

# THE ENTRY by STEPHEN MEJIAS LEVEL

THIS ISSUE: SM analyzes Drake and listens to Kimber Kable's PBJ interconnects and 8VS speaker cables.

## Drake, Marvin Gaye, Kimber PBJ

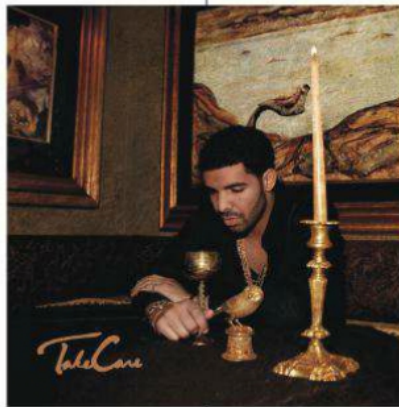
“**M**arvins Room,” the second track on side two of Drake’s platinum-selling *Take Care* (LP, Cash Money/Universal Republic B0016280-01), is a veiled but nonetheless intriguing confession from a sensitive young man whose addictions to alcohol, sex, and fame have prevented him from developing any sort of healthy relationship. I’ve come to this conclusion after several happy hours of listening to the song from beginning to end, over and over again, while swapping between two very different interconnects: AudioQuest’s Sidewinder (\$65/1m pair, now discontinued) and Kimber Kable’s time-honored PBJ (\$110/1m pair).

The song takes its name from the Los Angeles studio in which it was recorded, formerly known as Marvin Gaye Studios and founded by Gaye in 1975. According to Tom Kenny, editorial director of *Mix* magazine,<sup>1</sup> Marvin Gaye Studios was “the Studio 54 of the West Coast”—the venue for legendary parties where athletes, politicians, movie stars, models, and musicians mingled and cavorted, supposedly for days at a time. It was Gaye’s AIR, his Sun, his Electric Lady, his second home. Perhaps his first. In the late 1970s, when Gaye’s financial troubles resulted in the studio’s foreclosure, he was crestfallen. Kenny cites Gaye’s former wife, Janis: “He went into a deep depression. The enormity of losing his studio was so devastating to him that he was never the same after that. We had gone bankrupt, lost our home, our cars—everything. But he was a broken man over the studio. . . .”

In the late 1980s, Marvin Gaye Studios became a temporary site for Eldorado Recording Studios, but the new facility held little connection to its previous owner or those carefree parties of the mid-’70s. When Eldorado found a permanent location in Burbank in 1996, it looked as if any physical connection to Gaye’s vision and work would be lost altogether. But in a surprising twist, just as the old studio was to be converted into a digital photo lab, it was purchased by record-label executive John McClain, renovated to honor the late soul singer, and given a new name: Marvin’s Room.

With all this in mind, I can’t help wondering if Drake’s “Marvins Room” is as much a semi-autobiographical account of Gaye’s personal troubles as it is a semi-autobiographical version of Drake’s own. *I Want You*, the first album Gaye recorded in his new studio, was released while his romance with young Janis Hunter was in full bloom and his marriage to Anna Gordy

was falling apart. I swear you can hear echoes of *I Want You* in Drake’s music. Though the Toronto-based rapper has been disparaged for the low-key, even rueful nature of his work, and has been linked to musical genres, such as emo and goth, that are typically associated with suburban indie artists, I hear a deeper kinship to the “quiet storm” music that Marvin Gaye helped define. Throughout, *Take Care* is marked by subtle, intelligent rhythmic shifts and a surprising amount of wide-open space. The album is indeed quiet—quieter than most I own, in fact. I like to turn it up loud. The Kimber PBJ interconnects do an outstanding job of re-creating the performance space, setting well-defined musical images within a surprisingly wide, deep soundstage.



Producer Noah Shebib’s inventive use of electronics, live instruments, and real dynamic range combine with Drake’s impressive knack for moving easily between sung and rapped verses to make “Marvins Room” a sonic and musical success. With a flurry of staccato syllables and melodic twists, Drake’s character describes the events that led to his making a late-night phone call to a former lover. I’d like to cite a few lines from the song, but

because even I can’t bring myself to use such caustic language in the hallowed pages of *Stereophile*, I’ll paraphrase: “I think I’m addicted to naked pictures and sitting, talking about [women] that we almost had / I don’t think I’m conscious of making monsters out of the women I sponsor until it all goes bad.” A psychotherapist would have a field day with such confessions.

