

# Murder in the Listening Booth

By L. B. HOLDRIDGE

**Y**OU HAVE just soldered the final connections in your super-ultra-high-fidelity sound system. And though stiff, damp, and weary, you are almost childishly eager and expectant for the aural splendor soon to flood your living room. Suddenly it occurs to you that you have no real "test" records—those fabulous recordings you've heard so much about that set the audio fraternity on their collective ears. Of course, you have plenty of good 78's, but wasn't it LP that started you on the whole project in the first place? You thumb hurriedly through past and current issues of your favorite magazines, and there it is—just the thing: "Barfly," Concerto for Silent Dog Whistle and Orchestra, on a Rathskeller LP, "outstanding for its sensational acoustic impact." Of course, the fundamental of a silent dog whistle is up around 18,000 cps, but so what? Isn't your outfit "flat,  $\pm \frac{1}{2}$ db 20-20,000 cycles?" A pushover!

Ten minutes later you pull up panting at the counter of Joe's Record Emporium. Yes, he has the "Barfly." Funny, he says, gets a lot of calls to hear that thing, but not too many buy it. Would you care to hear it, indicating one of five or six little glass walled booths? Nope, take it with you. And what seems like an endless interval later the disc is spinning on your transcription table, while a polished diamond stylus held with fine precision in a correctly tracked and loaded arm prepares to explore the exciting intricacies of its grooves.

What you've read about this recording has you turning in circles. It begins with a sustained note for double bass and kettledrums down around thirty cycles, then launches into a tremendous crescendo for full orchestra capped by "the most remarkably realistic timpani roll ever heard in a living room." There it goes! O o o m m m—(sounds more like a prolonged hiccup by a circus fat man locked in a rain barrel). Now the crescendo, then the drum roll (they should have served a cup of coffee with this one). You fool with the controls—again the low note, again the crescendo; yes, it's loud alright, but you search the room in vain for the much vaunted "presence."

And now the solo instrument is

playing. "Al Fresco is a virtuoso of the silent dog whistle," says your reviewer, "and he exploits the 'Barfly' for all the tonal beauty, and poetry it contains." Back to your controls, but no tonal beauty and no poetry. What's the matter? You spend a fruitless hour with the controls in every conceivable position. You try the speakers in various locations in the room. Then you decide the fault is "room acoustics" and take down the draperies, move out the rugs and upholstered furniture, and finally bring it all back in again and more besides. So this is high fidelity! So this is LP! So what!

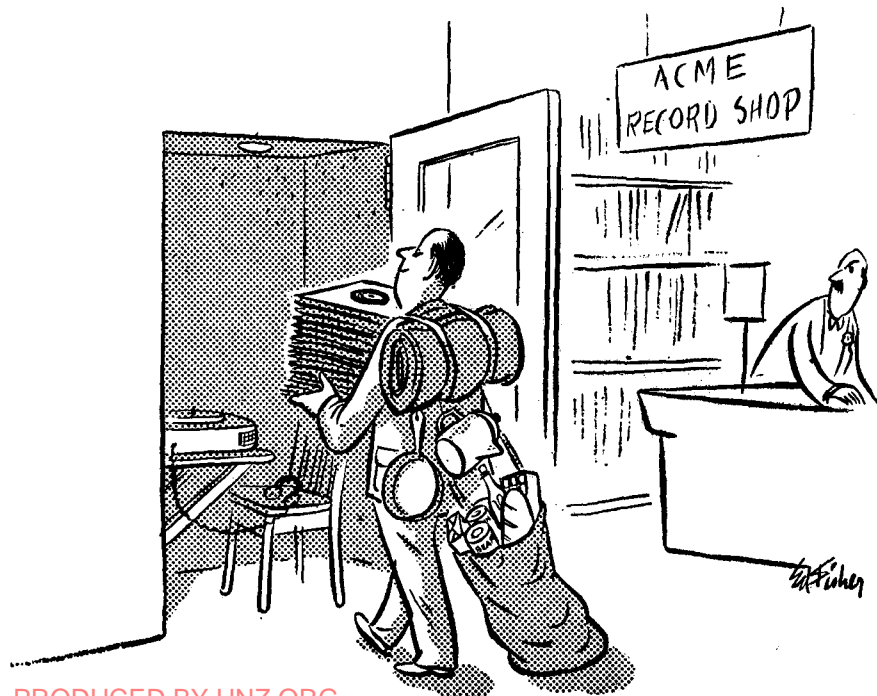
Take it easy, friend. There is nothing wrong with your equipment, or your ears, or with anything the reviewer wrote. You are standing over the body of high fidelity. It was murdered with a blunt instrument in the listening booth of the dealer from whom you purchased the record. The blunt instrument was a worn stylus clutched by a ridiculously short, improperly tracked and weighted pickup arm. A single excursion of that deadly weapon around the virgin grooves of a record that was truly a tribute to the remarkable degree of perfection attained by audio engineering, one time around, and your precious high frequencies were plowed under like surplus corn in the Thirties. Instead of the full-bodied, reso-

nant bass put there by competent technicians you now have a harrowed tub-thumping. "But I didn't play it at the dealer's," you protest. No, you didn't; but others had. It's standard practice, and in hundreds of listening booths all over the nation thousands of high-priced, high-quality recordings are being exposed to ruin before they ever reach the wide-range equipment which alone can do justice to these discs.

