

2,500 Clams for a Frog!

*Mister Grasshopper gets a new friend.
Review by Steve Guttenberg*

Van den Hul The FROG® moving coil cartridge

Cartridges — really expensive, high end cartridges — have always been tough for me. They're such tiny, relatively simple devices. So why are they so *?/#*@! expensive?

Surely, the cost of the materials doesn't amount to much, so it must be the inefficiencies of small-scale production that drive up the price. And that's pretty much it: We're paying for incredibly specialized skills that won't be amortized over tens of thousands of units. So yes, they're bloody expensive, but I can promise you this: In the context of a perfectionist audio value system, the van den Hul Frog is an exceptional product. This old audio cynic (yours truly) had his ears opened by this \$2500 contraption, and I'm still a little shaken by the experience.

I've never doubted the sonic contributions of phono cartridges to the hierarchy; all Linnies in the audience may now chant our mantra, "information lost at the beginning of the chain can never be recovered." Makes perfect sense to me — but then, unlike speakers, electronics, or turntables, phono cartridges wear out. Or worse yet, their untimely deaths (curious cats, indelicate handling) usually set their owners back half their original cost or more. Well *ex-cuuuuuuse me* — I just wanna have fun, not face financial catastrophe every time I play a record!

In my pre-audiophile days, "needles" were no big thing, and over the years I went through a number of Shures, Stantons, Empires, and \$9 Grados before I bought my first cartridge with any sort of higher aspirations. It was a \$125 Micro Acoustics. Sure seemed like a lot of dough for a cartridge in 1978, but when that Micro yanked so much more music out of the grooves, I started believing in the higher priced spread. A year or so later, I bought my first Linn: The Micro found a new home on a Grace 707 tone arm, and the stakes were raised yet again. (When your turntable costs more than your car, you know you're an audiophile.) That cartridge was my last that wasn't a moving coil; a Supex 900 was my first that was. From there I moved on to a Dynavector Ruby, a Linn Asak, then to a Koetsu Black, then a Kiseki Blue, a whole slew of Monster Cable cartridges, a Sumiko SHO, and, more recently, a Linn Klyde. Most of these cartridges sell for under \$1000. That's hardly chump change, but \$2500 is really getting up there. Inquiring (and penny-pinching) audiophiles want to know: Is the Frog really worth that kind of money?

A.J. van den Hul first entered the cartridge business by designing the vdH-1 and vdH-2 stylus tips in 1975. His patented, radical stylus shape traces far finer groove modulations than the more common elliptical tips, while reducing noise and record wear thanks to the extended vertical height of his design. (Who would have guessed that an unexpected benefit of the van den Hul stylus shape would be its ability to play 78s!) In any event, A.J. sold more than 1.5 million styli over the years. The Frog stands half way between a van den Hul MC10 Special (*Listener*, Vol.2, No.4) and van den Hul's statement cartridge, the \$5000 Grasshopper. The Frog uses the very same stylus as the Grasshopper, a highly polished vdH-1S, the same coil winding, frontpole, and suspension of its big brother. The Grasshopper's gold coils are replaced with matched crystal copper coils and the optically flat aluminum body top (to ensure the most intimate contact with the headshell) is identical to all MC series cartridges — but its color is an appropriately froggish green. The Frog weighs in at a frisky 8.2 grams, and like the Grasshopper, it's hand built and tuned by A.J. himself.

I started listening to the review sample Frog on my good friend Todd Wilding's system — modded Quad 63s, totally tweaked out Futterman OTL-1 amps, Joule Electra LA 100 preamp, and an S.M.E. 20 turntable with Graham 1.5 arm. High rez and extremely musical, Todd's rig sussed out the Frog pronto, and his setup allowed for quick changes. Todd's Vendetta SCP-2B phono stage made cartridge loading experiments a snap, but we mostly jumped back and forth between 47k and 1k. At 47k the sound was a touch too bright, but with the 1k, the top end was slightly soft, though the bass was tighter. Fiddling with VTA resurrected the top end detail and middle clarity, so we continued with the 1k loading.

