

The  
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Kelly Wearstler on the raw appeal of marble furnishings.

BY RIMA SUQI

Ross Bleckner exorcises the ghost of Truman Capote.

BY STEVEN KURUTZ

DOMESTIC LIFE | DESIGN | GARDENING | D.I.Y.

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# Home

The New York Times

## AT HOME WITH GEORGE McDONALD



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC STRIFFLER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES  
The Tile House and its latest owners, with their granddaughter Emma Rideout-Mann.

## The Mosaic Of His Life

Grand Central Terminal has been a touchstone in George McDonald's life. Now he has a house that matches it.

By PENELOPE GREEN

BAY SHORE, N.Y. — Everything that has mattered most to George McDonald has happened in Grand Central Terminal.

It was there that he began feeding the homeless in 1985, a 700-night odyssey, as the story goes, that led this former apparel executive, now 69, to start the Doe Fund.

He named the organization, a career and life-skills counseling program in its 28th year, after Mama Doe, a homeless woman who died of pneumonia on Christmas Eve in Vanderbilt Hall, the former waiting room that the homeless, who used to congregate on the benches there, called "the living room." Mr. McDonald still leads a candlelight service for Mama Doe in the main hall every year on Christmas Eve.

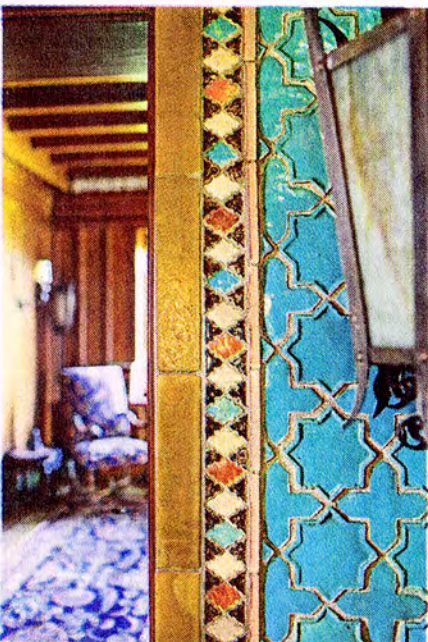
It was there, too, that he met his wife, Harriet Karr-McDonald, now 62, who was a screenwriter and actress in 1987 when she spent a week in the terminal with a teenage runaway named April Savino, researching a script about Ms. Savino's life.

Fittingly, when Mr. McDonald announced his candidacy for New York City mayor last winter, he did so in Grand Central, in the Graybar Passage.

The terminal's quirks and flourishes, like the glazed herringbone-tile arches of the Oyster Bar and the Whispering Gallery outside it, are as familiar to Mr. McDonald as those of a family home.

Yet it was almost by accident that he found himself in late 2010 wandering through a family home embellished with the same flourishes. The Tile House, its local nickname, is an eccentric, Moorish-looking brick folly on the south shore of Long Island, built by Rafael Guastavino Jr., the son of the architect Rafael Guastavino Sr., who developed the tile-vaulting system used in the Oyster Bar, the Whispering Gallery and in hundreds of other spaces, including Carnegie Hall and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Begun in 1912, when the younger Guastavino was working on Grand Central, the house is a riot of tile work: his own instantly recognizable herringbone arches, supplemented with European tiles he



The house is a riot of tilework, yet it is also surprisingly homey and acoustically gentle.

