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STEPHEN MEJIAS

A Sunday Drive, an Unbeatable Experience

By Stephen Mejias • Posted: Dec 2, 2011



All photos: Micah Sheveloff.

"Big loud blue sedan" is the text message I receive as our Metro-North commuter train eases into the sleepy Milford, Connecticut station. I pull on my coat, grab my bag of CDs, step out of the train and onto the clean platform. It's precisely 11:39am on Sunday, November 20, and there's not a cloud in the sky.

The text message is considerate, but unnecessary: Even from the platform, my view compromised by the station's waiting room, I can hear the handsome, steady purr of the engine, see the polished chrome of the bumper scattering sunlight in a million directions. The car—a 1988 Chevrolet Caprice 9C1—is a deep metallic blue, almost black, and it's pristine. As I open the door, I leave fingerprints on the glass and chrome.

The car's interior has been restored to mint condition and offers no hint of the powerful audio system contained within. For the moment, the stereo is playing softly and I can't make out the song; the system sounds strangely ordinary. But this is no surprise: It would be out of character for Micah Sheveloff to attempt to impress me from the start. He's subtler and more thoughtful than that. We'd been discussing this outing for months: Sheveloff would demonstrate his car's custom sound system while we toured Milford and New Haven; we're lucky to have settled on this bright, clear Sunday, only days before the car goes into storage for the long winter ahead. Micah extends a hand.

WIRC Media, his public relations firm, represents major hi-fi and home entertainment brands including Bryston, Thiel, Savant, and ZVOX, but before he made the transition into the home audio market, Micah was infatuated with car audio.

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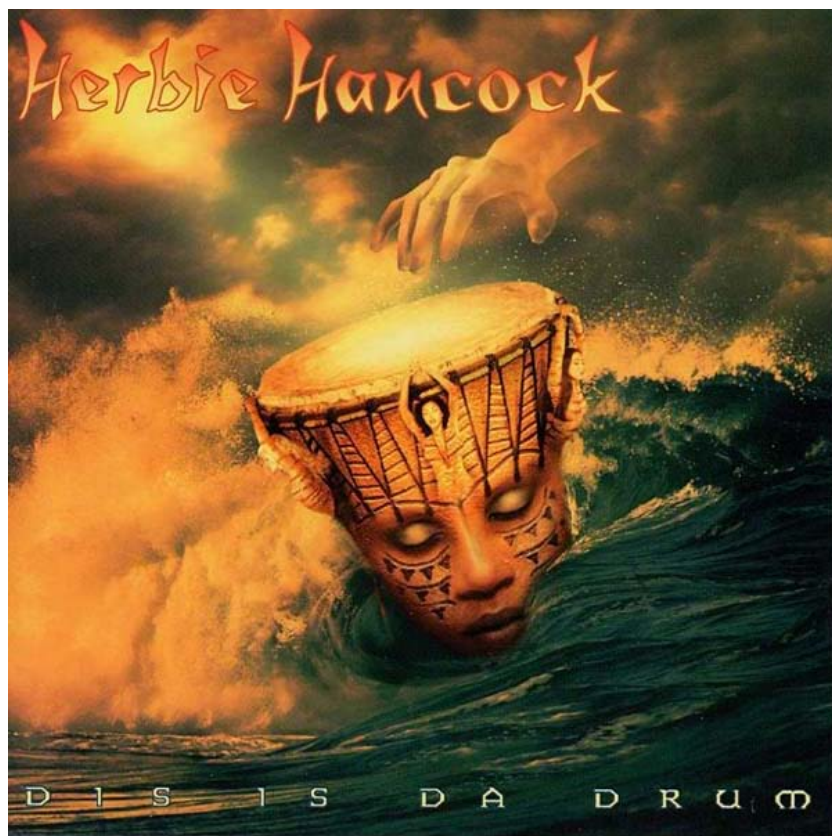


The big difference between car audio and home audio, Micah explains, is car audio's need to overcome ambient noise. In fact, to a large extent, it's this simple requirement which dictates a system's overall design. In the case of the Caprice, the system had to have enough power to overcome the car's custom-built 2.25-inch stainless dual exhaust.

