

SPIN DOCTOR BY MICHAEL TREI

THIS ISSUE: A turntable by the designer of the Wand tonearm, plus a factory visit.

The Wand 14-4 turntable, and a visit to SME

In prior screeds, I have discussed the category of turntable designers I like to call deep thinkers, who twist their brains to come up with fresh thinking about how to approach the task of playing a vinyl record. If there is a poster boy for deep thinkers, it's got to be Simon Brown.

Brown is based on the South Island of New Zealand. I'm thinking that being in such a far-flung part of the world must have given his head plenty of space to get creative. First, in 2011 he created The Wand tonearm, a striking unipivot design that features a fat carbon-fiber armtube nearly 1" in diameter. Art Dudley wrote about The Wand in 2019,¹ and I highly recommend that you read his thoughts, especially about his struggles to set up The Wand. Over the years, I have worked on a few Wands out in the field, so I'm pretty well acquainted with their fiddliness. If you're the type of person who gets sweaty palms at the thought of installing and aligning an expensive and fragile cartridge on your turntable, I recommend you seek experienced assistance.

While the Wand arm has been around for quite a while, The Wand 14-4 turntable is more recent.² The name comes from the turntable's platter: The larger size (14") increases rotational inertia without adding significant mass; the platter has four layers including an aluminum/acrylic/aluminum sandwich (for damping) plus an acrylic mat to interface with the record.

Despite the unusual platter, the most visually striking feature of the 14-4 is the plinth, made from a 1 3/8"-thick slab of German plywood cut into what at first appears to be a quarter section of a large circle. Closer inspection reveals that it has a slightly squashed radius on the curved face, which extends from the front left corner to the right rear, and that the straight sides are unequal in length. Several holes of varying size are punched through the plinth underneath the platter, positioned to break up panel resonances and block vibrations from reaching the arm mount. The structure is supported on three adjustable feet with built-in elastic suspension bands, providing isolation and allowing leveling.

A DC motor is mounted in the front left corner, capped with a large, flat knob that visually matches the power and speed control knob in the front right corner. A thick, flat, Swiss-made belt goes around the platter's perimeter, then under the wide, knoblike part of the motor pulley. Don't do like I did and try to get the belt to ride on the pulley's thick knob; it's wrong and will just fall off. Normally, I would say it's time to "read the freakin' manual, Michael," but the manual is sketchy at best, glossing over a lot of fiddly details. The website isn't much help, either, with various PDFs,

videos hosted under different user names and platforms, and information scattered around the site and hard to locate. Brown says this is all being addressed.

An inline switching power supply connects to a recessed socket near the motor; a battery supply is available as an option. Once you have it up and running, a speed sensor under the platter automatically adjusts the speed; I found the speed was spot on at both 33 1/3 and 45. Finally, while my review sample came without it, a new 14-4 will come with a lift-off dustcover that sits on the platter and has a flap that extends over the tonearm.

As easy as the turntable is to set up, the tonearm is a heart-pumping challenge.

Art outlined some of the difficulties in his piece, but he didn't mention how the multipurpose alignment tool, with its built-in sharp-edged metal-arc protractor, threatens to slice off your cantilever and stylus if you jiggle it the wrong way. I'm normally as comfortable as anyone handling big-dollar cartridges, but trying to use this tool was giving me hives, so I gave up and used my Feickert protractor.