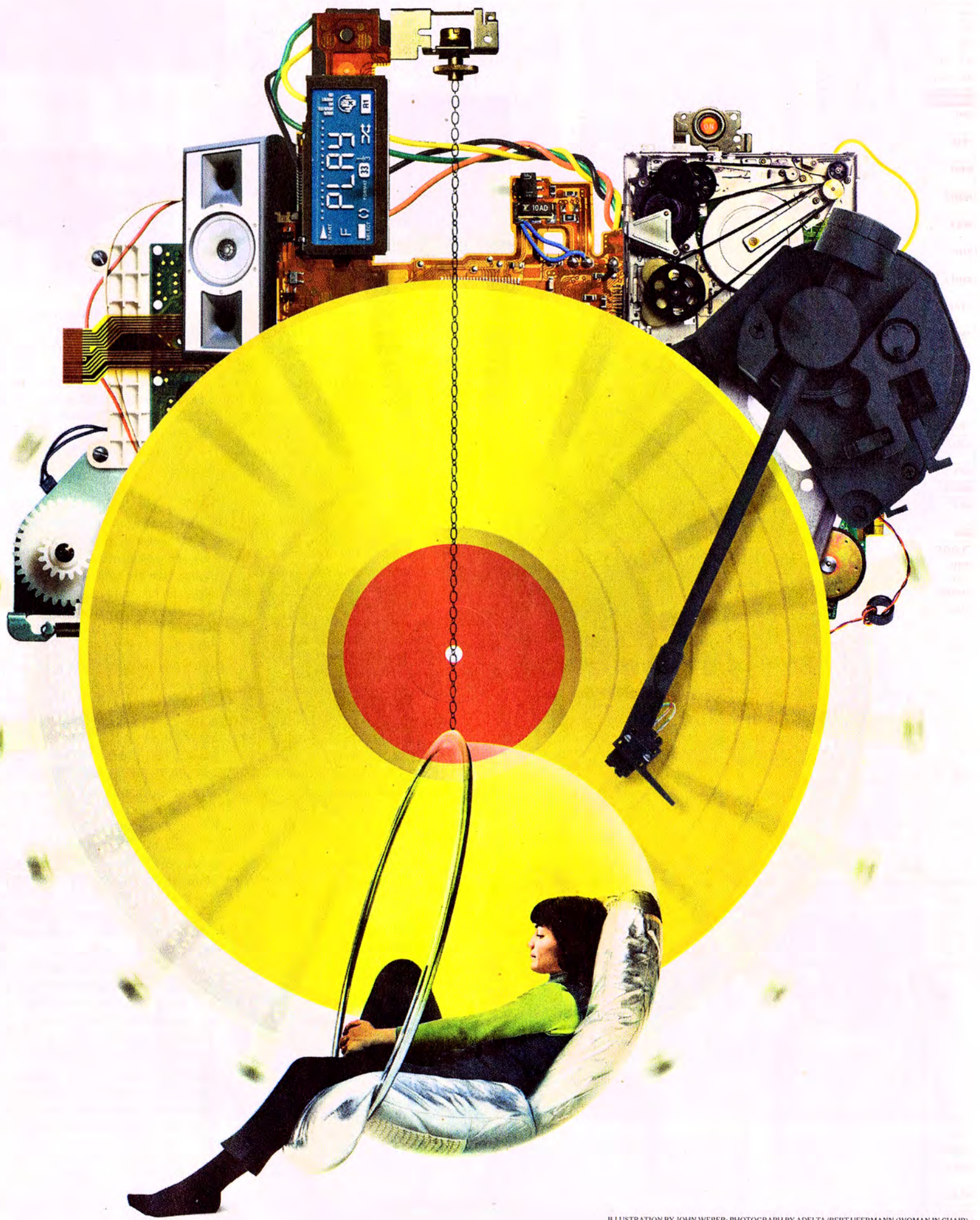


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN WEBER; PHOTOGRAPH BY DELTA/BERT UFFERMANN (WOMAN IN CHAIR)

# The New Audio Geeks

A high-tech audience catches on to the appeal of high fidelity.

By STEVEN KURUTZ

In his bachelor days in the late '80s, Philip Elias lived in a town house in Pittsburgh wired for jaw-dropping sound.

He owned a Bang & Olufsen Beocenter 9500 music system with three pairs of B&O Penta 3 tower speakers, each set up in a different room. Sometimes he would invite friends over and crack open a new album as if he were uncorking a great bottle of wine.

The speakers, which cost around \$5,000 a pair and required months of saving to buy, were as breathtaking in design as they were in sonic quality, Mr. Elias said: "Architecturally, they were sensual. Almost something out of the Museum of Modern Art. That was important. They made a statement above the sound."

These days, Mr. Elias, 58, is an advertising executive who lives with his wife and three children in a house in Pittsburgh with enough high-end audio gear to open a stereo showroom, including a Krell Showcase five-channel power amp (\$4,500), Thiel CS6 loudspeakers (\$9,000 a pair) and an Escent FireBall CD system (\$4,000). Every year, he offers to buy his children a great stereo, he said, but they never take him up on it.

"They'd rather have a laptop," he said. "It's dispiriting."



Left, A Thiel Audio CS2.7 speaker (\$7,999 for the pair); top, Traveler turntable by VPI (\$1,500); above, Connect by Sonos (\$350), which streams music to a home stereo.

The Internet and digital technology have upended the music industry over the last decade or so, but high-end audio has arguably suffered an even greater blow. The industry's very raison d'être — the nitpicky pursuit of superb sound reproduction, no matter the cost or complexity — is irrelevant to many music listeners today.

People download MP3s from iTunes or Web sites and play them on their smartphones or laptops. They share songs with friends by e-mailing YouTube links. Sure, the music sounds flat, tinny, supercompressed; it's an audiophile's hell. But convenience and mobility rule the day.

