

RECORDING SOUTHERN AVENUE AND THE MODERN MEMPHIS SOUND

# RECORDING

The magazine for the recording musician®

## UPGRADING YOUR STUDIO

Advice from Chuck Ainlay, Steve Vai & Friends

Mark Hornsby demystifies Atmos

Mix at Home & On the Go!



VOL. THIRTY-FIVE  
NUMBER TWO  
NOVEMBER 2021

USA \$5.99  
CANADA \$5.99



## 21 NEW REVIEWS

Alclair • Arturia • Aurealex • Black Lion Audio  
Brainworx-Focusrite • Carl Tatz Design  
Coleman Audio • Heritage Audio • Hosa  
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Raising Jake • RME • Shure • Slate Digital • Strymon

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## STUDIO UPGRADE ROUNDUP

### Strymon: Conduit MIDI Hub

Although Strymon is best known for its extensive line of high-quality boutique guitar pedals, this month we are looking at the Strymon Conduit MIDI Hub. At first glance, this 3.5" x 2.63" x 1" emerald aluminum box is a throwback to the MIDI breakout boxes popular in the late 90s. On the front, Conduit offers a pair of 5-pin DIN MIDI I/O, a USB-C input (USB-C to USB-A cable included) and a small set button. Conduit is a fully bus-powered device, or it can be powered by an optional 9v DC power supply.

Conduit will fulfill the most basic MIDI breakout needs for guitar pedals and keyboards alike. On the rear of the box are four 1/4" TRS sockets (cables also included), each of which transmits bi-directional MIDI data. This fast-growing 1/4" MIDI standard is becoming commonplace on many guitars effects pedals and some drum machines and tabletop synths, although currently in 1/8" form.

This makes Conduit an aptly named solution for controlling said pedals from your DAW, a keyboard controller, or a MIDI foot pedal. Depending on the MIDI capabilities of the attached pedal, you can perform program changes or control pedal parameters in live performance or automated in your DAW. Conduit ships defaulted for use with the growing number of MIDI-capable Strymon pedals. Still, you can change modes for use with third-party MIDI-capable pedals and devices on an output-by-output basis. You will need to know how the specific pedals you are trying to connect receive MIDI, and learn how your DAW will address available parameter changes, but once the legwork is done, Conduit works like a charm to sync tempo-based effects to your DAW, perform parameter sweeps and more. If you enjoy using stompboxes in your mix, the Strymon Conduit is an indispensable piece of kit.

**Price: \$149**

**More from: [strymon.net](http://strymon.net)**

### Carl Tatz Design: Phantom Focus System

The final entry in our studio upgrade roundup is the Phantom Focus System from Carl Tatz Design. Perhaps you have seen ads for Phantom Focus speakers, subs, and chairs and wondered, "What is this Phantom Focus System and does it work?" Those same thoughts went through my mind as well as that of reviewer David Blascoe as we sat outside the Blue Grotto studio near Nashville waiting for Mr. Tatz himself to give us a personal walk-through of the Phantom Focus System.

#### What is Phantom Focus?

The Phantom Focus System is the studied result of Carl's quest for an accurate listening and mixing environment. While the Blue Grotto is a full-scale PhantomFocus MixRoom design, Carl quickly pointed out that the system is scalable and can work in almost any room, even with a pre-existing monitor system.

At its core, the Phantom Focus system is essentially a room correction system but dissimilar to many of the software and hardware options already available for studios and live venues. The difference here is that Carl has done the legwork of tweaking and perfecting a complete plug-and-play turnkey solution. The key to any level of Phantom Focus install is turned when Carl and/or members of his team arrive in person at your door. The whole thing reminds me of the difference between a professional alarm company install vs. an inexpensive DIY option.

#### The process and the system

After initial consultations and planning, the Carl Tatz Design (CTD) team arrives at your studio even if you are working with an existing space and monitor setup. They measure, move and position your monitors and mix position using laser guidance and a strict set of tolerances. The room is tuned using a proprietary rack mount processor, a pair of the company's ICE Cube subwoofers, PF Monitor stands, and the PhantomFocus eChair to make your listening experience as accurate as it can be in the sweet spot. In essence, that is the Phantom Focus System.



## Take a seat

Interestingly, the eChair is a high-end upgrade of the Steve Knight-designed ErgoLab Stealth chair (reviewed November 2017). It adds additional chrome, ceramic, and mesh options to this already excellent design. I am sitting in one now and am a Stealth/eChair evangelist. Nicely, the PhantomFocus eChair as well as the PFM ICE Cube subwoofers can be purchased ala carte.

As with all things audio, the system only gets better as you consider adding Carl's custom-designed PFM HD-1000 or PFM UHD-1000 Master Reference Monitors, and recommend amplifiers.

## Furniture

Along with the PFS included eChair, furniture choice and positioning also affects your monitoring. As you move up the Phantom Focus ladder, you may also consider the Carl Tatz Edition Argosy desk.

At the highest end, you can consult with Carl on a from-scratch room design, from the layout and build to the looks and acoustic treatments working hand-in-glove with all previously mentioned products.

## The Blue Grotto

The Blue Grotto is a full-tilt Tatz-designed PhantomFocus MixRoom. As David and I took turns sitting in the sweet spot listening to a broad range of musical styles, both of us were frankly blown away. This was easily one of the most uncolored, accurate listening experiences of my life. Everything was amazingly dimensional. There was zero harshness, bite, or fatigue in the upper frequencies. The low-end extended beautifully downward but never lost its definition or became rumbly or mushy. Even at moderate listening levels of 70dB and below, the imaging remained immaculate.

Listening to great mixes in the Blue Grotto, the elements of each mix extended vertically like layers of an aural cake with vocals, guitars, percussion and bass guitar, each occupying its own defined space.

The Phantom Focus System is *very focused*. Any immediate shift out of the sweet spot to the left or right is quite noticeable. Carl makes no concession for this phenomenon. This system is not designed for large groups of musicians to be huddled together side-by-side at the board. It is designed with secondary and tertiary listening positions, in line behind the focused mix position.

One other caveat: this system is so accurate that once you learn to mix within its ecosystem, you will not need (and according to Carl, not *want*) secondary sets of check monitors. The whole point of the system is the removal of variables and obstacles to your mix environment.

## Conclusion

As you may guess, the system is not inexpensive, especially as you factor in the company's monitors and more. Having said that, it's actually not out of line when one considers the price of equivalent monitors and such. In some instances, a stereo pair of boutique monitors may easily cost more than a pair of the PFM HD-1000 and a System 4 set up, and again according to Carl, still not come close to its performance.

Bottom line—both David and I concurred that the Phantom Focus System is neither myth, scam, nor snake oil. It truly is a stellar, ultra-accurate listening experience. If you are looking to up your mix accuracy game, check out the website for packages, details, and better yet, give Carl a call, he is highly knowledgeable and a pleasure to talk to. ➤

**More from: [phantomfocus.com](http://phantomfocus.com)**