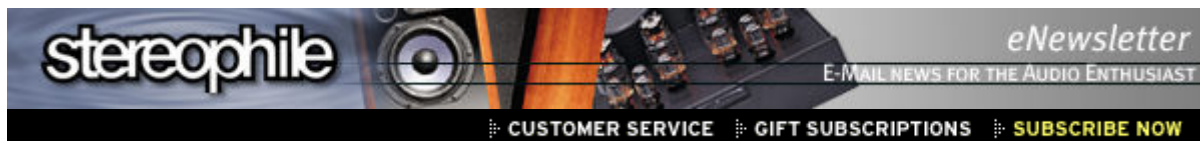


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ROOM DIFFUSER



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In This eNewsletter:

- *Cheating the Angels' Share*, by Wes Phillips

THIS ENEWSLETTER BROUGHT TO YOU BY:



Stereophilia

Cheating the Angels' Share, by Wes Phillips

Audiophiles are a picky bunch. If you're an audiophile, you've got to admit that's true; if you *know* an audiophile, you can *testify* to its truth.

In its most virulent form, this pickiness, this urge to critique, becomes a form of audio cynicism. Like Oscar Wilde's infamous definition of a cynic—someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing—the audio cynic hears only flaws.



There is, however, a more benign form of the disease: the urge to tweak. No one ever tweaked a system because they thought it was perfect. Tweaking, by its very nature, is an admission that *this could be better*. Best of all, many tweaks are free, or involve only a little sweat equity.

Stereophile used to run a monthly column of free and low-priced tweaks, written by Jonathan "J-10" Scull. It was called "[Fine Tunes](#)" and covered stuff like speaker placement, cable dressing, and even audiophile expectations (as in Jonathan's [October 2001 column](#), about how bad his brother-in-law's low-end system *didn't* sound).

"Fine Tunes" had a glorious four-year run, a fact that offered me no small measure of pride: if I recall correctly, it had been my idea to turn Jonathan loose on setups and tweaks. As I recall, sometime in 1998, John Atkinson was bustling through my office in the corner of his speaker-testing lab, on the way to *his* closet of an office, when he said, "J-10 wants to write a column. We don't have room for another front-of-the-book feature."

I had an epiphany. "Readers are always complaining that we review only stuff that costs money. Jonathan's systems—all of them—always sound amazing. Why don't we have him write a column on setup and suchlike?"

"I knew I'd think of something brilliant," JA said. "Make it so."

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Cut to the summer of 2006

Even if it was my idea to, in the last millennium, unleash on the world Jonathan's amazing setup database, that doesn't mean I was sanguine about his coming to *my* listening room in 2006. I knew I had work to do—and I was phenomenally concerned that Jonathan would listen to one track, suck wind through his pursed lips, move one book in my bookshelves, and thus transform my sow's ear of a system into a silk purse.

Yeah, I know—but I did tell you [last month](#) that I dread audiophile visits.

So I got to work. In years and apartments past, I've turned my wife's and my living room into pretty much of an audiophile cave: records shelved to the ceiling, books and more books in the other shelves, bass traps sprouting all over the place. These were rooms only an audiophile could love, and when we moved to our current apartment, I swore I'd give back to the two of us an honest-to-god living room—with grown-up furniture and everything. I tried to convince myself that the bare lath-and-plaster walls, hardwood floor, and sparse furnishings gave me a bright, articulate sound, but as JA likes to observe, walls full of LPs do wonders for a room's acoustics.

When I reviewed the [Ayre C-5xe](#) universal disc player, Ayre's Steve Silberman insisted I hang some form of drape over the doorway behind and between my loudspeakers—"preferably a natural fabric, which sounds better than synthetics." Out came my 150-year-old alpaca and silk Peruvian poncho, which I hung with a curtain rod and clips, and I'll be doggoned if it didn't tighten up the center fill and extend the rear of the soundstage. Keeping that in mind, I went back into the linen closet to see what other textile treasures we'd kept from our time in South America.

I unearthed a wool rug, as well as a 100-year-old Peruvian *manta* that really *needed* to be on display. I used the same arrangement of curtain rod and clip to drape them on my room's rear and left walls. One advantage to this mounting system is that it gets the hangings off the wall by about 3", and that air space is important for a few reasons, not least that you can hide unsightly acoustic treatment in it.

Because, let's face it, just adding fabric wall hangings to a room only treats slap echo and high-frequency problems. The 2000-lb elephant lying in the center of most rooms is lack of bass control. Putting textile art on my walls made the room nicer to be in, and, yes, the sound *did* improve—but I knew I needed heavier artillery.

Fortunately, when Jonathan and his wife, Kathleen, did visit, he forbore showing me up with his setup wizardry, though he did have a few suggestions. Jonathan has given up the writing con and gone legit: These days, he does public relations and consults with audio companies looking to grow their market share. One of those companies is [Furutech](#), the Japanese engineering firm best known for its electrical connections and audio terminations made from high-purity, single-crystal, oxygen-free PC-OCC copper from Furukawa.

Jonathan had brought with him two Furutech FP20A rhodium-plated duplex AC wall outlets, which sell for \$130 each. Yikes! \$130 for a *wall outlet*? Well, the FP20As sure aren't built like the Home Depot Levitons they replaced—J-10 showed me how solidly crafted they were and how rigidly they gripped a three-prong 15A plug. But could *that* really make a sonic difference?