Ken Kessler, a veteran audio journalist, summed up the industry's problems last year at an audiophile conference in Denver. Speaking to a roomful of mostly middle-aged men, he said: "In the '60s and '70s, if you opened up Esquire or Playboy and they showed a bachelor pad, there was a killer sound system in it. Now, there's an iPod dock."

Apple devices aren't losing ground with bachelors or anyone else, and soon music may exist mainly in the nebulous "cloud." Still, there is a sense that after years of near extinction, a new generation of home audiophiles is emerging to follow in the footsteps of guys like Mr. Elias.

From the renewed popularity of vinyl (a trend that isn't lost on retailers like Urban Outfitters, which now sells not just records but turntables alongside its clothing) to the sales explosion of high-end headphones like the \$400 Beats by Dre, many

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# The New Audio Geeks

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younger music fans are seeking a listening experience that goes beyond an MP3 and a cheap pair of earbuds.

Of course, for some, the primary motivation is fashion; it's become cool to collect vinyl or wear slick headphones. But for others, there is a desire for what Charley Damski, a 24-year-old budding audiophile, called a "pure connection to the source."

Mr. Damski, who lives in Los Angeles and works at a television animation studio, said he spent high school buying and burning CDs and making mixes from songs he downloaded from iTunes and file-sharing sites.

Then he heard one of his older brother's albums, "A Night at the Opera" by Queen, in 5.1 surround sound. "I remember listening to it in my room and hearing all the voices," Mr. Damski said. "I thought, 'Oh, there's another layer to this I wasn't aware of.'"

Hearing music with such outstanding sound quality was a revelatory experience, he said: "You don't know you need it until it exists."

IF SONIC QUALITY has diminished for many in recent years, the quantity of music that people consume may be at a high. Freed of home storage constraints, digital libraries have swelled absurdly.

Dan Svizeny, a 24-year-old manager at an online advertising agency in Philadelphia, recalled how his high school classmates bragged about the number of tunes stored on their iPods. "They would say, 'Oh, man, I have 60,000 songs,'" he said. "It was a currency."

For a while, Mr. Svizeny, a guitarist and avid music consumer, engaged in the MP3 arms race, ripping songs from Napster and other file-sharing sites and importing them to his iTunes account. "The sound quality didn't matter at all," he said. "Just the music."

But Mr. Svizeny's attitude has since changed. He no longer owns an iPod and rarely, if ever, downloads music, he said. At work, he listens to Spotify, the music-streaming service. At home, he plays LPs, inspired, he said, by his father's collection of Black Sabbath and Frank Zappa records. "I could buy a terabyte hard drive and store countless MP3s, but it's lost value to me," Mr. Svizeny said. "I'd rather hold a physical thing."

With vinyl, he added, "You're experiencing music in a different way."

Mr. Damski went through a similar evolution, from having more than 50,000 songs on his hard drive to "abandoning" iTunes, he said, in favor of Spotify and the scratchy joys of vinyl. He likes the physicality of LPs, and the way they make it hard for him to skip songs. He also enjoys what he called the "Easter egg hunt" of used-record shopping, otherwise known as sifting through bins of Olivia Newton-John and Al Martino releases, hoping to find a rare gem from the Beach Boys' bearded phase.

In true audiophile fashion, it now pains Mr. Damski to listen to low-resolution music played through the microspeakers of a smartphone or a computer. "I wanted to hear a Kinks song the other day that wasn't on Spotify, so a friend looked it up on YouTube," he said. "It sounded so bad."

He laughed at his own fussiness, but added, "I didn't even want to listen anymore."

As for home audio equipment, Mr. Svizeny owns what he considers an average Sony turntable, receiver and speakers, while Mr. Damski uses his roommate's Audio-Technica model. But both men hope to acquire a high-end system someday.

"If I own a house and have disposable income, a good stereo will be a primary investment," Mr. Damski said. "Definitely higher on the list than bath towels."

FOR YEARS, the typical high-end audio customer has been a white-haired classical music aficionado or an aging rock fan for whom listening to "Aja" in 1977 on a pair of Altec Lansing's was a spiritual experience.

But recently, veteran audio companies have started adapting their products to the changing tastes of younger listeners. McIntosh, for years the holy grail for preamps and other components, has been adding USB ports to its entire product line in a long overdue acknowledgment of the popularity of music streaming. Thiel Audio, the revered speaker maker, has hired an industrial designer for the first time to make sure its products pass what its chief operating officer, Bob Brown, called the "aesthetics test."