By this point in our conversation, Micah has already apologized for the noise a number of times.

"Let's listen to the system for a bit and I'll see if we can find some good roads," Micah suggests. "Ready?"

Micah turns up the volume and reaches down for a knob located to the right of the steering wheel. This discreet knob, he explains later, controls the subwoofer level—independent control of the sub gain, coupled with a series of EQ presets, allows Micah to tailor the system's sound to different mixes and genres of music.



The song, completely new to me, is "Dis is Da Drum," the title track from Herbie Hancock's 1994 record, a vibrant collage of Latin rhythms, hip-hop, jazz, electronic, and funk. And as the volume rises, the music replaces our words, our thoughts, and the sounds of the outside world; it becomes the soundtrack to everything we now see and feel. The experience is not unlike listening to a good set of headphones: momentarily disorienting, but also wonderfully immersive, freeing, *moving*.

If one wanted to be critical of such pleasures, there is the fact that a driver cannot hear sirens or other alarms. Car audio is loud. That's part of the deal.

Yet, so vibrant and compelling are these sounds, I'm now tempted to ask Micah to turn the volume up.

"Is the volume okay?" he asks.

Going back further, Micah, like so many audiophiles, grew up in a house devoted to music. Micah's father was a longtime professor of musicology at Boston University, and as a child, Micah regularly attended ballet and chamber concerts. At home, Micah's first system was a pair of Advent bookshelf loudspeakers driven by a Realistic receiver from RadioShack. Piano and voice lessons also came at an early age. Later in life, Micah's time was split between pumping gas, working as an apprentice mechanic, and playing music. Though he enjoyed working on cars, fixing transmissions was ruining his hands, and he began to wonder about other

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employment opportunities. It was around this time that a customer's car was broken into, the stereo stolen, and Micah assigned the job of repairing it. For Micah, this was a turning point—a way to work on cars *and* preserve his hands for music.

When Chevrolet originally released this car, the company referred to the body type as "The New Chevrolet." On his blog, "[Micah Madness](#)," Micah explains his attraction to the Caprice:

I remember in 1977 when GM launched an ad campaign for the Impala/Caprice entitled "The New Chevrolet." I recall huge ads, profile shots—a very clean, boxy design. For some unexplainable reason, I took to the car way back then. After years of working on automobiles—including many exotics from all over the world, I decided to purchase a "box-style Chevy" of my very own. The 9C1 denomination is reserved for the police package cars, which were adorned with heavy duty everything and an anemic but torque-heavy 350ci V8, rather than the 305ci that came standard in the civilian cars. I restored the deep blue beast with the initial purpose of using it as a demo platform to sell the very first Alpine aftermarket GPS navigation systems.

The car is large and uncompromising, marked by sharp angles and long lines. Perfect, I imagine, for hiding some serious audio gear. And perfect for Micah's personal philosophy of delivering the most accurate reproduction of music while maintaining the vehicle's original form.

The system comprises an Alpine CD player, an Audison BIT1 processor, and an array of Focal loudspeakers: 4-inch speakers in the front, 6x9 radial speakers in the rear, and two 10-inch subs behind the backseat. An Audison HV Sedici amplifier powers the front stage, while JL Audio HD600 amplification handles the rear-fill and subwoofers. In addition, cleverly placed acoustic treatments have been installed throughout the interior. Aside from the CD player and small EQ control, there are no visible signs of any of this gear: The car appears as though it were stock, unmodified and absolutely elegant.

