

Absolute Analog



Hana Umami Blue Lightning Strikes Again, And This Time It's Blue!

Andre Jennings

Excel Sound Corporation's Masao Okada-san has been building OEM cartridges for decades. Several years ago, Excel started designing cartridges for sale under its own name, the first ones being the elliptical-stylus Hana EH and Hana EL along with the Shibata stylus Hana SH and Hana SL. These four cartridges are excellent for their price points and offer good value, especially the low-output Shibata-stylus Hana SL. The flagship cartridge in the Hana lineup to date is the Umami Red—a gorgeous-sounding cartridge with an ever-so-slight hint of warmth to go with exceptionally balanced coverage of the frequency spectrum.

The subject of this equipment report and the newest addition to the Hana cartridge line is the Hana Umami Blue (\$2500). The cartridge has a glossy blue finish that gives off a bit of brilliance to the eye. The blue finish is applied with a special Melamine Thermosetting Process, developed by DuPont, that bonds the color to the Umami Blue's A7075 aluminum Auricle body, followed by an enameling process to add that brilliance to the look of the cartridge. Instead of the ebony-wood inlay of the Red, the Umami Blue uses a white POM material with an embedded Hana Umami logo for the front inlay, which is said to provide specific damping properties. This Auricle body design is the same as that used in the Umami Red. The solid boron cantilever, nude micro-line stylus, and the cryogenic treatment (front and rear yokes, pole piece, and 24-karat gold-plated terminals) are all shared with the Umami Red. The Blue uses an Alnico-magnet moving-coil generator with pure copper hand-wound on the Permalloy armature.

The Umami Blue comes packaged in a glossy blue cardboard outer box with the Hana logo on five sides and a serial number on the bottom. After I mentioned in the Hana Umami Red review that the 6mm screws were too short for some thicker cartridge-mounting headshells (like that of the Graham Phantom), Hana has added a longer screw to the package. Inside the wooden box, in a small cardboard container, are four sets of mounting screws (4mm, 5mm, 6mm, and 8mm) to use with different-thickness tonearm headshells. Note: The proper mounting screw can be selected based on the thickness of the headshell along with the 3mm mounting depth of the Blue's threaded holes. Along with the mounting screws are a stylus brush, a mounting-screw hex key, and a spec sheet/manual. Like the Red, the Umami Blue has an excellently designed and easy-to-use stylus guard.

Setting the Stage

The Umami Blue was evaluated on three turntables (Basis Debut Vacuum, Basis 2800 Vacuum, and TW Acoustic Raven 2) and two different tonearms (Basis SuperArm 9 and Graham Phantom III). The rest of the playback system revolved around the combination of components listed in the sidebar.

The Blue was initially installed on the Basis Debut Vacuum 'table using the Graham Phantom III 'arm for a period of settling down and casual listening. The Umami Blue took longer to completely settle in than the Red. While it is good sounding at the start, count on 50+ hours

of playback to get all that the cartridge offers in terms of dynamic expression and harmonic richness. For most of the serious evaluation, the Blue was mounted on the Basis SuperArm 9 connected to the Basis 2800 Vacuum 'table. The TW Acoustic Raven 2 'table (w/Phantom III) served as a final listening platform to provide additional confidence in assessing the Blue's core performance.

Some brief items of note for the Umami Blue are: The desired SRA for this specific cartridge was slightly above a near-level tonearm setting with a tracking force of 2.03 grams. The channel separation specs of 30dB were exceeded with this specific cartridge, showing very good results of 32.5dB in the left channel and 34.8dB in the right channel. THD numbers at 1kHz came in at a very respectable 0.26% and 0.25%. (These measurements were taken after careful setup and adjustments for optimal sound.)

Other specs include 8 ohms internal impedance with a suggested greater-than-80-ohms loading for voltage-mode phonostages. The weight of the Blue comes in at 10.8 grams. Additional specifications are listed in Specs & Pricing.