At that point we compared the Frog to Todd's current fave — the luscious \$2650 Crown Jewel Reference. Since Todd had a second arm "wand," switching back and forth between the two cartridges took only a few minutes. Our easy summation: The Jewel is no slouch. Michael Fremer called it "lush and seductive," and I agree, but the Frog simply left less of a discernible imprint on the music. Todd immediately volunteered, "The Quads never made better (deeper, tighter) bass." Running through a stack of records, the differences from disc to disc were always musically striking and, equally important, sans any hi-fi jinx like exaggerated "detail" or "air."

Checking out "Moon Maiden" from *Intimate Ellington* (Pablo) was instructive. Duke's playful recitation was so much more playful, his little phrasing details more apparent, the celeste's harmonics more ethereal with the Frog. Next we listened to the Classic Records reissue of Duke's *Back To Back*. The Frog hopped right to it, opening up Ellington's bouncy piano sound and easing out the deeper beauties within Johnny Hodges' poetry-in-motion alto sax. I have to make a confession here: As much as I love Ellington, it was only after I heard "Back To Back" with the Frog that I truly connected with it. This is a smoky, late night blues record, with plenty of bounce, and the Frog made that very clear to me. Todd flipped over the Frog's "aliveness" and dynamics, and I must say that his system never sounded better to me. At that point, I was itchin' to hear the Frog in my own system so we jumped on the No.4 train heading out to Brooklyn.

Setup is a breeze, so the Frog was quick to make itself at home on my Naim Aro arm, and Lingoed Linn. Compatibility with the Aro seems fine, though A.J.'s .6 to .8-gram antiskating force recommendation cannot be accommodated: The

Aro's minimum is 1.5 grams. Naim's Julian Vereker believes that the sensitivity of his uni-pivot arm to the skating forces developed by the stylus in the groove is less a concern than in gimbaled arms. From what I heard, I'd have to agree. The Frog proved itself a tracking champ, even with a minimal downforce of 1.5 to 1.6 grams. Phono preamp-ing duties were handled by my Michael Percy-modded Audio Research PH-3. *

* This \$266 mod supercharges the PH-3's transparency, and kicks up low level rez a whole lot. It's a DIY project that requires above-average skills though: Todd put in a solid 15 hours, but then he's very persnickety. Call Michael Percy Audio Products at (415)669-7181 for more info.

Despite the experience at Todd's, the 47k loading on the PH-3 seemed well balanced, so we stuck with the standard loading — it's impossible to predict such things from one system to the next.

While I've come to think of the Klyde as essentially neutral (*Listener*, Vol.3, No.1), it didn't take more than a cut or two to convince me that the Frog was unraveling heretofore untold mysteries of the grooves. For the first time, I was aware of feeling the "body heat" of the musicians, or maybe it has something to do with the way it restores the natural density to voices and instruments — it's tempting to think this green cartridge imbues the sound with a euphonically sweet "coloration." It's probably the other way around: Because of the other cartridges' more machinelike characters, their coarser grain/distortions are grafted onto the music. Cartridges are mechanical transducers after all — "just pulling a speeding rock down a dirty road." Somehow the Frog makes the vinyl come alive; it magically retrieves more of the music and less of the everything else.

A big part of the story here is probably the Frog's higher than average output for a moving coil: 0.65 mV. Combined with the van den Hul stylus's unique profile (said to dig fresh groove walls), this results in a higher signal-to-noise ratio — and in a hushed quiet that's addictive. It's like a vinyl noise reduction system: My entire record collection sounds "remastered." They're quieter, the balances make more sense — they're mo' better overall. Pops and clicks are far less intrusive, making most of my crisper Atlantics, Motowns, Delmarks, and Prestige pressings sound rejuvenated.

