

ford American Dictionary (but lighter), it's portable and could be strapped to the body, but not jammed into the hip pocket.

By the time one has exhausted the imagination with pure experimentation on the MG-1 (about the time the neighbors are exhausted as well), the manual provides answers on how the 30 buttons actually can work in harmonic consort. With or without back-up band, the instrument enables the player to be many things to many people. With only three more keyboard keys than the VL-Tone, it can be manipulated like a real piano made for human fingers rather than elf's knuckles, and within that 2-1/2 octave range, a polyphonic capability allows you to play chords as well as single notes. No memory capability or rhythm synthesizer is included, but the easy-to-follow-but-not-very-complex instruction booklet does explain a number of true synthesizer terms such as auto contour trigger, detuning, cutoff frequency, peak emphasis, and other jargon of the tune. Following some diagrams for dial-twiddling, one builds the sound into an electronic organ, a hurricane, a violin, a tuba, a helicopter, electric fuzz guitar (but one even the Ventures wouldn't have touched, I might add), the clarinet



(ditto Benny Goodman), and talking robots (an incomprehensible kitchen sink). Beyond these prescribed functions, and a cursory description of the six boxed, color-coded sections which control modulation, two tone sources, contour, filter of brightness and low tones, and the mixer, you are on your own. My own basic forays into possibilities, done in conjunction with Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark plugged in through an overdub plug in the back, cranked out such hybrids as a dentist drill, the gamut of bird calls, Echoes of the Lost World, and other amazing conjunctions of sound to drive any ordinary record reviewer

insane with metaphorical phrase-making. To wit, a searing meltdown which explodes seconds after the button is pushed, a burbling brook with warm heart blips reverberating, regurgitating on belltone background, etc. Make no mistake. The MG-1 is a real instrument. If the advertising picture is to be believed (and it must be seen to be believed), Elton John uses one. Still, I would assume that the primary kick one can derive from playing with the machine is scoring the themes from Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, and Asteroids, or simulating any hundreds of special effects. The theme from Jaws, for example, can be created and left running by itself, playing endlessly for your bathtub pleasure. Personally, the more traditional possibilities enticed

me, and I found myself working up snide arrangements of "Silent Night" and "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" (using as much white noise as possible) to play at the annual chow-down. By interfacing your MG-1 to a home computer, you can program many more musical possibilities. With a button called random wave shape, a computer generated noise system of beeps, drips, kerplunks and zaps will speed across the keyboard endlessly without any sense or aesthetic for as long as the machine is plugged in. It's not exactly a comfort on a lonely evening, but it does do things by itself if you're still feeling incompetent. The best possible solution for such musical nontalent is the personal stereo, the ultimate compression of musical ability into a small space. Let someone else do all the driving.

The Personal Stereo

First on the moon, Sony lucked onto the generic label of Walkman (plural: Walkmen), like Kleenex for tissue, but everybody's into the action. Panasonic has a personal stereo that's more cumbersome, General Electric's Escape comes in striking blue, Penney's has confusing controls, the Infinity Intimate costs a bundle (with the FM module), and more than twenty others compete, each dropping in size and price from day to day. Technology virtually jets along. WM-II is the size of a cigarette pack, Sanyo's machine plays the tape both ways without flipping, a few types record as well as play back, earclip speakers can already replace the headband, everything is getting smaller and smaller than Alice's "eat me" mushroom. We'll be injecting jams before the Nineties. Now, there are good ways and bad ways to utilize the amazingly snobbish personal stereo, and the bad ways are the most fun. Strapping on a Walkman and heading out on wheels undoubtedly takes first preference. Roller skates, bicycles, mopeds, tractors and wheelchairs, any means of transportation gets a boost when the crystalline separation of a good P.S. unit provides

a throbbing aria from the croaking chords of an Angus Young or a Joey Ramone in your ears. The danger gives a tingle, too, as all other sounds take second place, including irate horn honks and skidding tires.

Sony claims, "The Walkman is more than a breakthrough product. It has established itself as the representative product of an entire generation. Television, color television, and sports cars held this distinction for previous generations."

Does this imply that a sprouting crop of robotons are about to invade our walkways, maneuvering as solitary zombies, blocking out all the world but for their chosen sounds, never to talk to one another again? Will disco music return?

The more practical service of the personal stereo exists for the opposite group, the non-mobile types. Bed-ridden patients, unable to haul their stereo components into the ward, can enjoy high quality stereo without crowding. Sedentary jobs, from factory work to truck driving, can block out the blahs. Time seems to fly while washing dishes, and the chances of the p.s. dipping into the suds are remote, especially if one utilizes the belt hook instead of the neck strap to attach it.

For most purposes, the strap secures the machine nicely, keeping hands and waist free. Want to go strapless? Sony's WM-II fits into a shirt pocket, and features "soft-touch" controls which operate through the fabric. Most brands offer a "mute" feature, to enable you to speak to the check-out girl without clicking off the tape. You can communicate while the music flows on deep in the distance. Some machines have a microphone with the mute, eerily broadcasting the external noises into the soundtrack, suitable if you prefer to croon with the tune.

Despite the lightweight comfort of the headphones, sound quality is usually sharper than stand up speakers, the lyrics brought closer to the brain, with subtleties distinguished. Record reviewers have been known to tape their free promos, in order to listen while biking to their day jobs as busboys.

The political ramifications of the Walkman and its proliferating ilk may balance on the obsolescence of sidewalk "boom box" radios. Clearly, one need not advertise his preference for high volume P-Funk to the generic crowd passing by, but on the other hand, there is nothing particularly suave about accidentally belting out the chorus of "Bette Davis Eyes" in an otherwise quiet and crowded elevator. And, the person next to you doesn't need to be shouted at to understand. He can't hear REO cranking in your ear.