**T**HERE is really no excuse for a listening booth. Even if it were provided with good equipment, who could judge the playing of a hundred-piece orchestra in a cubicle the size of a coat closet? And the equipment is rarely good, being generally a cheap playback unit whose entire cost would not purchase a good magnetic cartridge and pickup arm. It is not the inadequacy of the amplifier or speaker, however, that does the damage; it is the stylus—"permanent type, of precious metal"—and the short, badly tracked pickup arm. A few dealers use "sapphires" but rarely change them until they actually sound intolerable. By that time they may have ruined dozens of records.

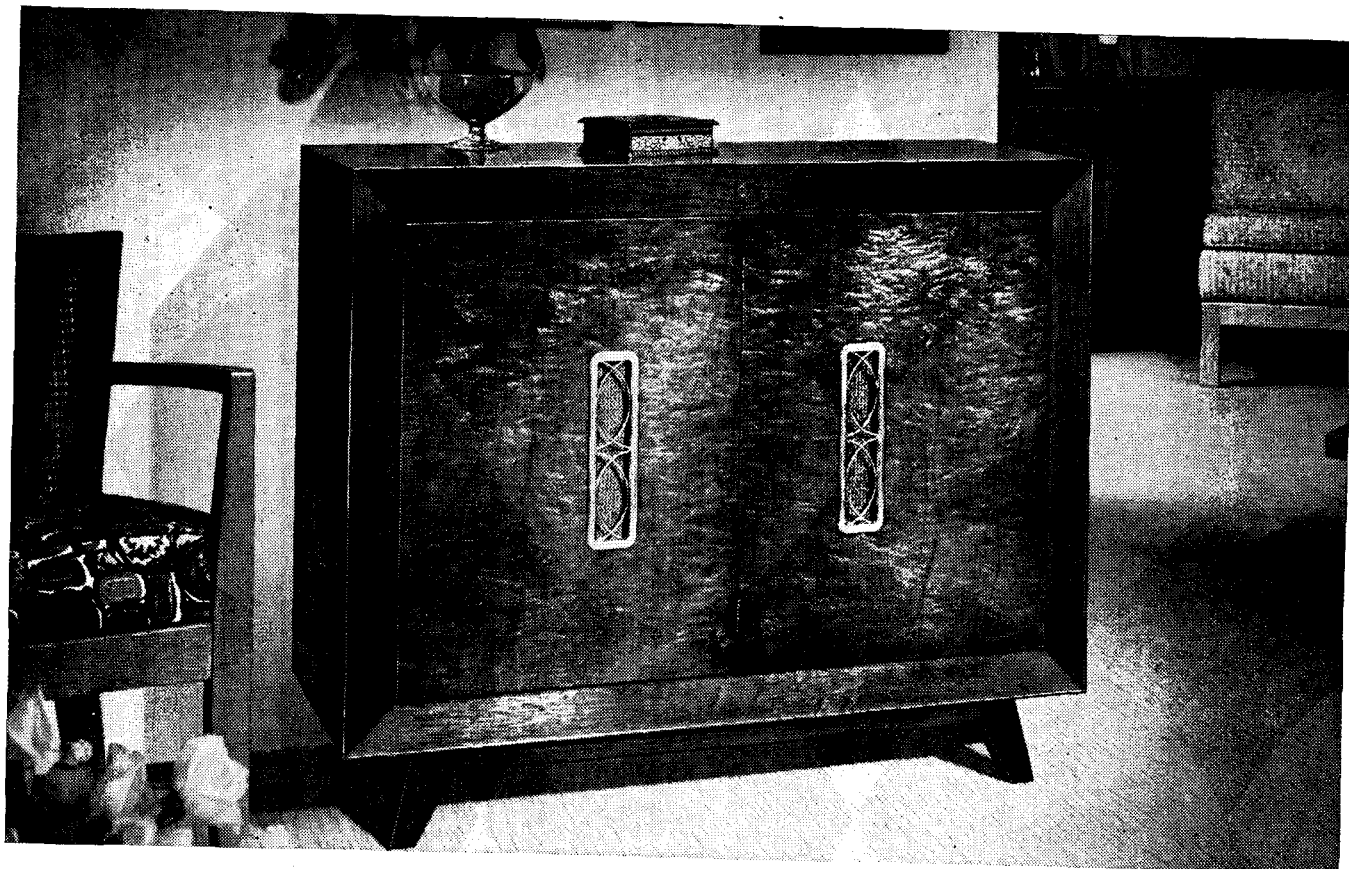
Here perhaps it would be advisable to put an end to certain pussy-footing that has been known to prevail in this regard. Practically every well-known record reviewer and audio authority has unhesitatingly endorsed the use of diamond styli, but has usually avoided one simple statement of demonstrable fact: diamond is the only material suitable for LP styli; there is no other. Metal need not even be considered, for there is no metallic