"My wife laughs at how our house was filled with speakers the size of refrigera-



From top, Peachtree Audio Decco65 integrated amplifier (\$1,100); Grain Audio over-ear headphones (\$199); Music Hall Audio turntable sold at Urban Outfitters (\$250); McIntosh McAi9 integrated audio system (\$3,000); Thiel SCS4 speakers (\$2,299 for the pair); Grain Packable Wireless System (\$249).

tors," Mr. Brown said. "This generation is not going to buy ugly, boxy stuff. They listen through their eyes first, before their ears."

Mr. Brown envisions that Thiel speakers will be curvier, with thinner profiles, in keeping with the industry trend and in line with modern interiors. It's a look he hopes will appeal to his new, more-discerning target audio customer: the young career woman.

"The bachelor-pad stuff is old," Mr. Brown said. "I wish it wasn't, but I have to be honest: If you sell to my son and my wife and the young career woman, you get me. I don't make the buying decisions anymore. It's over."

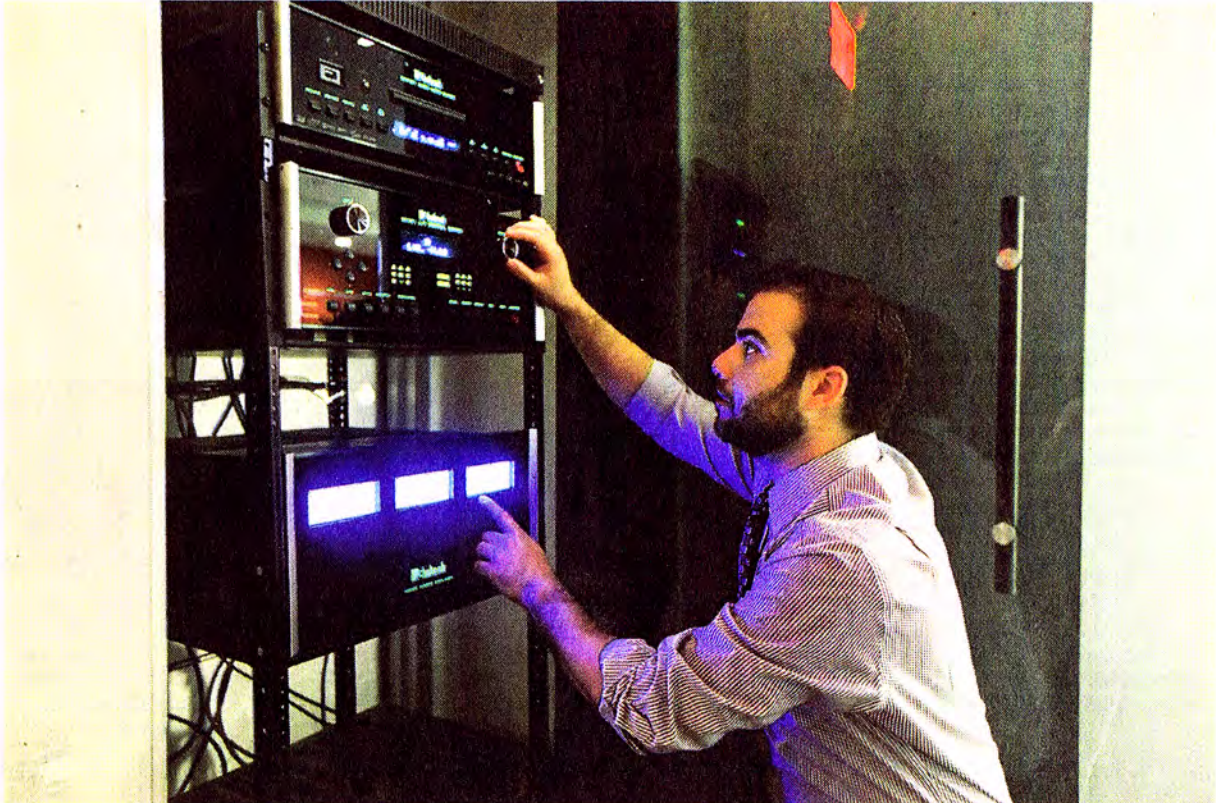
Grain Audio, a new company formed by four industry veterans, is covering its bookshelf speakers and earphones in wood, an aesthetic it hopes will appeal to both sexes. Mitch Wenger, its president, said music fans shouldn't have to conceal speakers behind walls or cabinets at home, as they have for years.

"It should be furniture-quality," Mr. Wenger said. "It's, like, my Eames chair and my Grain bookshelves. That's the thinking."