The young man knows very well that his ex is happily involved with someone else, but he nevertheless attempts to regain her love. Again, I paraphrase: “[Forget] that [worthless new guy] that you love so bad / I know you still think about the times we had.”

Never mind that Drake twice end-rhymes *had* with *bad*; his steady flow and fine use of internal rhyme get him off the hook. Alongside a heavy kick-drum beat and through some clever production work, we hear samples of a phone conversation: “It’s Friday night, I’m mixed up / I’ve been talking crazy, girl / I’m lucky that you picked up, lucky that you stayed on / I need someone to put this weight on.” Shades of Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*?

The female character, clearly annoyed but not without some lingering affection, asks, “Are you drunk right now?” To anyone familiar with alcohol addiction, the question is a familiar one; the answer, of course, is yes. The young man apologizes for calling, but not without adding a barb: “I’m just saying you can do better.”

This is fairly heavy, strangely earnest content for a pop

<sup>1</sup> See [www.tinyurl.com/bljwlyy](http://www.tinyurl.com/bljwlyy).

See Stephen’s popular blog at [stereophile.com](http://stereophile.com)

## CONTACTS

### Kimber Kable

2752 South 1900 West  
Ogden, UT 84401  
TEL: (801) 621-5530  
FAX: (801) 627-6980  
WEB: [www.kimber.com](http://www.kimber.com)

song, especially one in the hip-hop genre. Drake is playing with sentimentality, working on our more vulnerable emotions. For me, at least, it works: I feel a connection to his character.

I liked "Marvins Room" a lot before adding Kimber Kable's PBJ interconnects to my system. Now that they've been in for a few weeks, I feel obliged to share these thoughts with you. A part of me worries that some readers will expect an apology—John Marks gives you Delius, I give you Drake—but I think there's something to be gained from all this: If you, like my dear Uncle Omar, still insist on using cheap, no-name cables in your hi-fi, well, I'm just saying you can do better.

### Things that last

Kimble Kable's PBJ interconnect was deleted from our "Recommended Components" list in April 2005, but only because too much time had passed since we'd last heard it to be sure that it still belonged there. Corey Greenberg reviewed the PBJ in July 1993, when I was 16 and still listening to music, almost exclusively rap, through a small GPX boom box: some of my favorite groups were Black Sheep, A Tribe Called Quest, Lords of the Underground, and Leaders of the New School. Corey was probably listening to Nirvana through his He-Man rig. The PBJ then sold for \$62/1m pair, which translates to about \$98 in 2012. According to Kimber Kable's founder, Ray Kimber, today's PBJ is almost identical to the interconnect he originally released in the late 1980s. At the time, he wanted to make a minimalist cable, using only materials he had on hand. The recipe is simple: "Take three high-quality multi-strand wires in individual Teflon jackets and braid together. We have refined connectors and materials over the years, but even a decades-old

PBJ should still make music."

I love things that last, and the small increase in price, to \$110/1m pair, seems fair to me. The fact that Kimber's tried-and-true PBJ—not the Mk.II or v.6 or Special Edition PBJ, but the same old design—has stuck around this increasingly fickle world all this time is just one reason to take notice.

I also love the cable's look and feel—holding it in my hands is almost as satisfying as having it in my system. It's thin, light, and flexible, and its three individually colored wires (red, blue, and black) look purple from a distance. That's cool. I was hoping, perhaps fancifully, that there was some artistic motivation behind the color scheme, but Kimber selected the colors for practical reasons: "Because most of our interconnect cables are the same construct in balanced or single-ended [configuration], we needed three colors to speed production. We had been using black and blue in our TC speaker cables, so adding a red to the ingredient cupboard made sense. There have been times when we ran 24/7 production cycles on PBJ. With that kind of

**simplifi audio**  
original master sound in your home

**Gradient Revolution Active**  
**BEST SOUND at SHOW – 2011**  
**Bay Area CAS show**

"The bass in this room was perfect... impactful, but not boomy, and fast... and there were no room treatments used."