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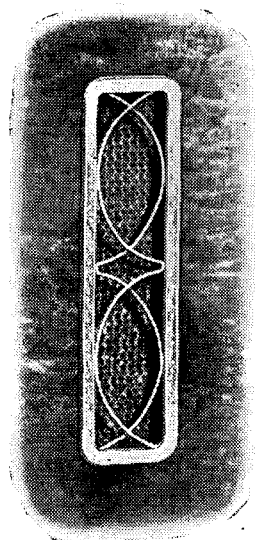
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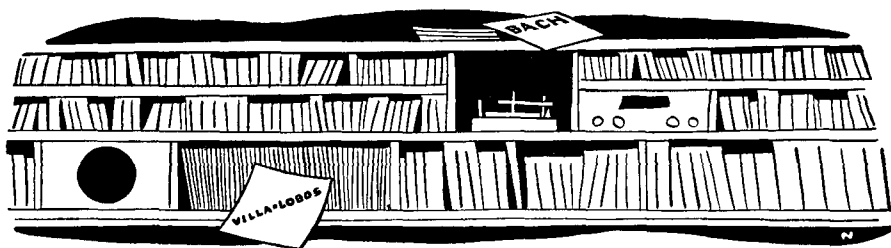
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# The Audio Bookshelf

By R. D. DARRELL

COUNTING the scant five candles on the current Audio Fair and LP birthday cakes, or recalling that the "high fidelity" movement has mushroomed to its present growth only in the last couple of years, it's hardly surprising to find that the literature of audio encompasses little more than a handful of available books and an immeasurable, chaotically dispersed mass of periodical articles. Yet when we're reminded that sound waves were first recorded (visually, by Scott's "phonograph" of 1857) nearly a century ago, that the phonograph dates from 1877, and electronic sound from 1925, the literature's deficiencies—in extent, substance, and accessibility—become painfully obvious.

Happily, the steady flow of recent, current, and forthcoming publications promises that most of these deficiencies soon may be remedied. At any rate, it warns the book-buying audiophile that he must begin rescuing more shelf space from the greedy demands of discs and albums. And while he is anxiously revising his space and financial budgets, it might be well worth his while to review the incoherent past development as well as the present active status of the "Sound" bibliography.

Most of this literature's inadequacy obviously results from its peculiar location astride the boundaries of various arts and sciences. It impinges here on the domains of music, communication, and even home furnishings; there on those of acoustics, electronics, and even gadgeteering. It embraces (or eventually should embrace) at least some elements of history, physics, esthetics, psychology, physiology, and sociology!

Yet even as a peripheral art-science, the reproduction of music long has been a disdained if not disowned stepchild. For years the phonograph was generally considered little

more than a toy; serious interest in records was confined to a comparatively small band of "phonophiles." Musicians, musical educators, and musicologists only now are drowsily awakening to the full significance of this medium; they still have to buckle down to an earnest study of its history and potentialities. (Indeed, the first significant historical study is only now in active preparation—by Roland Gelatt, for publication by Lippincott in 1954.) Similarly, the technical aspects of audio long have won little more than the passing attention of leading acousticians and "radio" engineers, whose most striking achievements in this field usually have been by-products of investigations concerned mainly with speech communication. The comparatively few audio specialists have concentrated on the practical means of broadcast transmission, and film and disc recording, while even the practical problems of sound reproduction have been attacked only cursorily, especially where home rather than auditorium systems have been concerned.

Small wonder, then, that to date most authors (consciously or unconsciously sensing their limitations) have avoided comprehensive explorations of this incredibly complex field, or that their most successful productions have been severely limited in scope.

The audio bookshelf, as a consequence, has included (until very recently) mostly highly specialized publications: a few devoted to technical or semi-technical subjects, the majority dealing with music on records, and nearly all of them (by their very nature and the rapid expansion of techniques and repertoires) of largely ephemeral worth.

I catalogued the more important works (at least those in print in English as of 1951) in "Schirmer's Guide to Books on Music and Musicians," under such headings as Acoustics, Hearing, Phonograph/Gramophone,