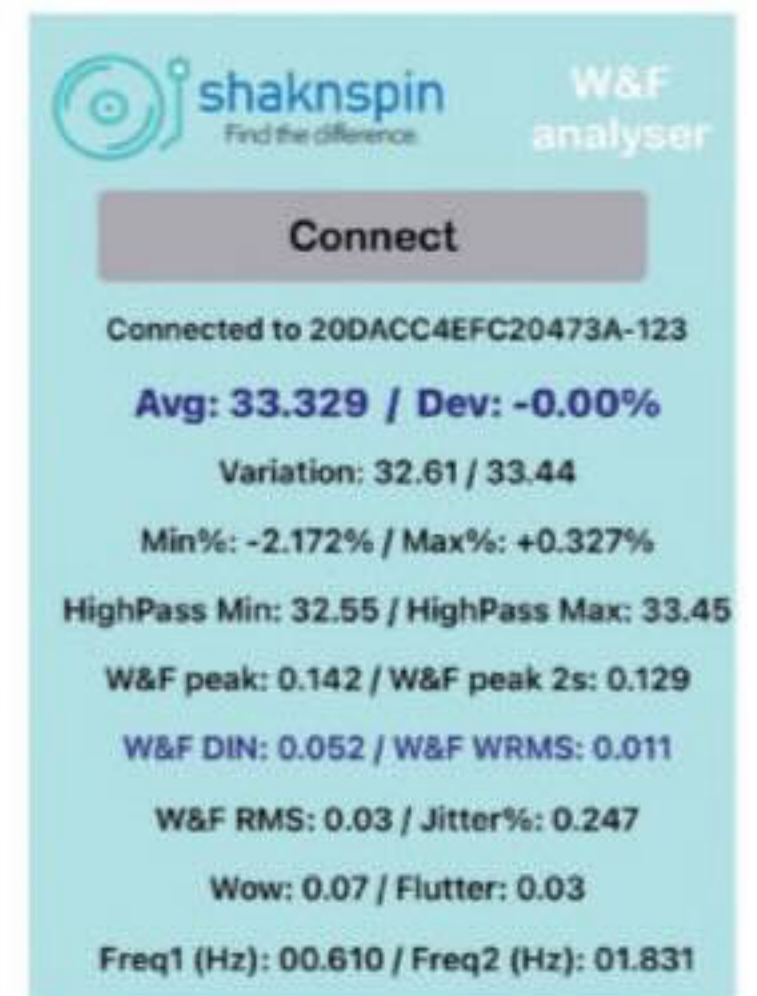
I have found that, with unipivots like this one and VPI's, you can position the protractor by removing the arm wand, then lining up the protractor's pointer with the unipivot cup. Tape down the platter and protractor so that they remain in position and remove the protractor's beam and pointer so that it's out of the way. Doing it this way felt way safer, less of a risk to my Lyra Delos cartridge.

A long slot is provided for mounting the arm, allowing use of three of the four available Wand lengths—9.5", 10.3", or 12"—without modification. The arms also come in three performance levels, Plus, Master Lite, and Master; only the Master is avail-

¹ See [stereophile.com/content/listening-197-simon-brown-wand-tonearm](https://www.stereophile.com/content/listening-197-simon-brown-wand-tonearm).

² The Wand 14-4 turntable costs \$5000, the Wand Master Lite 12" tonearm: \$3750. 10% discount when purchased together: \$7875.





able in the 14" length. The two upper levels have addition damping in the armtube and improved wiring; the Master arm adds a vernier-scale VTA adjustment. I received the 12" Master Lite arm, also called the Wand S some places on the website.

A potential concern when using the 12" arm on the 14-4 turntable is that the arm's length means that the cartridge ends up hovering precariously close to the power and speed selector knob. I'm sure you would get used to it, but it's easy to imagine bumping into the stylus when reaching for the knob, especially after imbibing a bit too much. Another lurking danger is the oversized platter: If you miss the mark while lowering the stylus onto the lead-in to the record, you could land the stylus on the outer lip of the platter, where there are several screws holding the platter's layers together.

They say that with great sacrifice comes great reward. The Wand turntable and tonearm is a perfect example of that. I have more experience than most with difficult-to-wrangle turntables and tonearms, but this one nearly had me crying for my mama. When it was done, all the pain and struggle was forgotten as I fell into the music.

Performance

First up, I played "Vignette," from jazz bassist Gary Peacock's 1977 album *Tales of Another* (ECM 1-1101). Featuring pianist Keith Jarrett and drummer Jack De-Johnette, this trio reconnected a few years later to become Jarrett's jazz-standards trio, with the pianist taking over as leader. Even at this earlier date, it's pretty clear that Jarrett was already in the driver's seat. This is a fairly dry-sounding record, but that only helped to make even clearer the Wand's extraordinary ability to present vivid shades of a rich tonal palette, each instrument sounding remarkably realistic and true. I have never before heard Gary Peacock's recorded sound presented with such clarity and vividness. With De-Johnette's snare, you could clearly hear the internal acoustic of the drum as he tapped lightly on the tightly tuned top head, each buzz from the snares sounding focused and resolved.

