

EQUIPMENT REPORT

van den Hul Frog phono cartridge

Wes Phillips

What's green, costs \$2500, and mates superbly with a tonearm? The van den Hul Frog. Sounds like a joke, doesn't it? Despite the whimsical name — and its bright and fanciful emerald-green body color — the Frog is a serious attempt to bring most of the performance of the well-regarded \$5000 van den Hul Grasshopper to a more affordable price point.

"The Frog is the practical man's Grasshopper — the Connecticut Yankee's grasshopper, if you will," explained Stanalog Audio Imports' George Stanwick.¹ "It has the same coil-winding, front pole, stylus (a highly polished variant of the vdH Type One), and suspension. Unlike the Grasshopper, however, the Frog has a copper coil, a metal body, and less expensive magnets. The Grasshopper has evolved into a cartridge that is, essentially, custom-made. Mr. van den Hul can tailor the cartridge to the client's preferences as to output, compliance, even musical taste. The Frog, by comparison, is off-the-rack."

¹ Concerns a former USA distributor. —**A.J. van den Hul B.V.**

Still, with repeated proclamations concerning the death of vinyl, doesn't it take real guts to come out with a \$2500 phono cartridge? "Van den Hul believes that our cartridges are good investments in the long term," Stanwick explained. "To begin with, we estimate stylus life at up to 3000 hours — about 50% greater than is typical. But we also have affordable retipping charges: The Frog or the Grasshopper can be totally refitted for about \$500 for a standard repair."

Froggy went a-courtin'

The Frog was one of the stars of HI-FI '96. Although there were only two, the VPI Aries/JMW Memorial Arm/vdH Frog combo seemed ubiquitous in the Waldorf-Astoria, and I made a point of spinning some vinyl whenever I ran across it. I was never disappointed. Before leaving the show, I requested a sample from George Stanwick. I received it last autumn and have put it through its paces on three different turntables with three different arms. I've also used four different phono sections with it: the Ayre K-1's optional balanced RIAA board, Krell's KPE Reference, Conrad-Johnson's Premier Fifteen, and my reference Naim Prefix. The Frog has a forgiving nature — it mated well with every combination I tried.

Setup is relatively simple: The threaded holes in the Frog's aluminum body allowed me to cinch it tightly against whichever headshell I was using. Be careful about VTA and azimuth, as the profile of the Type One stylus exaggerates any deviation from true. (Rather than go into much detail concerning setup, I'll refer you to Michael Fremer's comprehensive instructions in this month's "analog Corner.")

My background in record production has caused me to cast a jaundiced eye upon severe line-contact stylus profiles. Beyond a certain point (you should pardon the expression), I believe you end up playing a part of the groove that simply doesn't sound good. Because I base this belief upon my experiences of playing stampers and masters with a "saddle"-shaped stylus designed to play the physical negative of an LP, it doesn't necessarily follow that what I was hearing was solely attributable to playing the bottom of the groove; but I remain leery of claims that getting in there deeper is a good thing. Thus forearmed with prejudice, I was pleasantly surprised by how sweet-sounding I found the Frog.

I'm not saying the Frog was pervasively sweet, simply that without even hearing it, I had determined that its stylus would impart a clinically dry, somewhat bleached sound. In fact, once the cartridge broke in — and it took perhaps 300 hours to do so — it had bloom informed by detail, a broad dynamic range, and a rare ability to reveal emotional nuance in music-making.

With 650µV output, the Frog puts out enough juice to drive most phono stages easily. Stanwick told me that Mr. van den Hul believes in offering slightly higher output in the service of greater clarity in the signal — about half a millivolt more than average. That makes sense to me in the same way that the front-end-first theory of system-building does. At any rate, I can't argue with the results: the Frog was quietly harmonious with every phono section I employed.