Blue Lightning

The Umami Blue is an all-around excellent sounding cartridge. It has a more illuminated character than the slightly warmer-sounding members of the Hana family. It moves even closer to neutral without running anywhere near the cool side. The Blue traces the groove easily on more dynamic and

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Specs & Pricing

Type: Moving-coil cartridge

Output level at 1kHz: 0.4mV

Channel balance at 1kHz: 0.5dB

Channel separation at 1kHz: 30dB

Frequency response: 15Hz–50kHz

Tracking ability at 2 grams: 70µm

Dynamic compliance: 10 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne (100Hz)

Stylus type: Microline nude diamond

Cantilever material: Solid boron

Tracking force, recommended: 2.0g

Internal impedance: 8 ohms

Recommended load impedance: >80 ohms

Cartridge body material: A7075 Duralumin

Cartridge body color: Blue (Melamine Thermosetting Process)

Cartridge weight: 10.8 grams

Price: \$2500

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS (U.S.)

Distributor

5662 Shattuck Ave.

Oakland, CA 94609

(510) 547-5006

musicalsurroundings.com

hanacartridges.com

Reference System

Analog tape: Otari MTR-10 Studio Mastering (¼" 2-track) tape deck with custom Flux Magnetic Mastering Series repro head and secondary custom tube output stage, Studer A820 Studio Mastering (¼" 2-track) tape deck (x2), Studer A80VU MKII Studio Mastering (¼" 2-track) tape deck, ReVox A700 (¼" 2-track and ¼" 4-track heads) tape deck, Stellavox SP7 (¼" 2-track) tape deck with ABR large reel adapter, Nagra IV-S tape deck with custom large reel adapter, ReVox G-36 (¼" 4-track) tape deck

Analog vinyl: Basis Audio Debut Vacuum with Synchro-Wave Power Supply, Basis Audio 2800 Vacuum, TW Acoustic Raven 2 turntables; Basis Audio SuperArm 9, Basis Audio Vector IV (x2), Graham Phantom III, Graham 2.2 tonearms; Lyra Atlas, Lyra Atlas SL, Lyra Etna, Lyra Etna SL, Lyra Titan-i, van den Hul Colibri XGP, Hana SL, Hana Umami Red, Hana Umami Blue, Ortofon Verismo cartridges

Analog phostage: The Raptor (Custom), Ayre P-5xe, Musical Surround-

ings Phenomena II+ w/Linear Power Supply, Zanden Model 1200 Signature
Digital source: Intel i7 10th generation processor-based music server hosting JRiver Media Center, Roon, Qobuz, and Tidal

Preamplification: Dual Placette Audio Active linestage

Amplification: Custom/Modified solid-state monoblocks

Loudspeakers: Vandersteen Model 3a Signature with dual 2Wq subwoofers and dual SUB THREE subwoofers using M5-HPB high-pass filter, Focal Stella Utopia EM EVO

Cables: Assortment of AudioQuest, Shunyata, Tara Labs, Acoustic Research, Cardas, and custom cables

Support: Minus-K BM-1, Neuance shelf, Maple wood shelf, Symposium Ultra

Acoustics: Walker Audio

Accessories: Aurios Pro, Pneuance Audio, Walker Audio, Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200, Kirmuss Audio KA-RC-1, VPI 16.5, Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic

Room: 18' (W), 8' (H), 43' (L)

complex passages. It has what I'd consider superb micro- and macro-dynamics that comfortably compete with cartridges at any price. The Blue also has a surprising level of transparency to the music embedded in the grooves. The cartridge preserves harmonic content and speedy note transitions with uncanny ease.

Lady Blackbird's *Black Acid Soul* [Foundation Music Productions/BMG, 538711481] album is packed with excellent musicians and compositions that play to the singer's dynamic vocals. The first track on the album is "Blackbird," a Nina Simone composition, that sounds great from the start. The interplay of bowed and plucked double bass overlaid on the track are clearly revealed by the Umami Blue. Plucked bass notes are strong and big sounding, while the bowed bass is delightfully weighty. Having heard this track played on quite a few cartridge combinations establishes the Blue to be very good at parsing these dual instruments even in the lower registers. On the micro-dynamic side of things there is low-level brushed percussion that can get lost in the mix if the cartridge isn't able to reveal this soft and delicate contribution to the overall sound of this track. The piano notes sound realistic and harmonically rich.

The unmistakable star of this song, and of every vocal track on this album, is Lady Blackbird's voice. This song is sung in the mold of Nina Simone without veering off course with overt

improvisations. The Umami Blue does justice to the singer by expressing her voice's full, rich, strong, and powerful timbre. Pieced together, this track serves as a modern update to a classic Nina Simone song while holding true to the original composition.