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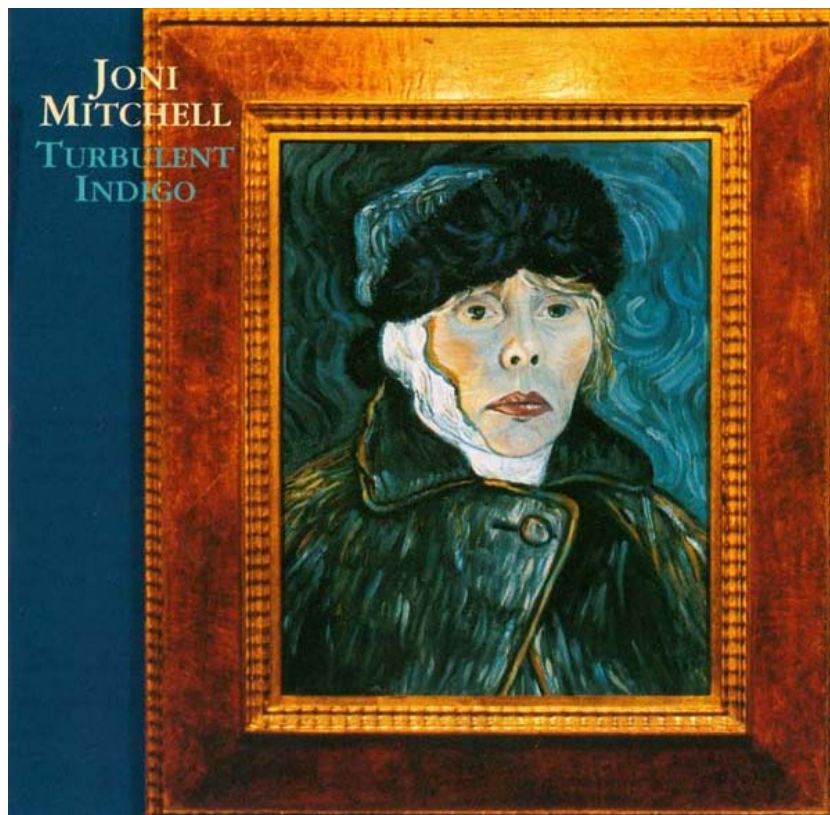


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The second track we listen to is Joni Mitchell's "Sex Kills," another song that I've never heard, and impressive for its guitar work, recording quality—there's a great sense of space around the big, powerful drums—and, of course, Mitchell's poignant lyrics.

*And the gas leaks
And the oil spills
And sex sells everything
And sex kills*

The neighborhood around us is a fairytale of yellow leaves and manicured lawns, pumpkins and decorative baskets, a life most people will never know. Micah turns left and heads straight for the water. Once we reach the Long Island Sound, we step out of the car to admire the view. Sunlight bounces off the choppy water, while seagulls hang almost motionless in the icy blue sky. Weeks ago, this area was trampled by Hurricane Irene. Nearby, a handmade street sign announces "Irene Drive."



We get back into the car and head along Bayview Beach. The song is "It's So Easy to Fall in Love," and it's delivered with satisfying impact, percussion instruments sounding surprisingly realistic.

Life led Micah to Rich's Car Tunes in Boston, where, through owner Rich Inferrera, Micah gained a great appreciation for high-quality workmanship. "I'm not sure if you noticed the

processor in the trunk—how neatly the cables were done—it's that kind of thing that I took from working at Rich's shop. Everything we did there was about intense craftsmanship. Wire harnesses had to be perfectly neat and fabrication was always absolutely as good as we could make it. We also did a lot with 'incognito' installations, which hid an aftermarket radio behind the face of the OEM radio to prevent theft."



Life took another turn, this time to Burlington, Vermont, where Micah landed a job at a hi-fi dealership called Audio Den. In his three years in Vermont, Micah turned the Audio Den into a viable destination for car audio, but also gained valuable experience in the world of *home* audio. So successful were he and his partners at selling Thiel gear that the company's Kathy Gornik and Jim Thiel came out for a visit. A strong and enduring relationship was born. It was then that Micah learned about phase- and time-coherent speaker designs and soon fell in love with Thiel, the brand, and its philosophy.

"That was when I really discovered high-end audio," he explains.

Later, after a second stint with Rich's Car Tunes, inspired by the philosophy of superior craftsmanship and attention to detail, Micah set out on his own and, in 1990, opened Audio Coupe to design and install custom car audio systems. There, as with all the stops along his way, Micah formed valuable, enduring relationships: Jason Venne, Micah's lead installer at Audio Coupe, now works at Automotive Restorations, Inc., the shop responsible for taking care of Micah's Caprice.