You can run the Frog straight into a 47k ohm load, as I did first, and it will sound pretty darn good — full of detail, with lots of ambient low-level information. But the Ayre K-1 did not like 47k, unlike the Conrad-Johnson Premier Fifteen. Driving the K-1 set to 47k, the Frog sounded hard and flat. So I installed the 800 ohm resistors and felt that everything benefited from this loading. Strings had a softer, rounder quality, while the sound overall was still detailed and dynamic. As I experimented further (and changed phono sections), I refined this loading to about 600 ohms — more or less the 560 ohm loading I used when I switched to my reference Naim Prefix. I refuse to get too doctrinaire about this; it seems that

Description: Moderate-output moving-coil cartridge. Stylus shape: vdH 1S. Stylus radii: 2x85µm. Frequency range: 5Hz-55kHz. Tracking downforce: 13.5-16mN (1.35-1.6gm). Static Compliance: 35µm/mN. Output voltage: 650µV at 1kHz/8cm/s. Channel unbalance: <0.30dB. Channel separation: >35dB (1kHz), >30dB (10kHz). Equivalent stylus-tip mass: 0.32mg. Coil inductance: 0.063mH. Recommended load impedance: >200 ohms. Recommended tonearm mass: 6-10gm.

Dimensions: n/a. Weight: 8.2gm.

Serial number of unit reviewed: 5302.

Price: \$2500. Approximate number of dealers: 25.

Manufacturer: van den Hul B.V., The Netherlands.

the “correct” loading must change from one preamp/phono section/arm cable combination to another. In the end, 560 ohms/400µV on the Prefix lit my wick, but experimentation suggests that most folks should be able to dial in their preference without too much trouble.

Nor did I find the Frog, at 8.2 grams, hard to mate with a tonearm. I know that I’m supposed to posture about how much effort analog is, but in my experience, it doesn’t have to be — especially not with well-designed products like the Frog. I settled on a tracking force of about 1.75gm with the VPI and Immedia arms, but the Naim ARO seemed to work best a trifle heavier, at around 1.85gm.

Doo-dah!

A healthy output can be a seductive thing. After living with the 250µV Transfiguration Temper, I found the Frog’s 650µV a luxury — I was able to turn down my preamp substantially while maintaining high output levels, and crescendos and other climaxes gained considerable heft. The lower noise floor meant I could hear further into recordings as well. This, as Martha Stewart would say, is a *good* thing.

M·A Recordings has released Begoña Olavide’s *Salterio* in a limited-edition 180gm pressing (M·A M025AV, LP), much to the delight of vinyl junkies everywhere. This densely textured recording highlights Ms. Olavide’s mastery of the psaltery — a delicate medieval harp — as well as her warm, enveloping vocals. The disc has a HUGE soundstage, which the Frog rendered as appropriately vast. The recording was made in a stonewalled Spanish church, and the vdH *nailed* the acoustic down to the faintest shiver of reverberation.

Yet there was considerable impact coupled with the finesse — an immense drum boomed forth with explosive force, even as finger cymbals and a belled Indian bracelet were reproduced with clarity and grace. Power and precision were allied with warmth and bloom.

One day last winter, John Atkinson burst into my office jabbering excitedly. “I just heard some music so bizarre that I bet *you* know what it is.” I wasn’t entirely certain that he meant it as a compliment, but it turned out he’d hit the target. KUNM had been playing the music of Ivo Papasov and his Bulgarian Wedding Band. Balkan wedding-band music — *stambolovo* — is wild stuff, simultaneously rhythmically tricky and passionate as all get-out. Papasov is the acknowledged master; when he appears in a village, the entire province closes down.

Papasov’s playing is filled with wild runs, forceful shrieks, and elaborate melodic fantasies. To say that Papasov plays clarinet is as inadequate as saying “Jimi Hendrix played electric guitar.” The band lays down the complex time signatures of Balkan dances — 11/16, 5/8, 7/8, 9/8 — not that they’re above a rousing 2/4 march. Drummer Stefan Angelov is incredibly fast and powerful, yet always swings freely. The first time I heard the group, I recognized the music immediately — it was the folk music Frank Zappa only *dreamed* of.