Ayre's [Charlie Hansen](#) thinks so. "I don't know for a fact, because there are just too many

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variables to consider, but I'm convinced that the better the mechanical connection between plug and receptacle, the better the sound. Crazy? Maybe, but that's what I hear."

It's what I heard too, dagnabbit. I hate stuff that my ape-brain doesn't comprehend. But comprehend it or no, my system's noise floor dropped noticeably with the FP20As in the line.

The killer was Jonathan's *other* suggestion. After listening to a few jazz discs, he glanced around the room and said, "I can see why you don't want conventional sound treatment in this room, but Furutech has some panels that I think could make a difference in, well, just about everything. Would you like to try them?"

Not really. I *like* being married. But I'm pretty serious about my job, too. "Tell me more, tell me more . . ." I said, channeling *Grease*.

"They're called [Furutech Room Diffusers](#) [FRD], and they're handsome and lightweight. The top, bottom, and back are made of wood, the side panels are lightweight plastic, and the interior is carefully shaped air-foam polystyrene. The front of the panel is covered in pure silk. They can be mounted on the walls, stand on the floor, or be suspended from the ceiling. Best of all, I think they'll fit behind your wall hangings."

About a week later, I returned from a shopping trip to the co-op and could barely open the door. Mr. UPS had jammed eight 28" by 6" by 48" cartons into my entrance hall, which didn't exactly give me passage *into* my apartment unless I Sherpa Tensing-ed over the tops of them, which I did.

On opening the cartons, I discovered that J-10 was right on many counts. The FRDs *are* handsome—handsome enough that I have two of them mounted behind the speakers without textile drapes (they come with invisible brackets, which were a cinch to install). They don't so much look like acoustic treatment as they do some kind of unfussy decor. Jonathan was right that they fit unobtrusively behind my wall hangings, too. Most visitors never notice them.

After I unpacked them, I moved them all down the hall to our dressing room. Then I played an early mix of Veljo Tormis' *Muistse Mere Laulud*, from Cantus' *There Lies the Home* (CD, Cantus CTS1206, to be available from *Stereophile's* [new e-commerce page](#) in October), listening for intelligibility and timbral detail. Then I tried different combinations of the panels, based on Furutech's instructions.

My first experiment was putting an FRD between the loudspeakers along the front wall. This absolutely *nailed* the center image and (again) deepened the soundstage. I then trotted out another two panels and placed one behind each loudspeaker. As I'd expected, this broadened the soundstage, but what stunned me was how much inner detail was now readily apparent in John Atkinson's recording. That detail had always been on the disc, of course, but the "triple install," as Furutech calls it, made it far easier to discern. It quieted a lot of "room chatter" I hadn't been consciously aware of. It also tightened up bass response to some extent.

Adding panels to the rear wall *really* tightened up the bass, and brought down the room chatter even further. This is a hard one to explain—it sounds as if I'm finding more and more detail (it almost seemed as if that was the case)—but what I think was actually going on was that the naturally existing detail had less competition from the room's

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reinforcements of particular frequencies. But there was no sense of deadening the room, as when you keep adding heavily absorptive materials—the room remained lively and articulate, even while "noise" (in the information-theory sense of *nonsignal*) was reduced.

My last addition was two panels, one at the first-reflection point of the sidewalls, which—again!—opened the soundstage. Well, not perzackly. The soundstage was about as wide as it could get, but the FRDs on the side gave me more of the room the soundstage existed in. On recordings like *There Lies the Home*, this put me in a pretty big room—the Great Hall of Sioux Falls' Washington Pavilion of the Arts and Sciences seats about 1800, and I heard all that space. Studio recordings lack this kind of scale, of course, but trust me—when it's present, you *want* to hear it.

Are the Furutech FRDs the last word in acoustic treatment? I don't think so. I still think my listening room needs work in the deep bass. It's a big room (13' by 28' by 8') and it frequently has big speakers in it. I think the room is capable of much deeper bass. However, bass traps are massive—a panel 24" wide by 45" tall by 3" deep just doesn't have the ability to do much to the long wavelengths of deep bass. That's the job of a real bass trap. I think some unobtrusive corner traps might be in my future.

Also, at \$460 apiece, the FRDs aren't cheap. Well, that depends on how you look at it, I reckon. Putting eight RFDs in my listening room would run about \$3700, and they improved the sound of a \$60,000 hi-fi by a significant amount. I seriously doubt I could have spent \$4k on any *component* and realized the same difference in sound. Besides, I suspect that the original "triple install" got me more than 85% of the way toward the final result. That's a \$1400 investment in my hi-fi that I *know* I couldn't realize with an equivalent component expenditure.

I also can't emphasize how unobtrusive the RFDs are. They don't look like something you dragged home from the studio (not that that's a bad thing). I likes 'em—I really likes 'em.

If you're wondering about the title of this column, distillers refer to "the angels' share" as the amount of liquor that evaporates when alcohol is aged in wooden barrels. The part that disappears is the angels' share. Well, a certain amount of your music disappears into your room—and the right room treatment can cheat the angels from taking too big a share. The Furutech RFDs can keep those pesky angels at bay.

Maybe I should invite Jonathan over again.