



I Left My Heart In Some Frog's Disco

van den Hul Frog
Moving Coil Cartridge

by Fred Manteghian
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A FROG IS as funky as they come. Able to breathe in both water and air in his all-too-brief life, forced to jump and flop while others walk, the frog is clearly a fluke of nature. So what would you call a music-loving moving-coil phono cartridge with a heart of gold and guts of steel? A Frog's what!

Most moving-coil cartridges can't get up enough juice to drive a moving-magnet phono section. Exceptions exist — the universally affordable Sumiko Blue Points are good examples of moving-coil cartridges exhibiting a pulse. The Lyra Clavis, on the other hand, is of such low output, it's of little use without a step-up transformer or additional gain stages and the musical losses they present. Pass the Grey Poupon and call life support! The Frog, with its .65 millivolt output, straddles both sides of the pond, driving my Audio Research SP-14 preamp comfortably. No background hiss, no cranking the volume to 3:00 o'clock to hear the harp, no bullfrog!

Of course, you're wasting your money if you put the \$2,500 Frog on an entry-level 'table. As great as the under-\$1,000 VPI Jr. is (40 whacks if you haven't gotten around to hearing one), the Frog demands something even better. VPI's new Aries turntable and JMW Memorial arm provided the stability and control needed to let the Frog strut its stuff. Driven by the virile VTL MB-250 monoblocks, the Magnepan MG-20, Martin-Logan ReQuest and Aerial 10 T loudspeakers (God, I love this job!), this cartridge gave me such a mouth-watering, I almost slimed the Frog flipping sides.

Prior to the arrival of the Frog, I had been listening to my long-term reference, the humble, and discontinued, Audio Technica AT 170ML. A sweet and affordable gem, but not perfect. With a mildly prominent lower treble and a slight grain from the midrange up, music was still enjoyable if not absolutely translucent. This new puddle-jumper hops over these difficulties without even casting so much as a shadow. And musical, yes, by leaps and bounds.

Resolution is one of the Frog's strongest suits. I don't know how to say this without sounding trite, but you really *could* hear every little detail. Like Peter Green's vibrato fingerings on "Searching For Maggie" (Fleetwood Mac, *Then Play On*, Reprise 6368). And his Stratocaster? Switch jimmied between the first and second pick-up with the tone control on two and one half — sounds about right. The Frog captures the most guarded microdynamics and brings them to the forefront without disturbing their relationship with the body of the music.

In a mid-Eighties A&M Supertramp CD re-issue, the vocals on "Dreamer" sounded disjointed and nasal, so I ran for my worn Mobile Fidelity vinyl issue (*Crime Of The Century*, MFSL 1-005). Stop the presses! The vocals snapped uncannily into place with the Frog, restoring phase and fundamentals alike. I sat through the rest of the side mesmerized. Hey *Ed.*, you'll never take *my* vinyl away!

So it's analytical, right?

Nothing could be further from the truth. Right up there with the Frog's great resolution is its superb sense of naturalness. The horns on *Blood, Sweat & Tears* (Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-251) had both bite and body. As for the human voice — David Clayton-Thomas made me oh so very happy. Instrumental textures are harmonically correct and voices are sweet and endowed with a fair amount of air. Michael McDonald's parched voice (Dobbie Brothers, *Minute By Minute*, Warner BSK 3193) is supposed to have some spittle, but it's tough to capture if a system overdoes the lower midrange. In less expensive cartridges, and I'd rank the musical Goldring 1022 in this group; a little extra warmth is a good thing. But with a cartridge as revealing and resolute as the Frog, it would be clearly unacceptable. Another cracked crooner, Mark Knopfler, would be in dire straits as well, were the Frog only able to emit his croak without his crescendo. He sailed through with swimming colors. If you value instrumental timbre, you'll value what van den Hul has done.

Those accustomed to what passes as bass on some CDs are usually shocked to hear how a good analog setup can provide nearly the same level of impact, but with a forest of extra flavor. The Oscar Peterson Trio's *West Side Story* re-issue on DCC (LPZ 2021) gets my vote for some of the most seductively expansive bass ever recorded. Rat Brown's

Sound 8.7

Sweet voices and forceful dynamics join with a realistic stage perspective. Superb resolution that let's you pick out an instrument and follow its progress from start to finish. Sort of like: "Dulcimer — this is your life!"

Operation 9

As easy to install as your tonearm permits, and not so grossly oversized as to make VTA adjustment difficult. The signed box and individual measurements are the crowning touch.

Value 8.5

Expensive, yes, and not for everyone. But once you hear it, you'll agree.

fingers fly like hell to bring you a little heaven. For its part, the Frog tracked every resonance, and pulled every punch. So the Frog can be subtle — can it be a bruiser as well? Socked back in my listening chair from the force of the kickdrum on “Private Investigations” (Dire Straits, *Love Over Gold*, Warner Brothers 23728-1), I decided not to ask.

From every musical angle that means anything to me, this Frog is a real Prince. True, it’s not cheap, and you may not realize its full potential on most affordable turntables. But if your rig is up to it, you couldn’t do better at its price. The spotlighting detail of most higher priced moving-coil cartridges grows wearisome in short order, and their crisp bass often turns out to be simply anemic after a while. The Frog has none of these problems. With a life expectancy of over 2,500 hours (that’s over 3,000 albums), and a fair re-tipping policy (try \$500), the Frog is trained to make the big jump into the Twenty-first Century.

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