

**NEEDLE match**

**W**hen is a frog a cheap grasshopper?

When it's not a frog, but a phono cartridge. And beware: cheap is used in strictly relative terms only.

We're not talking wet and slimy frogs here, but Dutch cartridge wizard AJ van den Hul's The Frog - a 23,000 Rand phono cartridge that's been designed to offer many of the sonic benefits of the world-renowned The Grasshopper, one of Van de Hul's true high-end designs, at a 'more affordable' price.

A needle that costs 20,000 Rand-plus? To play antiquated vinyl records on an equally antiquated record player? Yup, you better believe it. And believe, also, that it sounds, well, sublime. There's no other word for it.

Let me not become embroiled in the hackneyed debate about CD versus LP, or digital versus vinyl. To consider one better than the other is strolling onto quicksand: the technologies are so inherently different, so far apart, that to consider one superior to the other simply serves no purpose.

Instead, one should remember that the whole point of hi-fi is to listen and to enjoy, all the while hoping to be seduced and intoxicated by music that sounds so real, so tangible, that you're exposed to the very essence of the performance. The Frog is one of those rare hi-fi items that comes close to achieving that.

The Frog is a hand-built, custom designed, medium-output moving coil cartridge. Key components - the coil and the frontpole and suspension - are related to those employed in The Grasshopper. It links these to matched crystal copper wire coils, and custom magnets.

However, the key component here is the stylus, which features VdH's much discussed (and frequently copied) Type 1 profile - a so-called line-contact profile with a 2 x 85 micron radius that reaches much deeper into the record's groove than used to be considered safe and sonically acceptable.

That it is still in use, more than two decades after first debuting, succinctly proves the critics were wrong, and that VdH's claims about the gains in resolution and information retrieval achieved by such a stylus shape have been vindicated.

The Frog weighs in at 8.2 grams, delivers an output of 0.65 mV RMS, and boasts a claimed frequency response of 5 Hz to 55 kHz. The quoted vertical tracking angle (VTA) is 22 deg, the optimum load impedance 500 ohms, and the recommended tracking force between 1.35 and 1.6 grams.

Consider that every single Van den Hul cartridge, including the one reviewed here, is individually crafted - by hand - by AJ van den Hul himself, and you realise not only how precious a piece of audio kit this is, but also that the 23,000 Rand asking price is perhaps not unreasonable, considering the painstaking labour and expertise involved.

What isn't always common knowledge is that a cartridge like The Frog can be custom-built to suit the buyer's turntable and tone arm, the ancillary equipment and even the particular taste in music. All Mr. van den Hul needs is the information when he starts making the cartridge. Amazing.

Back to the review unit, which was gingerly installed in my Linn LP12/Ittok/Lingo reference record deck. The rest of the sonic chain encompassed an Electrocompaniet ECP-1 phono stage, Vincent SA-93 Plus pre-amp, Electrocompaniet AW120 power amplifier, and both Vivid Audio V1s and Revel Performa M22 monitors.

The next 300 hours or so were spent running in The Frog, together with a little tweaking to the Linn's VTA setting in an effort to find just the right compromise - this cartridge is particularly finicky about VTA, and demands careful experimentation to deliver its best.

But once properly ensconced and played in, The Frog became irresistible - a little piece of magic that transformed the listening experience of every record I treasure. And trust me, I've spent the last couple of weeks working my way through a good portion of my vinyl library.

Let's talk resolution first, since it's at the core of The Frog's stylus design. Yes, this is a cartridge that effortlessly extracts huge amounts of detail. But it's the way that detail is resolved that sets The Frog apart.

Rather than brashly dishing up the information in big dollops, it's presented with a liquid finesse that's both luscious and arresting. Suddenly, music that used to be pleasant enough is brought into sharp focus, and vague brushstrokes become finely etched details.

At the same time, The Frog provides loads of air for the music to breath and grow, so that there's space for anything



from the rustle of a page on a music stand to the explosive riff from a closely miked double bass. Background noise is all but absent, while imaging is alive with realism, and so finely focussed that it's like putting on a long-lost pair of spectacles.

The Frog achieves real tonal depth, starting with a dark, authoritative bass, and progressing from there to a richly hued mid-bass and midrange, and on to sweet, clear treble. There's nothing overbearing about this tonal bounty - again, it's more a case of the cartridge being able to collate and contextualise a tonal range that was ignored before.

Finally, The Frog is not at all intimidated by taxing recordings - it retains control at all times, accurately reflecting both extreme pace and heavily embroidered works, and never sounding sloppy. However, it holds the reins just loosely enough to ensure the music never sounds constrained.

Van den Hul's The Frog is not just a phono cartridge. Nor is it cold and slimy. It is a piece of art, an instrument of musical pleasure to be treasured. And with a quoted 5000 hour lifespan, each magic music hour costs less than 5 Rand. Now beat that!

**Deon Schoeman**

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**VERDICT**

Forget the odd name. This is a fine phono cartridge of world-class quality, offering warmth, liquid detail, superior intonation and thoroughly natural timbre. Slight lack of verve the only potential negative.

**PRICE**

23,095 Rand

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