**Enjoy the Music.com** –Clarke Robinson Aug. 2011



Gradient SW-S Module with Revolution Active

Back in 1993 Gradient developed the SW-63 Add-On Dipole Bass System for the Legendary QUAD 63.

This full range QUAD System delivered bass down to 20 Hz, played 10 db louder with improved mid-range clarity.

## EVERY SYSTEM NEEDS

### What Is SMARTBass ?

SMARTBass is a combination of the Gradient Revolution's dipole Bass modules with Gradient's HE active crossover and is now available for ANY box or panel speaker system.

A Single SW-S unit houses two 12-inch bass drivers measuring just 30 inches high. Two or three modules can be stacked to form the SW-D (Double) and SW-T (Triple) measuring 57 or 74 inches high.

### SMARTBass Benefits:

- ❖ **BETTER BASS** - Hear the minute Bass Nuances and easily follow the bass lines.
- ❖ **BETTER MID-RANGE CLARITY From Your Main Speakers** - Relieving your main speakers of bass below 200 Hz delivers better mid-range clarity.
- ❖ **YOUR NEIGHBORS WILL HEAR LESS OF YOUR BASS LINES** - Dipole bass puts two thirds LESS bass energy into your room for the same perceived sound pressure level at the listening position.
- ❖ **DECOR FRIENDLY** - Variety of Cloth and Wood finishes available

### What's Included in the \$6,990 Package:

- ❖ 1 Pair of SW-S modules
- ❖ Classic Gradient HE active crossover
- ❖ 20 Day HOME TRIAL with 90% refund



Classic Gradient HE Active Crossover

demand, efficiency is important.” Apparently, Ray Kimber makes cables like Marvin Gaye partied.

Kimber interconnects are available with a wide variety of connectors. My PBJ samples were fitted with Kimber’s standard Ultraplate connectors, which have a solid fluorocarbon dielectric and a split center pin. According to Kimber, the Ultraplate’s surface is designed for high conductivity and great durability. Nothing I’ve used in my system has made stronger, tighter connections with my components. During the evaluation period, there were times when I feared I’d pull the rear panel right off my NAD C316 BEE integrated amplifier while attempting to pry the PBJs from my system. Though this proved annoying for *me*, I don’t think typical users will have the same problem. Tight connections are good, and once the PBJs are in your system, they’re likely to stay there a while.

I also tried Kimber’s 8VS loudspeaker cable (\$280/10’ pair). Like the PBJ, the 8VS employs Kimber’s braided geometry, but whereas the PBJ has three braided wires, each length



Today’s PBJ is almost identical to the interconnect Kimber introduced in the 1980s.

of 8VS is made up of eight gray and eight black conductors. I knew there could be no romantic reason for the 8VS’s color scheme. Kimber: “The color choice was put to many of our customers’ significant others, and black/gray was unanimous. We wanted two distinct colors for manufacturing ease. We are trying to deliver high value to the customer, and wasting time on elements that do not contribute to performance adds cost to the customer

with no appreciable improvement.”<sup>2</sup>

My sample of 8VS speaker cable came with Kimber’s SBAN banana plugs at the amplifier end and the company’s patented PostMaster 33 spade lugs at the speaker end. The SBAN plugs are simple and solid, and made tight, easy connections with my amp. Perfect. I was even more impressed by the PostMaster 33 spade lugs, which are strong and sensible—not unreasonably bulky, like many high-end connectors. In the PostMaster’s unusual sandwich construction, an elastomer strip is placed between outer surfaces of ultrapure copper. The design is meant to provide three benefits to music reproduction: strong

<sup>2</sup> Ray Kimber’s philosophy is in stark contrast to that of AudioQuest’s Bill Low. In response to my review of AudioQuest’s Alpha-Snake and G-Snake interconnects (respectively, \$22.50 and \$34 per 0.5m pair; both discontinued), Low said, “I use gold on under-\$100 AudioQuest cables because the tiny amount of gold-flash costs much less than what it would cost to lose sales without it. There is essentially no audio damage done by the additional thin gold layer, though no good is done either.” It should also be noted, however, that Kimber’s least expensive interconnect, the Tonik (\$80/1m pair), reviewed by Art Dudley in November 2011, costs significantly more than AudioQuest’s lowest-priced models.