Besides, this cartridge makes it easy to resist the reviewers' typical highs/mids/lows sonic breakdown. Live sound is continuous — and so is the Frog.

One of the qualities of the Frog that totally took me by surprise is the way it presents dynamics. Not only will the large scale leaps make you jump, there's also a wider range of dynamic nuance going on here. As soon as I heard hipster Mose Allison's swinging rollercoaster tunes "Your Molecular Structure" and "If You're Goin' To The City," I was a goner. The Frog lets me feel and anticipate Allison's crazy rhythms and abrupt shifts more intimately — and with this jazzman at the piano everything's in constant motion. Couple that with the Frog's substantial presence (its "there-ness") and the music feels more fully developed and complete. Speaking of piano players, the Frog's rhythmic abilities had me digging through my collection to find *Stridemonster!* (Unisson Records), a dazzling assortment of piano duets with Dick Hyman and Dick Wellstood. These rip-roaring duels can get pretty hairy, but the Frog tracked their syncopated compressions and expansions with amazing precision (the trackability of the fairly compliant Frog is exceptional — it felt unusually secure in the groove). Lesser cartridges just can't keep up with the two Dicks.

When I popped the DCC remastered *Fresh Cream* on the Linn, Ginger Baker's bass drum detonations kicked harder than ever — the runaway train on "Rollin' and Tumblin'" is unbelievably fast and furious. Jack Bruce's vocal and harp are tearing it up, nearly out of control, and Clapton seems totally into it. I've heard this track dozens of times, but I've never been so caught up in the frenzy of the music. Imaging, schmimaging: Who would notice in the midst of such a raucous good time? Hey, I like imaging, but there's a time for it.

When the mood was right, I put on Copland's *Quiet City* (Argo) and, sure 'nuff, Neville Mariner's Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Orchestra suitably expressed the boundaries of my room. Focused and wide open, the soundstaging abilities of the Frog were beyond reproach, always musically natural. I couldn't ask for more. In fact, I came to take the imaging for granted — kind of like real life when you stop and think about it. I was consistently drawn to the music and how it moved more than to the way it sounded. Yup, A.J. has his priorities in order.

After my sensory awakening, I couldn't go back to the Klyde. The Frog now reveals it to be a fairly soulless performer. Not bad mind you, but it lacks the life of the little green cartridge. I'm convinced that the Frog digs out more of the truth hidden in the grooves. In retrospect, it looks like (sounds like?) the Klyde and all of my previous cartridges were adding stuff that wasn't there. They created sounds unrelated to the music, while the Frog just decodes more of the wiggles with greater fidelity. The good stuff isn't good for what it does, but rather for what it doesn't do. As in getting the hell out of the way.

So are 2500, er, *clams* for a cartridge such a silly idea? Sonically, there's no question in my mind that the van den Hul Frog is very, very good. I've even found myself fantasizing about the twice-as-dear Grasshopper, and that's more dough than my father's first Cadillac. In terms of value for the money, think of it this way: Where else in the techie consumerland can you buy a product hand-built and tested by its designer? Each Frog consumes 3 to 4 hours of tender loving attention by the master cartridge craftsman himself. And the 2-year warranty provides at least double the protection of most of the competition.

And — when it's time for retipping or repair, A.J. again does all the work; no underlings or assistants ever lay a hand on a Frog or a Grasshopper. You can spend a lot more on a cartridge and not receive that level of service. I almost forgot to mention the Frog stylus's 2500-3000 hour life expectancy and it's oh-so-reasonable \$500 retipping repair fees. A.J. believes his cartridges are not disposable things: They should have a 10-year (plus) lifespan, and some even reach their twentieth birthdays. Put all that together and the Frog doesn't seem so extravagant after all. Yeah, it's still hard to put \$2500 cartridges and value together in the same sentence, but if there really is such a thing, the Frog is it.

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