

THE NEW YORKER · OCTOBER 19, 1998

# “Semper Fi”

On and Off the Avenue  
Blackie Pagano excerpt

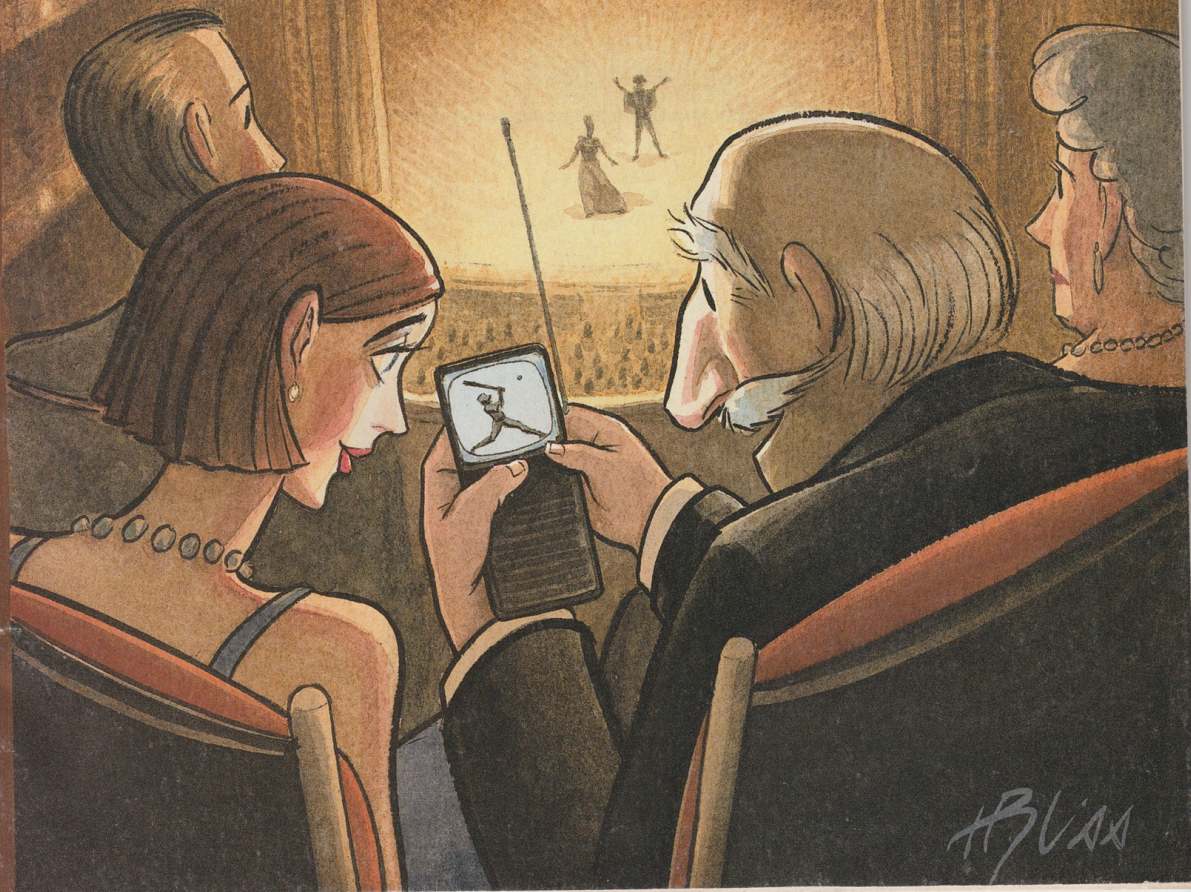
VACUUM-TUBE AUDIO · TUBESVILLE · 153 LUDLOW STREET

Curated scan excerpt from the original magazine. Includes the issue cover, contents/date reference, and the article page section relevant to Blackie Pagano’s tube-amplifier work.

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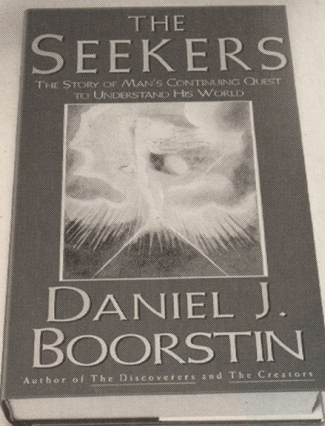
# THE NEW YORKER



THE NEW YORKER · OCTOBER 19, 1998 COVER

From the bestselling author of *The Discoverers* and *The Creators*

# WHO ARE WE? WHY ARE WE HERE?



### "An impressive conclusion to a grand trilogy..."

The three books together [*The Seekers*, *The Creators*, and *The Discoverers*] bring to mind a monumental library whose facade is decorated by statues of Moses, Socrates and Newton and whose reading room is framed by murals depicting the Progress of Technology and Law. In an age of Alexandrian pedantry and narrow specialization in the academy, Boorstin has slowly and carefully built a Library of Alexandria open to the public, a library, that is, without walls."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

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## THE NEW YORKER

OCTOBER 19, 1998

THE MAIL . . . . . 5

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN . . . . . 6

THE TALK OF THE TOWN . . . . . 25  
**Comment** Hendrik Hertzberg on the ugly future of impeachment.  
**Et cetera** The Tigers' new cage; Patricia Smith's cathartic poetry slam; fight night at the Garden; Elvis & Burt.

DEPARTMENTS

**The Political Scene** The Vision Thing . . . . . *Joe Klein* 30  
 Job and George W. Bush are succeeding by emphasizing the sorts of issues that their father ignored.

**Annals of Medicine** A Healing Hell . . . . . *Jerome Groopman* 34  
 Why bone-marrow transplantation is the cancer cure of last resort.

