

Gramophone Dreams #17: Abyss AB-1266 Phi headphones



Recently, a friend played me a masterpiece: Ike & Tina Turner's *River Deep—Mountain High*, arranged by Jack Nitzsche and produced by Phil Spector (LP, A&M SP 4178). It sounded terrible: murky, distant, with badly booming bass. Even before the first track was over, we both laughed and called it a night.

Nevertheless, I went home obsessed with Tina's inspired singing and Spector's infamous Wall of Sound production.

I have forever lusted for Tina Turner . . . but now, my nerdy old reviewer self wanted to use this dense, soulful recording to bring back my teen testosterone, and also (don't laugh) to use it as a tool to judge how well an audio component can dig through Spector's sonic hash and peer into one of the wildest, most amped-up, reverb-infused pop recordings ever made.

That same night, before I fell asleep, I bought an M-/M- first-pressing LP on eBay, and an original 7" 45rpm single of the title song—just for comparisons.

When I was a little girl

I had a rag doll . . .

Now I love you just the way I loved that rag doll

Room lights are dimmed; I'm wearing Abyss AB-1266 Phi headphones with an 8' cord, pacing back and forth, bending at the waist, fist pumping . . . and singing!

And it gets dee-per, let me say

And I get high-er, in every way . . .

Buying black discs like this, and listening to them with products like the new Abyss AB-1266 Phi headphones, is like getting paid to take LSD, drink Hennessy VSOP, and grind with Tina. The hard part is telling you about it.

Therefore, in this "Gramophone Dreams," unlike most others, I'm not going to get all audio-critical, pink'n'purple prosy, or even quasi-scientific. I'm simply going to play some killer records and describe the actual musical pleasures I experienced while auditioning what many say are audio's best headphones: JPS Labs' Abyss AB-1266 (\$4495, now discontinued), and their replacements: the new, maybe even better AB-1266 Phi (also \$4495).

I remember very well my first encounter with Abyss headphones. My ol' friend and headphone guru, Steve Guttenberg (C-NET, *Sound & Vision*, *Stereophile*), handed me this weird squared-off headset and said, "Try these." I'd just finished being gobsmacked by a pair of AKG K-812s, and right away, everything about the AB-1266es seemed too strange and too good to be true—especially how they just hung loosely on my head, not tightly cupping my ears, but sort of *floating* right next to them. I thought, *These things don't sound like any type of audio gear I've experienced. They sound like life.*

I handed the AB-1266es back to Steve. "I love these things. They sound so totally *not* hi-fi. How much are they?"

He told me the price, and my consciousness froze as I rode the Audio Time Machine back to the 1970s. I saw a *Stereophile* review of Dick Sequerra's Model 1 FM tuner, which cost \$5000—in 1973! Then I remembered the original [Wilson Audio Modular Monitor](#) (WAMM), which cost \$35,000/pair in 1983. I remembered the legendary Sony MDR-R10 headphones: \$2500 in 1989. And who could forget Audio Note (Japan)'s 25W Ongaku amplifier, which cost \$90,000 in 1993? Like those notorious legacy products, the Abyss AB-1266 headphones exist in categories of price and performance all their own.

Equally impressive is the fact that audio engineer Joe Skubinski, owner and founder and president of JPS Labs, started out as a humble cable manufacturer who, after wandering about an early CanJam (www.canjamglobal.com), "decided to take JPS Labs in a completely different direction—toward a goal of producing the best headphones ever made."

In late 2013, after five years of research and development, JPS Labs began full production of their now-classic AB-1266: a planar-magnetic design that "broke all the headphone design rules" and, almost instantly, was regarded as the best of the best. Steve Guttenberg told me, "Joe hit a home run in his first at-bat."

I asked Skubinski how that was possible.

"I just tried to design the most linear driver unit possible," he said. "The rest was easy."

I doubt *any* part of designing a first-quality headphone entirely from scratch is *easy*, but even a quick look and a short listen will demonstrate that the Abyss AB-1266 headphones are very different from all others.

Description

The Abyss AB-1266 Phi headphones are available with three different

combinations of accessories. The most basic package, the Lite (\$4495), includes minimal accessories, JPS Labs' standard four-pin XLR headphone cable with ¼" adapter. The Phi Deluxe (\$5495) includes a heavy leather man bag, an Abyss-branded headphone stand, and a set of JPS Labs' dual-balanced cables. The Phi Complete (\$7495) is the same as the Deluxe, except that its headphone cable is a 2.4m length of JPS's Superconductor HP.



The Lite Package (\$4495)

The AB-1266 Phi headphones arrived in a luxurious wooden box. When I opened it, I was impressed by how precisely manufactured their heavy

black-anodized aluminum frame looked without the sculpted, magnetically attached, rotatable lambskin earpads. The Abyss's industrial-looking, square-cornered frame and suspended leather headband pad reminded me of the famously short-lived AKG K1000s—which I used to call "headspeakers" because they, like the Abysses, suspended their drivers *near* the listener's ears, without enclosing and creating a seal around them.

I studied the Abyss website for specifics of what's new and improved about the Phi edition of the AB-1266, and finally gave up. It all seemed intentionally vague. I wrote Skubinski and told him his headphones looked industrial-strength outlaw, but his website was dodgy. "So Joe—what exactly *is* different about your new replacement model?"



The Phi Deluxe (\$5495)

"Yes, the website is vague . . .," he admitted, "but the new AB-1266 Phi represents a significant refinement in planar speaker-driver technology. For the original Abyss we created a single-magnet planar with a specific magnetic field pattern, and now, the new version dramatically increases [magnetic]-field line contrast, allowing for greater accuracy in relation to the driven trace pattern. We've reduced micro-phase distortions on the

planar surface to crazy-low levels. Acoustics are fine-tuned without the need for absorption."

I hope you understand all that better than I do.

"In layman's terms, this is the perfect speaker in a perfect room that audiophiles seek. Musical information no longer is blurred, harmony can easily be heard as individual singers within the group, instrument separation is crazy good, bass drums have the rolling of their skins—'bass within bass,' as we call it—snozzberries taste like snozzberries. You get the idea." Joe knows I *love* snozzberries.

"With flat phase and impedance, the directly driven AB-1266 Phi simply sounds like you are standing on the surface of the microphone."

This I understood perfectly—and agree with completely. Joe continued:

"Compared to the original AB-1266, sensitivity is increased a few dB (to 88dB/mW), [and] impedance came down 4 ohms, to 42. Harmonic distortions are lower in key regions. Overall, they're a bit easier to drive; you'll find yourself playing them at lower volumes."

Footnote 1: Abyss Headphones, A Division of JPS Labs LLC, 16 Lancaster Parkway, Lancaster, NY 14086. Tel: (716) 288-9112. Web: www.abyss-headphones.com.