## ROOM CORRECTION

**DSPeaker**

**Anti-Mode 2.0 Dual Core Pre-amp/DAC**  
with Room Correction and Remote Control



Made in Finland



### ROOM CORRECTION Benefits:

- ♦ **CORRECTS** for Room Modes, floor bounce and side-wall room artifacts up to 500 Hz - the most overlooked problems in audio.
- ♦ **No Computer Skills Required**
- ♦ **SIMPLE 3 step process** takes just 5 minutes
- ♦ **SEE BEFORE and AFTER** measurements on the built-in screen.
- ♦ **HEAR** the corrected and un-corrected sound from your listening seat with included remote control and be amazed !!

### Extra DAC / PRE-AMP Benefits:

- ♦ **ADD Computer Audio** with DUAL-CORE'S built-in USB DAC
- ♦ **ADD User Selectable Tone controls** / EQ to your system.
- ♦ **SIMPLIFI and IMPROVE** your System by Replacing your existing Pre-amp and cabling with DUAL-CORES built-in Pre-amp.

**Retail \$1,200 - Introductory SPECIAL \$1,099**

NEW 20 DAY HOME-TRIAL OFFER: with 90% refund.



DSPeaker Anti-Mode 8033:

“..an essential subwoofer upgrade”

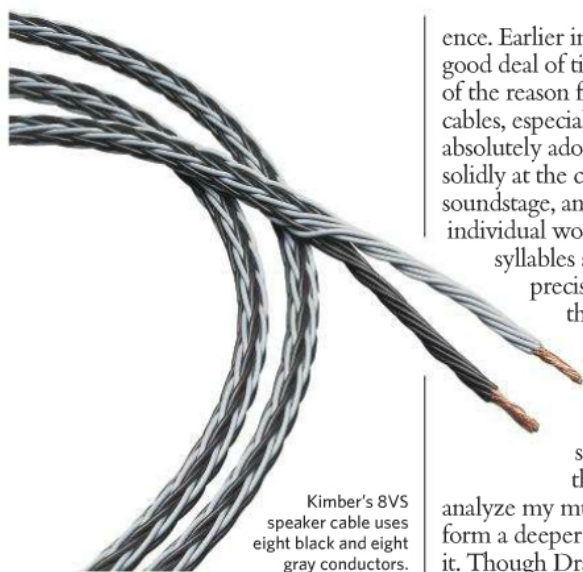
Robert E. Greene. *The Absolute Sound*

Contact: **Tim G Ryan, Simplifi Audio**

(858) 414-3900

[tim@simplifiaudio.com](mailto:tim@simplifiaudio.com)

[www.simplifiaudio.com](http://www.simplifiaudio.com)



Kimber's 8VS speaker cable uses eight black and eight gray conductors.

contact with the speaker's binding posts, resistance to vibrations, and high-quality energy transfer.

And why the braids? Kimber explained: "A braid looks like a really bad antenna to EMI and RFI, yielding a lower noise floor." While the PBJ's wires are sheathed in Teflon, the 8VS's wires are clad in polyethylene. Other cable manufacturers make a big deal of their complex shielding technologies, but these Kimber cables are unshielded. In theory, an unshielded cable is more susceptible to electromagnetic interference, but in the weeks I've had the Kimbers in my system I've experienced no such problems. I live on the top floor of an apartment building, above a bar and restaurant, surrounded by countless other apartment buildings, in downtown Jersey City, New Jersey. I could reasonably expect a good deal of electromagnetic crap to be falling from the sky, but other than the pigeon poop, it seems my power lines are clean. Nevertheless, you'll want to be sure that your own environment is just as quiet. If possible, try the Kimber products in your system before you buy them, or consult a trusted dealer.

I performed my listening tests with my NAD C316 BEE integrated amplifier (\$379) driving my PSB Alpha B1 loudspeakers (\$299/pair). When playing vinyl, I used Parasound's Zphono•USB phono preamp (\$349). Sources were my Rega P3-24 turntable (\$1295; now discontinued) and NAD C515 BEE CD player (\$300).