**Postcard from Rome** Coffee Clash . . . . . *Michael Specter* 40  
 Can Starbucks win over Italy's espresso lovers?

**PROFILE** The Dictator . . . . . *Jon Lee Anderson* 44  
 Augusto Pinochet was a ruthless tyrant. Why does he expect history's vindication?

**THE SPORTING SCENE** Catch-and-Dissect . . . . . *John McPhee* 58  
 The Alabama Deep Sea Fish Rodeo is one of the largest events of its kind, and the perfect place for an ichthyologist.

**FICTION** "Mexico" . . . . . *T. Coraghessan Boyle* 68  
 Sun, sand, and too many Margaritas.

THE CRITICS

**The Art World** Jackson Pollock in perspective . . . . . *Adam Gopnik* 76

**Books** Harold Bloom's "Shakespeare" . . . . . *Anthony Lane* 82

Briefly Noted . . . . . 87

**The Theatre** Matthew Bourne's "Swan Lake" . . . . . *John Lahr* 88

**On Television** "Felicity," "Will & Grace" . . . . . *Nancy Franklin* 91

**The Current Cinema** "Antz," "Happiness" . . . . . *Anthony Lane* 93

POEMS BY CHARLES WRIGHT

"Autumn's Sidereal, November's a Ball and Chain" . . . . . 36

"Indian Summer II" . . . . . 56

CROSSWORD 8 x 10 Cryptic No. 63 . . . . . 95

SHOUTS & MURMURS Penny-Wise, Penny-Foolish . . . . . *Mark Singer* 96

COVER *Doubleheader*, by Harry Bliss

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# ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

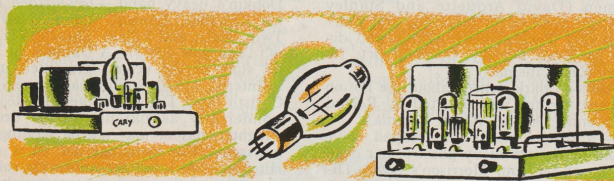
*Semper Fi*



THESE are the Dark Ages of hi-fi. Only a few lonely fanatics still huddle around their vinyl records and analog vacuum-tube amplifiers, preserving the old technology against the conquering digital barbarians. Even if you've thrown out your last LPs, hooking up your disk player to a tube amplifier can give those cold, savage CDs some real human warmth. Today's mass-produced stereo equipment is

Note Gaku-On, a \$175,000 amplifier made of twenty-one pounds of microscopic silver wire (wound by hand) and tubes dating back to 1942. But he can also set you on the path to enlightenment with a Jolida 202a (\$695), a sonorous starter set with a chrome-jukebox feel.

Blackie Pagano's got a lot of ink on him—from the word "lonesome" tattooed on his jugular to the image of the Virgin of Guadeloupe inside a shapely 300B tube that decorates his right tri-



designed to be tossed when the next new gimmick comes along. Tube amplification, by contrast, promises durability and sonority—and a link to the legacy of that old-fashioned concept called "high fidelity."

Andy Singer, the white-bearded proprietor of *SOUND BY SINGER* (18 E. 16th St.; 924-8600), has a conspiratorial glint in his eye which suggests a countercultural past. His shop is cluttered and comfortable, and he'll set you up with anything you need, at any budget. "I'll get as evangelical as I can until I see the eyes glaze over," Singer says about his analog pitch. What he really wants to turn you on to is the hard-line fundamentalist system: a single-ended, direct-heated triode, vacuum-tube amplifier. This technology hasn't changed much since the twenties, and, to purists, it's still considered the purest sound around.

While most high-end amplifiers are sleek, Spartan powerhouses (see the 1,200-watt Vacuum Tube Logic Wotan, at \$27,500), Singer favors the Cary CAD-805C Monoblock, which looks like a science-fair project gone haywire. Most of this amp's electronics are right out in the open: it sports a set of wicked-looking black-box transformers behind a voluptuous 300B vacuum tube. (Known as "God's tubes," 300Bs were first used in thirties movie-house amplifiers and are favored in the stereo industry for their power and warmth.) There are no buttons on the front, just a gauge in the form of an uncanny green eye, staring at you. (It takes two of these units to create stereo sound; a pair goes for \$9,000.) Singer can hook you up with the Audio

ceps. Pagano is a craftsman—he loves tinkering with capacitors and resistors as much as he loves the "ripe" stereo sound he searches for. *TUBESVILLE*, his silver-painted storefront, at 153 Ludlow Street (529-7345), is a rock-and-roll emergency room. The guts of guitar amps litter the floor; huge rolls of wire, boxes of dead tubes, and weird testing devices line the shelves; and cathode-ray oscilloscopes waver and quiver. Pagano can explain the subtle differences in obscure vintage tubes with the avuncularity of a good elementary-school science teacher. Doo-wop groups like the Five Satins can often be heard in the shop, since a-cappella music is a great test for his amps. "Our ears are so attuned to the bandwidth of the human voice," he says, "that distortions are immediately obvious."

Pagano builds high-end home stereos, priced from \$2,500 to \$12,000, to suit customers' ideas and specifications. He experiments with tubes even more esoteric than the 300B (which he finds hopelessly mainstream), and likens his design aesthetic to tricked-out hot rods with a military influence. His latest amplifier sits on the workbench: a burnished-steel chassis with chrome handles and bullet-shaped nuts is topped by an array of tubes and a power transformer that looks like a twenty-pound doughnut wrapped in wax paper.

For the novice, Pagano doesn't recommend entry-level analog items from specialty shops: "Find a Dynaco Stereo 70," from the early sixties, he says—they can be had at flea markets for under fifty dollars—"and then bring it to me to fix up."