Throughout the album, Lady Blackbird's vocals are highlighted. Her voice goes from sour to soft but never loses that full-strength tone that makes it unique. On "It's Not That Easy," the vocals are more dynamic, imparting a rawness to the song, while the supporting organ underpins the arrangement. On "Fix It," the singing shifts, yet again, to a softer, more

reserved presentation that fits perfectly with the somewhat wet piano notes supported by overlaid chords. Songs like "Nobody's Sweetheart" show a different side of the voice with additional instruments added to the mix. This time, a clean and clear trumpet emerges from within the composition in addition to the very warm and inviting tone of a guitar. Throughout the album, Lady Blackbird's style of singing and the music composition change (both subtly and overtly) to show some of her range of performance. The Umami Blue lays it all out there for you to enjoy, both the singing and musical performance and the producing, mixing, and mas-

Hana Umami Blue Cartridge **Absolute Analog**

tering of this wonderful-sounding album.

Like the Lady Blackbird LP, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong's album *The Great Reunion* (Classic Records 45RPM Clarity Vinyl, Roulette SR 52103) showcases many of the Umami Blue's attributes. "Solitude" alone reveals what sounds like excellent transparency to the recording. Micro-dynamic shadings of cymbal brushstrokes and Ellington's clearly defined piano chords play softly in the background as Armstrong sings in his uniquely articulated style. Supporting clarinet playing in the right channel from Barney Bigard has spot-on timbre with rich windy detail and lush vibrato. Similarly, Trummy Young's trombone in the left channel hosts that same truthful tone color and vibrato during his time in the spotlight. Umami Blue makes it all clear, including the initial release of plucked double bass notes. Armstrong's trumpet rings true with *ppp*-to-*fff* dynamics that seem to effortlessly run from soft to loud. There isn't a hint of breakup on any track of this album when the Umami Blue is tasked with pickup duties.

The Umami Blue fared just as well with music from other genres. Classical music's multitude of instruments on large orchestral pieces were conveyed with the scale and power of such compositions at satisfying levels, as were smaller ensembles and soloists. The Blue easily scales with the demands of the performance. Pop/rock music with the cartridge offered similar levels of satisfaction, as did folk and blues.

Red or Blue?

One modern electric blues album offered a chance for comparisons with another Hana cartridge I have in-house. With the Umami Blue, Mighty Sam McClain's album *Give It Up To Love* sounded excellent. On "Give It Up To Love" and "Too Proud" instruments were clear and dynamic with heft and weight when called for. Drums had impact, guitar licks were impressive, electric bass was big and full, organ playing was rich and expansive, and piano strikes had appropriate attack. In terms of soundstaging, when compared to the Umami Red, the Blue is perceptually bigger, faster, and more upfront while the Red is more set back with slightly soft-

er edges around instruments. In terms of dynamics, with its more upfront character the Blue seems to go more all-out from a macro perspective, while the Red is a bit more reserved but still packs a weighty punch. Tonal characteristics of the Umami Blue puts it the closest to neutral of any Hana I've heard, while retaining excellent harmonic retrieval to keep instruments and vocals realistic sounding. The Red is slightly warmer sounding, seeming to favor ever-so-slightly more tone color rather than clarity. These characteristics were heard on the tracks above as well as many others. While the Red is more expensive, the choice of which Hana Umami to choose may come down to sound preferences (think sports sedan versus luxury sedan of the same model). Both cartridges sound excellent and by the time this review is published, both cartridges will have TAS Golden Ear Awards under their belts.

Conclusion

This Umami Blue doesn't leave much on the table and has quickly become part of the mainstay cartridge rotation because it is so enjoyable to listen to. Hana has set another benchmark of performance-for-cost because there is one heck of a lot of goodness in this cartridge when compared with more expensive models, even into the upper four-digit realm. If my legitimate in-house comparisons to higher-resolution 15ips tape sources with the same downstream components are any indication, the Umami Blue—with appropriately capable supporting source components—comes closer to that sound than not. Excel Sound Corporation has created another superb-sounding cartridge with the Hana Umami Blue. One listen to a well set-up Blue will give you another slightly different, mouthwateringly delightful taste of Umami. Lightning did, indeed, strike again and this time, it's blue. **100**

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