Since the Apple store has for many people replaced the stereo showroom, audio companies are also striving to find cre-



STEVE LEGATO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES



STEPHEN MCGEE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ative ways of reaching younger music fans. Two years ago, Roy Hall, the founder of Music Hall Audio, approached Urban Outfitters about carrying his turntables. At first, the retail chain sold a \$250 entry-level model, but sales have been so robust, Mr. Hall said, that some stores now carry his higher-end mmf-2.2 turntable, which sells for \$450.

"The kids are not idiots," Mr. Hall said. "A nice little hi-fi system with a good turntable sounds amazing — way beyond an

iPod."

And while many audio companies have struggled or gone under in the wake of the iPod's popularity, the iPod has also created millions of potential audiophiles. "You have a whole generation getting music over the Internet, from streaming, tablets, iPhones," Mr. Brown said. "It's introduced many more people to music."

Sam Angiuli, a 25-year-old sales representative at Bloomberg LP, is typical. Like Mr. Svizeny and Mr. Damski, he has amassed a large iTunes library and uses an online music service, SoundCloud, yet he is as finicky about good sound as an old-school audio geek like Mr. Elias.

In his teens, Mr. Angiuli "worked two to three jobs at a time," he said, to finance a sternum-rattling stereo for his car. Now he is on the verge of buying his first high-end home system for his Manhattan apartment. It will be equipped with McIntosh components and cost \$10,000 to \$20,000, he estimates. "My ear can hear the difference," Mr. Angiuli said, explaining why he dedicates so much of his income to audio gear.

Being a modern audiophile, he added, is "a constant battle between the best sound and convenience." It's a world in which turntables and McIntosh preamps vie for shelf space with digital media streamers and iPods.

Still, to someone like Mr. Brown, the speaker executive, it's encouraging that sound quality is once again part of the equation.

"I never lost faith that the new generation would come along," he said. Then he added, in what could be the audiophile credo for any age or era, "If you really love music, you're ever searching for how to hear it better."

Top, Dan Svizeny plays vinyl records at home, inspired, he said, by his father's collection of Black Sabbath and Frank Zappa records. Middle, Sam Angiuli is on the verge of buying his first audiophile-quality home system, and estimates he will spend \$10,000 to \$20,000. Above, Philip Elias with a Bang & Olufsen Penta 3 tower speaker. He has six, which cost around \$5,000 a pair.

## Starting With Something Simple

As a salesman at Stereo Exchange, a bastion of audio geekery in Manhattan, Michael Toto has watched the upheavals in the music and audio industries from the ground level. With music fans switching between MP3s and vinyl, the current moment is a combination of "high-tech and low-tech," he said. To that end, Mr. Toto recommended a few basic stereo components, to be used separately or in tandem, for entry-level audiophiles who want a system that blends modern technology and convenience with higher-quality sound.

**CONNECT BY SONOS**  
**PRICE** Around \$350

**WHAT IT DOES** Hook up this music streamer to a home stereo, and it will play audio from Spotify, Sirius XM radio, iTunes and other sources. It is platform- and format-agnostic, and has an Apple-like cube de-

sign. Mr. Toto called the Connect "the box of choice" and "a product for a modern music listener."

**DECCO65 BY PEACHTREE AUDIO**  
**COST** Around \$1,000

**WHAT IT DOES** An all-in-one amp, preamp and digital-to-analog converter, the Decco65 can be used in conjunction with a Sonos Connect or any device with a digital output, like the Apple AirPort Express. "It gives a warm sound to digital files," Mr. Toto said, calling it a kind of gateway into high-end home audio. It also looks sharp, with an outer shell in black lacquer, cherry wood or rosewood. (Price varies by finish.)

**TRAVELER TURNTABLE BY VPI**  
**COST** Around \$1,500 (without cartridge)

**WHAT IT DOES** This first step into high-end

performance turntables is made by a small New Jersey company that has been in business since vinyl was the default format. The Traveler's platter is extremely stable, producing amazing sound. It can be "tweaky" to start, Mr. Toto said, but "when you set this up the right way, it's a damn beautiful piece of equipment."

**SMB-02 HEADPHONES BY PHONON**  
**COST** Around \$350

**WHAT THEY DO** These over-ears headphones are made by a Japanese company with an audio dream team that includes a veteran sound engineer, a music producer and a D.J. The results are known in the audiophile world as "the holy grail of headphones" for their comfort and clear, lush sound. "We get batches in 10 at a time from Japan," Mr. Toto said, "and sell them out immediately." STEVEN KURUTZ