustic and electric, which I strum often enough to know their sound, feel, and full voice as well as I know any other familiar sound and feel. The EAR's way with Lenker's acoustic guitar brought out its resonant body more than

the Lejonklou Slipsik 8 (review) by adding more dimensional weight to both guitar and Lenker's vocals.



With the EAR Phono Classic, it was as if this music was more fully formed, more dimensional, with more ringing harmonic beauty filling the air around the DeVore O/96 with captivating energy. For my tastes and proclivity for immersive emotional engagement, the EAR stood out and apart from the other phono stages I've enjoyed so far.



Martha Argerich's way with Bach seems impossibly perfect, transcending technique and interpretation to an altered state of transformative magic, turning piano into breath, flesh, thought, and blood. With the EAR taking part in coaxing this pure sound energy from vinyl into waves in room, I was immediately connected to that resounding body, Argerich and piano as one, with heart-pounding delicacy, power, and reverberant beauty manifested in Barn like so many spirits. This kind of weighty beauty is music to my ears, coupled with the lightest touch, Argerich-speed, and timbral density that connected me so deeply to the performance that the present was replaced by timeless shimmering glimmering delight.

There's an addictive quality to this level of reproduction, where interplay—in this case between Argerich's left and right hands—provides a deeply satisfying sense of rightness as sounds mix and mingle in air with real life weight and clarity. Stunning.



There are two genres of music I don't seem to enjoy as much in digital form versus vinyl—reggae and traditional blues. I also know I enjoy the original mix, i.e. the *Original Jamaican Version*, of Bob Marley & The Wailers' *Catch A Fire*, that leaves out Island Records head honcho Chris Blackwell's overdubs and re-mixes, so I jumped through the Internet to grab this Universal Music Japan Zippo cover version, released by Light In The Attic. Featuring Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny

Wailer (a super group if ever there was one), and the band's own vocals from the master tapes recorded at Randy's by Harry J., Aston "Family Man" Barrett, and Carlton Barrett, this LP version also adds "High Tide Or Low Tide" and "All Day All Night," tracks that were not on the original Island UK/overdub release.

As to why I don't seem to enjoy reggae and traditional blues in digital as much as analog, it's all about the depth of the experience where records seem and sound like a physical embodiment of an event in time, where digital can feel like a very finely rendered copy, sometimes too finely, with real distance between it and that event in time. In his novel *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, Japanese author Haruki Murakami wrote, "And every time, this thought hit me: It wasn't a record she was handling. It was a fragile soul inside a glass bottle." Perhaps reggae and traditional blues have, for me, the most fragile of souls and digital just seems to snuff it out.

Bob Marley & The Wailers made some of the most infectiously joyful music while dealing with not so joyful subjects, and this system with the EAR Phono Classic proved to be a pure boogie machine with big bouncy bass and silky groove backing Bob Marley who stood out singing and swaying (that's what I pictured) around the beat, dreads dancing like extensions of joy (I pictured that, too).



Lonely Guest is producer Tricky joined by a colorful cast of guest characters for the album of the same name. Long time collaborator/vocalist Marta, Joseph Talbot (Idles), Danish singer-songwriter Oh Land, Murkage Dave, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Rina Mushonga, Kway, Paul Smith, and Breanna Barbara all take turns out in front of rich skeletal accompaniment that includes cello, guitar, samples, and Tricky's electronic tool chest that goes as low as a rumble and as high as a tinkle. With the EAR playing its part in the chain of reproduction, percussive sounds leapt from the DeVore O/96 with the kind of force that blows out matches, with bass growling underneath like a subway train, and all of the light, tinkly tinsel sounds hanging in the air like little balls of energized light.



Lonely Guest is also a lovely record in terms of sound quality and packaging, the kind of record that sits in your lap while listening, giving face to those fragile souls responsible for the endlessly groovy moves contained in *Lonely Guest*.



The thing that continued to impress itself upon me and impress the hell out of me with the EAR in charge, record after record, was the sheer physicality of reproduction made up of a rich tapestry of sounds, as rich as the music contained. I also found myself completely relaxing into what ever music I chose to play with anticipatory excitement accompanying every needle drop. Playing records is many things, but among my favorites is fun.



The EAR Phono Classic is a fun factory laying in wait, ready to energize your records at the drop of a needle. Rich, powerful (plenty of force and growl), and endlessly rewarding, the Studio Phono is the kind of kit made for people seeking pure pleasure from the tunes cut into those magical grooves.

EAR Phono Classic

Price: Black MM only: \$1695
Black MM/MC: \$1895
Chrome MM/MC: \$2595
Optional ALPS Volume Control: \$0.00

Company Website: [EAR](#) **US Distributor Website:** [EAR-USA](#)

Specifications

Valves: 3x 13D16 (ECC83)
Inputs/Outputs: RCA
Input Sensitivity: MM – 2.2mV (1V @ 1kHz); MC – 0.22mV (1V @ 1kHz)
Voltage Gain: MM – 55dB; MC – 72dB
Loading Resistance: MM – 47k Ohms; MC – 470 Ohms