These potential snags are quickly learned, and overcome. The larger model personal stereos might not be as cute as Sony's, but they are still small enough to fit comfortably in the most active situations. The FM radio units, while draining batteries at a much slower rate than the 9 or so hours cassettes get on 2, 3 or 4 AA batteries, sometimes don't get consistent reception, dependent upon the area and the activity where they're used.



The best personal stereo models offer an FM module which snaps in like a cassette, allowing you to opt for recorded or broadcast sounds.

Some begrudging competitors don't hold much for the future. Richard Sutton of Toshiba America claims, "It's just like the CB boom. It will go down

the tubes in two years. With the Koreans and Hong Kong manufacturers in there, pretty soon you'll see them for \$29.95."

In the meantime, who's waiting to find out? I've got a date to scrub the bathroom floor with Ellen Foley, and I can't wait.



The Many Roads to Hi Fi

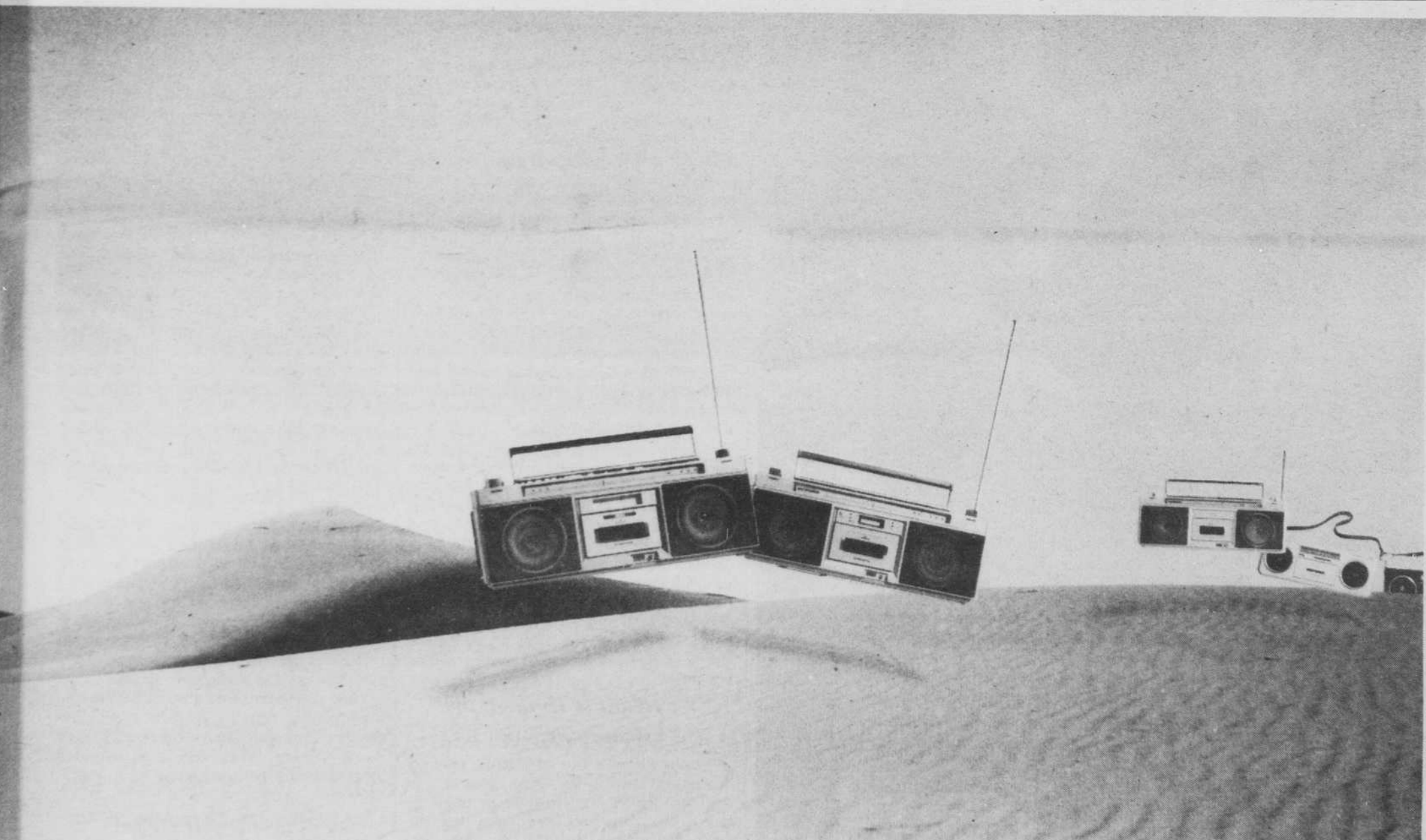
BY MARTIN CLIFFORD

There are no upper and lower limits to high-fidelity sound, and since listening to music with an assist from electronics has so many different approaches, one person's fi is another person's phooey. What you may like in the way of audio and what you will ultimately buy depends on the way you interface with audio components, on your budget, age, sex, environment, personal taste and musical training. Fortunately there are various ways to set up a hi-fi system, some of which are a dead-end arrangement, others permitting the system to grow as your budget and musical taste permit.

Getting a hi-fi system is a decision-making process and the selection of the wrong option can be costly, time consuming, and stress inducing. The problem is compounded by the fact that you cannot really hear a hi-fi system until you've listened to it for about a half year. It is only then that the oddities of the system you have set up will begin to emerge.

Your natural yearning for audio can be satisfied in a number of ways. Basically, there are two approaches, compact vs component, but there are a number of subheadings under these two. A compact system consists of an

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