Switching gears, I put on *Let It Be* by Slovenian industrial band Laibach (Mute STUMM 58). This 1988 record is an almost unrecognizable cover of The Beatles album of the same name, although it omits the title track. Most of the songs have a

symphonic-industrial sound with marching beats, grunted vocals, and choirs, but their version of "Across the Universe" with guest vocalist Anja Rupel is beautiful. This song, though, can be challenging to make sound good. With the wrong gear or setup, Anja's multitracked vocals can sound a bit thick and congested. The Wand managed to unravel this thicket of sound, clarifying and opening things up.

The Wand turntable and tonearm are clearly the creation of a single person, Simon Brown. There are no compromises here, and few concessions to ease of setup and use. But if you're willing to put in the work and deal with the setup anxiety, your patience will be rewarded with extraordinary performance. The Wand excels in areas I consider fundamental to musical enjoyment, such as tonal color and timing. The Wand will extract the most from your cartridge. There's nothing warm or sluggish sounding about The Wand, but because it's able to resolve detail so well, it never sounds thin or anemic. "Vivid" and "focused" are the words that keep popping into my head. Definitely recommended—as long as you understand what you're getting into.

A VISIT TO SME

It's no secret that I have long been a fan of SME turntables and tonearms. But despite having worked on, set up, or owned hundreds of their products over the last 40 years, I have never had an opportunity to visit the place where they are made. Until now.

Nestled in a sleepy village called Steyning in the south of England, SME still operates from the purpose-built factory they moved into more than 60 years ago, although it has been expanded several times.

What struck me first, as I approached the facility, is how the factory is wedged into a tightly packed residential neighborhood, surrounded by small row houses, with kids playing on the tennis courts across the road. SME isn't a loud or polluting business; they live harmoniously with their neighbors.

The main impression I got from my visit is that SME is working hard to find the right balance between their staunchly traditional English roots and modernizing the company to increase efficiency. Founder Alastair Robertson-Aikman (AR-A) died in 2006, but his office has been





maintained exactly as he left it, a bit like a shrine, complete with the original mid-century furnishings and wall treatments installed when the factory was expanded in the 1970s, adding a second floor. Those were heady times for SME, when they were making 500 to 600 tonearms a week. The 1983 introduction of the compact disc put the future of high-quality vinyl playback gear into doubt, but SME didn't lose faith. One response was to launch their first turntable, the Model 30, in 1991. Under AR-A's guiding hand, the company survived the 1990s. After his passing, in 2006, his son Cameron took the helm. Under new leadership, SME shifted focus to the other side of their business: high-precision contract work for aerospace and medical companies. Before long, that work accounted for 70% of SME's turnover. On the audio side, to some audio enthusiasts, they appeared to be losing their edge.

Fast-forward to 2016. SME was sold to Cadence Audio, led by Indian businessman and lifelong audiophile Ajay Shirke. Cadence's portfolio includes three other iconic English brands—Spendor, Garrard, and Loricraft—and two connected Dutch manufacturers, Siltech and Crystal Cable. Most of these names will be familiar to audiophiles, Loricraft perhaps less so than the others; Loricraft is best known today for its record-cleaning machines, though it has had a long association with classic Garrard idler-drive turntables and was included as a part of the deal to acquire the Garrard brand.

Shirke immediately realized that reviving SME's audio

business would be a delicate balancing act. There was a desperate need to increase efficiency, but it was important not to lose the brand's reputation for intense attention to fine detail and in-house production of almost all mechanical parts. During my visit, I heard several stories about how slow and inefficient things could be under AR-A's intense control, such as the time he asked an engineer to create a prototype for a small assembly, then refused to look at it when the engineer placed it on his desk a day later, saying it couldn't possibly be any good because it was fabricated far too quickly. Another story tells how hours were spent polishing tonearm parts to a flawless mirror finish even though they would end up covered by satin paint.