In 2000, Micah sold the company and went on to become senior editor at AudioVideo International, a trade magazine devoted to A/V, autosound, telecommunications, and mobile products. From his new perspective, Micah saw an opportunity to help companies better identify and differentiate their brands. He started WIRC Media and brought all of his past experiences along for the ride.

Next, we listen to one of Micah's favorite pop songs, "It's Never Too Late to Be Alone," a track from Del Amitri's 1995 album, *Twisted*. You might recall the album's hit single, "Roll To Me."

I actually saw Del Amitri perform live at Irving Plaza in support of *Twisted*. We were in college and Michelle was always winning free tickets to shows. She was the only one, I imagined, listening to our college radio station, there in her dorm room, with the phone nearby, ready to call in and take advantage of those ticket giveaways. One afternoon, she arrived at my room, tickets in hand, and dragged me through Teaneck, onto a bus, into Port Authority, onto a train, across Union Square, into Irving Plaza, and through the thick crowd to the stage. Moments later, the lead guitarist was tossing his pic in our direction and Michelle had a souvenir. After the show, we shared fries and a chocolate shake from Wendy's and watched the skateboarders leap from the steps of Union Square. It was getting cold.





All of this goes through my mind as we drive by a rocky beach, a fisherman stepping into the choppy water, a young couple sitting happily on a wooden bench, an old couple taking a walk, the music serving as the perfect soundtrack.

We drive on, turn left, and park in a lot with a view of green grass, bare trees, and the water. Appropriately, we listen to "Driving with the Breaks On." Micah adjusts the EQ and subwoofer control, taps the settings a few times, listens. Whereas earlier the bass was overripe, it is now tight and well-controlled. When Micah's satisfied with the sound, he explains that the system has been optimized for the driver's seat. We switch seats and listen again. In the driver's seat, I hear an expanded soundstage, greater image focus, and a more compelling overall presentation. If I were driving, we would probably crash. This is much more like listening at home to the hi-fi; it occurs to me that the car is a mobile listening room.

We drive on, now heading north from Milford into New Haven, on our way to Yale University. Along the way, we pass a group of protestors camped out at New Haven Green; Louis' Lunch, "The Birthplace of the Hamburger Sandwich"; Pepe's Pizza, where a long line of anxious, hungry customers stretches way down the sidewalk; Take5 Audio, a hi-fi institution ("We have to get out and take a picture here," Micah tells me); and Firehouse 12, a gorgeous recording studio where Micah has been working on a solo project. As we drive, we test the system's breaking point with a couple of well-recorded hard rock tracks, "Dorina" and "Posters," from Dada's *Puzzle*. In the middle of the huge drums and powerful guitars, Micah reminds me that good car audio requires shitloads of power to overcome ambient noise. Clearly, there's no shortage of power here.



As the soft autumn sun begins its early descent, we make our way toward the Caprice's garage, a charming, quiet building, surrounded by trees—one would never suspect the sort of power resting inside. We end our listening with an absolute feast of percussion, "World Machine," by Level 42, and finally with the Beach Boys' classic, "Disney Girls," a wonderful song and one introduced to me by Micah when *Stereophile* editor [John Atkinson and I visited](#) back in the summer of last year.

*Open cars and clearer stars
That's what I've lacked
But fantasy world and Disney girls
I'm coming back*

"I love doing this," Micah says. "Driving and rocking out on an autumn road...there's nothing like it. It's just an unbeatable experience."

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COMMENTS



Sunday Drive

Submitted by Skellum on December 2, 2011 - 2:57pm

Nice piece Stephen. Must have been a detective's car considering all all the bright work on it, Ford calls it "Street Appearance" for the Crown Vics. I get to drive one for work. Oh and by the way, the rest of that Joni album "Turbulent Indigo" is pretty yummy as well.

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Disney Girls

Submitted by John Atkinson on December 2, 2011 - 5:30pm