#### Quiet storm music

With the Kimber cables in my system, everything I listened to benefited from greater clarity, detail, and pres-

ence. Earlier in this column, I spent a good deal of time discussing Drake. Part of the reason for that is that the Kimber cables, especially the PBJ interconnects, absolutely adored his voice, setting it solidly at the center of an expanded soundstage, and managing to make individual words and even individual

syllables sound clearer and more precise. More impressive was the fact that the Kimber cables did all this without sacrificing momentum and flow—the stuff that makes a recording sound like music. Even as the Kimbers forced me to analyze my music, they allowed me to form a deeper emotional connection to it. Though Drake's words were sharper and more tightly focused than I'd ever heard them, they also sounded more believably human.

This also held true for female and background voices. The title track of Drake's *Take Care* was produced by Jamie "XX" Smith; it features lead vocals by Rihanna and samples of Gil Scott-Heron's version of "I'll Take Care of You," written by Brook Benton and originally recorded by Bobby Bland in 1959. Like Jamie Smith's work for his own band, The XX, "Take Care" uses loads of space, interesting rhythms, and a simple but intelligent arrangement to create a compelling listening experience. When I listened to this song with Kimber's PBJ, the small pitch fluctuations in Rihanna's voice were easier to follow and enjoy. Additionally, the rich sound of Scott-Heron's voice was set deeper in the soundstage and surrounded by more space, making it easier for me to believe I was listening to the real thing.

The biggest differences between the Kimber PBJ and the AudioQuest Sidewinder were in terms of speed and detail. The AudioQuest had a softer, slower sound, with added measures of body and warmth; the Kimber was more insistent, muscular, and precise. Initially, I thought the Kimber sacrificed the AQ's ability to present long, graceful decays. But when I focused only on crash cymbals, for instance, I realized that the Kimber did, in fact, produce equally well-expressed decays; it just had a persistent way of redirecting my attention to attack transients—the initial pulses of energy from percussive sounds such as piano keys, drum heads, and metal shakers.

The differences between the

Kimber 8VS and AudioQuest Rocket 33 speaker cables (\$299/10' pair) were very much like those between the Kimber PBJ and AudioQuest's Sidewinder, but slightly less pronounced. I think the Kimber offered greater clarity and control, the AudioQuest more body and warmth.

Of course, I listened to more than just Drake while evaluating Kimber's cables, but the results were consistent regardless of the music I played. If the Kimber had a fault, it was that it could be *too* revealing. A couple of examples: In "Amazing Backgrounds," from Eric Chenaux's gorgeous *Guitar & Voice* (CD, Constellation CST088-2), Chenaux demands attention with sweetly sung lyrics that twist and turn with easy grace: "If life's cruel tricksters keep us apart / Keeping myself together will be twice as hard." At times, the Kimber's fast, detailed delivery had me blinking at those spitty *s* and *p* sounds. And with "Kumano Codex 4," from Masaki Batoh's awesome *Brain Pulse Music* (CD, Drag City 471CD), the Kimbers added an urgency to Akihito Obama's shakuhachi; through the AudioQuest cables, this Japanese wood flute had a softer, rounder body. Then again, at around 2:50 into "Kumano Codex 4," Obama just barely pulls the flute from his lips and reaches for a breath. The Kimbers infused that moment with the sort of life and magic that only the best hi-fi can conjure.

#### A guiding principle

When I asked Ray Kimber how he manages to keep the price of his PBJ and 8VS so low, he said, "Through no effort other than simplicity. Every product we make is priced based on actual labor and materials cost. We use the same parts in different ways throughout our products, and we don't throw out good ideas just to have something new to talk about."

Isn't that refreshing? At a time when people seem more interested in what's new than what's needed, Ray Kimber remains dedicated to providing high-quality products that will last for years to come.

"Efficiency in every step is how we remain high-value," Kimber continued. "It began out of necessity in 1979, but has morphed into a guiding principle."

Now I just have to get Uncle Omar to believe. Perhaps a listening party is in order. I'll bring the beer, the cables, the Drake. ■

Stephen Mejias ([stephen.mejias@sorc.com](mailto:stephen.mejias@sorc.com)) is just saying you can do better.