To implement his plan to revitalize SME, Shirke brought in aerospace-industry veteran Stuart McNeilis as CEO. In the seven years since McNeilis took the helm, SME has been on a rapid path to upgrade and modernize its manufacturing capabilities.

Above, L-R: SME CEO Stuart McNeilis cleans a record with a Loricraft; Kat Ourlian deejays an SME 'table shootout at St Mary's of Bramber.

Today the production floor is jammed with new, state-of-the-art machinery jostling for space with legacy equipment that still does the job it was built for. Touring the factory, you really feel they've been here doing this for a very long time. I could practically smell the oil and grease embedded in the building over decades.

This visit was organized for a couple dozen representatives from SME's global distribution network with me tagging along as the only reviewer. After a short introductory talk, we took a step-by-step tour of the factory, with SME's service manager Brian Laker and other members of SME's friendly crew serving as guides. Everyone was there to experience the factory, but the rest of the group also received additional setup training on the lineup of SME products. Because I already have plenty of field experience, working with just about every SME turntable and arm, I used some of this training time to learn a little more about one of Cadence's other brands, Garrard.

This involved a road trip to Ajay Shirke's home, about midway between London and Steyning, which is down near the South Coast. There, I had the opportunity to audition the 301 through Shirke's finely tuned system, using the massive Siltech Symphony loudspeakers and Siltech SAGA electronics. The Garrard 301 was fitted with an SME M2-12R tonearm and an Ortofon Verismo cartridge. Shirke



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL TREL

treated me to some very special recordings, including a lacquer recording he had commissioned of a sort of mashup between Indian and Western music. It reminded me of Kavi Alexander's superb recording *A Meeting by the River*, with Ry Cooder and Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, only instead of the *Mohan veena* heard on Kavi's recording, this record used a harmonium. The recording Shirke played, which was engineered by the legendary Tony Faulkner, expanded the recording space into the listening room with astonishing focus and clarity.

Most important was how quiet it sounded. Idler drives like the 301 have a reputation for having tons of boogie and drive, but they can sound a bit noisy and in your face. Not so the SME-rebuilt 301; it was spookily quiet and transparent. The current plan for Garrard—a logical next step beyond the Garrard restoration reviewed by Art Dudley in 2019³—is to create fastidious, nuts-and-bolts restorations of classic vintage 301 models, sold in new plinths with SME tonearms. But Shirke also revealed that there are longer term plans to make idler-drive Garrards using all-new designs.

This is starting to sound a bit like a review of Shirke's system, so before I get carried away, it's time to return to Steyning

for another demonstration. This time it was Cadence's latest employee, Kat Ourlian, who was running the show, with a direct comparison between three SME turntable models. Some readers may know Kat from her years working as the analog manager for Upscale Audio. Cadence has enticed Kat to pull up roots and move to London, where she will be working as Cadence's global marketing director, based out of their new central-London showroom, the Audio Lounge. I got a chance to visit the Audio Lounge on my way back through London. It's definitely worth a visit.

Back to the demo in Steyning. The venue: the music room of a very old house called St Mary's of Bramber. We Americans tend to have a pretty limited perspective of what "old" means and will ooh and aah at any structure built before the 20th century. St Mary's was built in 1477. That's old, although to be fair, The Music Room is a later addition. In this gorgeous space, Kat and my friend Chad Stelly had set up an extraordinarily revealing system using Rockport Orion speakers driven by Nagra electronics with SME Model 6, Model 12, and Model 60 turntables ready to go.

First up was SME's most affordable turntable, the Model 6, followed by a midpoint, the Model 12, and finally the flagship Model

60, which I reviewed in the August 2023 issue. With each step, you could hear the expected improvements: improved dynamics, transparency, and scale. Normally, I would expect a system this revealing to expose the weaknesses of a turntable like the Model 6, but it held its ground well.

After two days immersed in the SME experience in Steyning, I was left with a strong impression that SME is building toward a strong future. I look forward to seeing and hearing what comes next. ■

³ See [stereophile.com/content/listening-204-new-garrard-301](https://www.stereophile.com/content/listening-204-new-garrard-301).

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