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November 18, 2009 By [Dennis Burger](#)

Digital hi-fi never really went away, but it's back and better than ever after taking a bit of a beating.

If your golden ears have shied away from the digital domain before, though, it's time for another listen. Not only are old formats like SACD finally reaching their full potential thanks to pure digital interconnectivity, the new high-resolution audio formats found on Blu-ray are making access to eerily high-fidelity music playback easier than ever.

Looking at the state of digital high-fidelity recordings over the past few years, is it any wonder that audiophiles by and large cling to the simplicity and stability of analog? Never mind the debate over which sounds better—with digital formats coming and (seemingly) going, competing standards, fussy connections, questionable bass management, woefully incomplete catalogs and the undeniable stigma of digital music being most commonly associated with poorly compressed, poorly mastered portable audio, analog is just so much easier.

But it's back, even though it never really left. And with these Show-Offs, you've got the demo material to prove it.

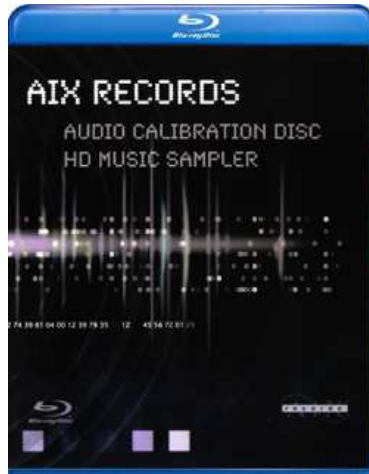
AIX Records HD Music Sampler (Blu-ray) Best Track: "Henry's Farm" by Carl Verheyen

Longtime readers should already be well aware of my undying love for AIX Records. The company's award-winning, multi-disc DVD-Audio/Video releases continue to be, without question, the most pristine recordings these ears have ever heard.

Enjoying them completely also continues to be an aerobic exercise, with high-resolution stereo and surround sound audio relegated to one side of a disc, and beautifully filmed studio performances (accompanied by compressed DTS and Dolby Digital audio) to the other.

Needless to say, AIX President Dr. Mark Waldrep was merely ahead of his time. Now, with the advent of Blu-ray disc, his high-definition, high-resolution audio/video recordings are finally getting the exhibition they deserve.

Customers who purchase OPPO's new BDP-83 Blu-ray Disc Player w/SACD & DVD-Audio are treated to an early taste of AIX's output on Blu-ray. A more comprehensive sampler should be available from aixrecords.com not long after this issue goes to print, with full releases quickly following. But no matter what package it comes in, you simply must experience Carl Verheyen's beautiful solo acoustic rendition of "Henry's Farm."



Leave your display on and soak in the gorgeous video, or turn it off for a more proper high-fidelity audio experience—either way, from the very first note your head will be filled with visions of fretted ebony and phosphor bronze strings. The only way you're going to get any closer to an actual guitar is to hold one yourself. The 7.1 channels of Dolby TrueHD audio aren't packed with discrete sounds so much as diverse textures; every note is a four-course meal of timbres packed into a single bite.

The midrange bathes you, and the high end practically polishes the molecules of air between the speakers and your seat, as the piece builds to a passionate crescendo and quickly pulls back to a gentle whisper—as lovely a display of the dying art of dynamic range as you're likely to hear on any recording anytime soon.

Jen Chapin: reVisions—Songs of Stevie Wonder (SACD) Best Track: "You Haven't Done Nothin'"

The advent of new formats doesn't mean there isn't a bit of audiophile life left in the old ones, though. In fact, the rumors of Super Audio CD's death have been...well, perhaps not greatly exaggerated, but certainly trumped up.

As long as Chesky Records continues to breathe life into SACD with its immaculate recordings, the format's plug will undoubtedly remain un-pulled—especially if they all sound half as good as this one.

From the moment you pop in this delicious collection of covers, the 5.0-channel mix transports you, body and soul, into New York's St. Peter's Church. And you can be sure that plenty of bits are dedicated to capturing the loping rumble of Stephan Crump's bass, the dulcet tones of Chapin's vocals and the growl of Chris Cheek's saxophone (which, incidentally, seems unsatisfied with emanating from any particular speaker and instead oozes with frightening clarity out of some dimensional rift off to the far side of the front left channel).

But the beauty of this recording is that seemingly just as many bits are dedicated to capturing the space between the performers—the subtle nuances of air reverberating off of red oak, fabric and granite in one of New York's most inviting acoustical environments. This disc is a lovely example of what music is supposed to feel like.

Will Dailey: Torrent Volumes 1 & 2 (DVD & CD) Best Track: "Hands"

If you never hopped on the SACD bandwagon and haven't yet upgraded to Blu-ray, don't worry; you're not cut off from digital hi-fi completely. Legendary producer T-Bone Burnett's new X0ΔE (CODE) audio format promises to deliver studio master audio quality into the home with nothing more than a standard DVD player. And if this X0ΔE-Certified, roots-rock release is any indication, Burnett isn't bluffing.



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