

# The Soundsmith Paua II Fixed Coil Phono Cartridge

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Serendipity plays a role in discovering new equipment. Lately my vinyl setup wasn't sounding the way it should so I started to examine my components to see if there were any obvious problems. I then decided to do a little house cleaning and rearranging of my system. During this move there occurred a few rough interludes where equipment and bodies made unintentional contact. It became clear that my Shelter 9000 cartridge was badly damaged.

I called a few buds and they recommended I check with Peter Ledermann of

Soundsmith. The man is a legend in the field of cartridge design and repair. After chatting with him, I sent my cartridge in for evaluation. It turns out that I had really done a number on the Shelter. The cantilever was twisted, the stylus was completely gone and there was a lot of dirt trapped in the body. Peter assured me that he could fix the cartridge and bring it up to full working order for \$550.00. He also explained how his policy for repair and rebuild is rather unique—all Soundsmith cartridges can be rebuilt to new, forever, for 20% or less. According to Peter, the Soundsmith cartridges therefore have a far lower cost per play over the years.

The Shelter 9000 retails for \$4195.00 and I wasn't about to discard it, so I gave him the go ahead to repair it. I was without a cartridge for a while so I asked if he could recommend one of his own cartridges in a similar price range. He recommended the \$4,000 Paua II and was kind enough to overnight one immediately. It came in a mini wooden sarcophagus with a mother-of-pearl cover—very sexy.

Before I begin, it's important to note that Soundsmith uses a different technology than most cartridge manufacturers. Many high end audio manufacturers use 'moving coil' designs for their cartridges. Soundsmith uses 'fixed coil' technology. For a complete explanation, [visit](#) the website where he explains the advantages and benefits achieved through the use of fixed coil technology. It's a must read both for the technical and non-technical audiophile. After reading his list of benefits, which are many, it is clear they are achieved largely as a result of a great reduction in the mass of the cartridge assembly.

### **Keep Listening**

After mounting the Paua II on my VPI JMW 12 3D tone arm, the burn-in began. The cartridge had arrived partially burned in and required another 30 hours before serious listening began.

Lately, I've been playing two fabulous big band jazz albums that I highly recommend: the first is an Analogue Productions' reissue of Columbia Records' Duke Ellington *Blues in Orbit* and the second is Basie's *Warm Breeze* on Pablo Today. These albums sounded incredibly good. I kept playing them over and over again, reveling in the quality of the musicianship of the players but equally matched by the quality of the sound.

Settling on cartridge loadings was made a lot easier by my Avid Pulsare II phono stage. It has the loading controls on the front face and is adjustable on the fly. As soon as I dialed in the best sounding loadings (500R, 200pf) I started some serious listening. When the needle dropped on the lead groove, it started showing off immediately. The Paua II was giving me more image solidity than I'd heard before. Images were more three dimensional and alive, more palpable. Separation of instruments, while outstanding with the Shelter 9000, was better under the Soundsmith. There seemed to be more naturalness to the presentation, perhaps a little more warmth and smoothness that I found to be infectious. It was not overly Romantic without appropriate detail and definition, simply more alive.

The listening continued and it became apparent that the Paua II produced a

slightly larger and deeper soundstage where the performance extended beyond the speaker boundaries. The Shelter 9000 was more incisive with more emphasis on instrumental attack giving images slightly more definition and location.

Up to this point I've been reporting my comparative observations from musical memory. Since my reference cartridge was being rebuilt I had to patiently await its return, which wasn't long at all. I also obtained a second matching VPI JMW 12D tonearm (thank you Mat Weisfeld) so it took less than 30 seconds to switch between the two cartridges.

Initially, both cartridges presented musically believable performances. The main difference appeared to be in the smoothness and three dimensionality of the imaging that the Paua II produced. Images were larger, rounder, had more weight and substance making for a more lifelike experience. Whereas the 9000 compared very favourably with the Soundsmith in the soundstage department—both excellent—I still felt the front to back layering was more natural and satisfying with the Paua II. The more I listened the more convinced I became the Paua II was for me. While the Shelter 9000 had been an excellent performer for almost 3 years, it was time to move on.

Serendipity can strike in so many ways, and in audiophile terms, this was perfect. A wonderful new discovery born of an analogue accident. Highly recommended.



Further information: [Soundsmith](#)

### **Specifications**

Stylus: Contact Line Nude, 0.100mm SQ

Radius of curvature: Nude Contact Line

Cantilever: Telescoping Aluminum Alloy

Recommended tracking force: 1.7 to 1.9 grams

Effective tip mass: 0.30 mg  
Compliance: 10  $\mu\text{m/mN}$  (low compliance)  
Frequency response: 20-20,000 Hz  $\pm$  1.0 dB  
Channel separation (stereo only): 1000 Hz >34 dB 50-15,000 >25 dB  
Channel difference: <0.5 dB (Stereo), <1.0 dB (Mono)  
Output Voltage:  $\geq$ 0.4 mV  
DC Resistance (DCR): 10-11  $\Omega$  each channel  
Coil: 2.75 mH each channel  
Suggested Preamp Gain: 58-64 dB  
Soundsmith Recommends: MCP2 Variable Loading Preamp  
Cartridge weight: 10.25 grams  
Stylus to Mounting Hole Offset:  $\approx$  10mm (0.4")  
Loading:  $\geq$  470  $\Omega$