The Frog was up to the task of sorting out the voices in the band’s *Orpheus Ascending* (Hannibal HNBL 1346, LP). Many cartridges, even rather good ones, have a difficult time separating Papasov’s clarinet from Nechko Neshev’s accordion. Our Froggie, though, helped me hear what was metal-reed vamping and what was wooden-reed blowing (and I do mean *blowin’*). Radi Kazakov’s forceful electric bass had deep bite and a ton of propulsion as it pushed the band along. And every fan of creative rhythm guitar should hear Andrey Kamazamalov’s Curtis Mayfield-on-(a lotta)-speed wah-wah chording as presented by the van den Hul. The music had swing and drive and bite, but it was full of woody richness and human warmth. Wowiee.

Most recent late-night listening sessions have just had to end with Classic Records’ spectacular reissue of Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* (CS 8163, LP). I can’t begin to calculate how many evenings this music has ended over the 25 years since I bought my first copy of the session, but the Classic reissue is something special. In case you haven’t heard, this edition has four sides: 1 and 2 are the record as released (meaning that side 1 is played back at the wrong speed — the original tape was off by about 1.5%); side 3 is the first side at the correct speed; and side 4 is a bonus, “Flamenco Sketches” cut at 45rpm. *Kind of Blue*’s pitch problems have driven me nuts for a quarter of a century; Sony’s SBM gold CD (64403) corrected this, to my great relief — but the LP is more welcome still.

Miles’s breathy tone is brass burnished more deeply than gold on “So What,” and the Frog allowed me to hear the rasp in Coltrane’s tone vividly — almost as if for the first time. Paul Chambers has an extra glide in his stride as he walks his bass — the instrument sounds deeper and fuller, in addition to its having a dollop more swing than on the original. Here, the Frog showed its mettle — swing is such an evanescent quality, and the cartridge parsed the differences between strut and saunter to a fare-thee-well. Jimmy Cobb, always solid, must have put extra sheen on his cymbals for the Classic cut — they have even more air, more shimmer. How small can the grooves be that create such an ethereal, floating purr? I can’t imagine, but the Frog surely can follow them with no sign of effort or blur. Nearly 40 years on, this music sounds as fresh as it did when it was recorded. That really says something for the reissue.

It also speaks volumes about the van den Hul Frog.

It’s not easy being green

Throughout the auditioning, I was impressed by the amount of musical detail van den Hul’s Frog managed to extract from recordings I know well. Yet I never felt it was emphasizing detail over the gestalt. Without ever cloying, the Frog was unceasingly warm — music never lost its “human” touch. And the cartridge mated with a wide variety of tonearms and phono preamps. The Frog is no prima donna — it plays well with others.

Compared to my reference, the Transfiguration Temper — a cartridge that costs 50% more — the Frog lacked an

The Frog puts out enough juice to drive most phono stages easily.

extremely small amount of airy liquidity. However, to another listener that liquidity could sound like an undesirable softening of detail. Horses for courses, as always, but the van den Hul Frog is awfully hard to fault.

Add to that the cartridge's extended stylus life and the firm's reasonable retipping charge and the Frog seems a bargain, even at \$2500. It's easy to use, easy to drive, and sounds great. Expensive cartridges are going to be hard put to justify their cost with the Frog around — I'd think long and hard before shelling out more. And I'm not really sure that, in the long run, I'd save money by spending less. For my money, right now, the Frog is the cartridge to beat.

And that's no joke.

Stereophile, July 1997

While A.J. van den Hul B.V. provides the information contained in this document to anyone, we retain (joint) copyright and/or publication rights on all text and graphic images. This means that:

You MAY NOT: Modify or re-use the text and graphics, distribute the text and graphics to others, or "mirror" this document's information on another server without the written permission of A.J. van den Hul B.V.

You MAY: Store the document on your own computer for your own personal use, print copies of the information for your own personal use, and refer to it in your own documents or on your website.

A.J. van den Hul B.V. reserves all other rights and is not to be held liable for the contents of this document.

www.vandenhul.com