

House Proud

Decorating With an Ear For Eames and R&B

By PENELOPE GREEN

THE first meeting between Laura Gottwald, an effervescent interior designer and jazz lover, and Margery Budoff, a personal injury lawyer and deeply committed audiophile, was so momentous that Ms. Budoff later had to re-think her undergarments.

It was 1995 and she had just moved into a one-bedroom apartment at Stewart House, the white brick, block-square monolith on East 10th Street in Manhattan, with Moby, an African Grey parrot; a pair of three-foot-tall, fidgety but lovely Quad 63 speakers; an assortment of amplifiers and pre-amps (heavy with tubes); and a handful of Chippendale chairs and tables (heavy with clawed feet). She also had a serious collection of vinyl — jazz, rhythm and blues, Latin and gospel recordings from the 1950's and 60's — and a huge black record washer. Curious and scholarly, Ms. Budoff was attempting at the time, she said the other day, "to just amass things."

"I was learning about antiques," she added, "and I didn't have any particular affinity for them. I just liked them because they were old."

A former child prodigy who played a piano concert series for children at the Brooklyn Museum when she was 8, Ms. Budoff has the sort of hungry intelligence that worries a fact like a terrier with a rubber ball. (In her teens, she would listen to the same John Coltrane record over and over until she grasped, "in a rudimentary way," as she described it, "the nature of improvisation over the heads of the tunes.")

When Ms. Gottwald came into Ms. Budoff's life, to untangle the antiques and stereo components and records, and to help her steer an aesthetic course, she offered midcentury modernism as a model. Ms. Budoff took to the style so enthusiastically that she began dressing to match her furniture, in 1950's foundation garments, pointy shoes and little suits.

"I thought that if I surrounded myself in everything from that vintage and wore everything from that vintage," she said,

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John Lei for The New York Times; above right, Rahav Segov for The New York Times



DECIBEL DÉCOR

Margery Budoff, with Jack Fetterman, above, showcases her vintage radios on an Edward Wormley sideboard circa 1948, left.

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"I would transmogrify in some way. Obviously I was at some sort of psychological stage."

In any case, she had found Ms. Gottwald while looking for the rug, she said, "that would change my life." It was a 1940's powder blue Karastan, advertised in the classifieds of The New York Times by a man named Paul Fuhrman, who specialized in buying and reselling the contents of restaurants and hotels. At home with her new rug and old chairs, "I was really lost," Ms. Budoff said. She appealed to Mr. Fuhrman, who suggested she meet Ms. Gottwald, a snappy designer with a rich sense of humor.

Ms. Gottwald and Mr. Fuhrman had met when Ms. Gottwald was redoing the interiors of the Cavalier Hotel in Miami Beach; she later hired him to restore some of the Algonquin's furniture when she redesigned that hotel's interiors in 1990. (Note to Mr. Fuhrman: send up a flare. Both Ms. Gottwald and Ms. Budoff are pining for you. "He just vanished," Ms. Gottwald said.)

Anyway, Ms. Gottwald continued, "I think Paul thought that if anyone could make the Chippendale things work with that rug it would be me. I do remember saying that if there was a lot of space between them they could be in dialogue."

Or at least détente. Ms. Gottwald would arrive at Ms. Budoff's apartment, and they would push the furniture away and sit on the rug. Ms. Budoff would serve cocktails and maybe some gospel, and Ms. Gottwald served little tutorials on midcentury modern furniture, or contemporary fabric, or Murano glass. There's a happy collaboration. Ms. Gottwald, who once followed Ornette Coleman around Manhattan for an entire afternoon just for fun, delighted in Ms. Budoff's music and tried to design with all the equipment in mind. Ms. Budoff, a member of three audio clubs — each an orgy of cable and component swapping — is very, very serious about sound.

She described 11 years spent with a pair of delicate Quad 63 electrostatic speakers with tenderness. "That's a speaker that broke my heart," she said. Tired of fixing them each year, she has run through a series of replacements. These days, a pair of Aerial 10's, hulking, blond maple obelisks, are planted at the top of the down stroke in her T-shape apartment, which is where the living room is. Stewart House's low-ceilinged apartments with their dead-end alcoves flatten sound, particularly the bass end. "One of our disappointments is we were not able to make the room perfect acoustically," Ms. Gottwald said. Placed as they are, the Aerials produce the best sound possible, but only if you're sitting in the living room.

"The sweet seat," Ms. Gottwald explained, "is in the center of the mohair plush sofa by that famous 40's designer, Anonymous." (That's another Paul Fuhrman pick.)

They took it slowly — buying pieces over



Above and right by Rahav Segov for The New York Times; below, John Lei for The New York Times

AMPED UP Margery Budoff, above right with a 1942 Flamex teapot and 1950's and 60's glass hanging fixtures, keeps two turntables and a mixer in her living room, above, along with midcentury finds like a white Edward Wormley couch and a 40's Karastan rug. The array above her vinyl collection of more than 2,500, right, includes a pair of 19th-century portraits and 30 or so glass vacuum pots dating to 1914.

the years as Ms. Budoff's budget allowed. Most of the Chippendale left to make room for an Edward Wormley couch and credenza, an Eames chair and a shiny black lacquer cabinet. The rest was slid into the bedroom with Moby. "That's where we put Margery's old life," Ms. Gottwald said. A few years ago, Ms. Gottwald took Ms. Budoff to visit an elderly aunt in Ocean Grove, N.J., and to visit the flea market there. Ms. Budoff met her first vintage vacuum coffee pot, a 10-cup, double-handled Silex Delray, bulbous and alluring, which she bought for about \$25.

"I walked towards it as if in a trance," she said. "I didn't know what it was, but I was determined to get to the bottom of it."

Into her apartment came a clinking army of bubble-shape glass coffee pots with evocative names like the Vaculator. The other night, there were 30-odd pots ranged above her record collection; nearly as many live in a closet. "They have multiplied like rabbits," Ms. Budoff said with some annoyance. "Now I'm trying to get rid of them."

(She has already jettisoned her 50's drag; she was disillusioned by the awkward fit of

her 50's foundation garments, the bullet bras in particular, and their inability to transform her on a deep cellular level.)

Last fall, Ms. Gottwald made another match for Ms. Budoff. She took her to see Jack Fetterman, an old friend who was D.J.-ing in a bar between Chinatown and the Lower East Side. It was a frigid, weird evening, "a bad gig," Mr. Fetterman said, but his mixing piqued Ms. Budoff's interest. Mr. Fetterman, an architect who works by day at E.R. Butler & Company, a high-end custom hardware manufacturer, is also a composer/remixer of a very particular sort of midcentury lounge music (a term he would hate). It's a swanky, ambient, very orchestral sound, all vibraphones and acoustic piano. Mr. Fetterman calls it "exotica house." Aficionados sometimes call it "neo-easy listening," and refer you to its heroes: Les Baxter, Martin Denny, Juan Garcia Esquivel.

"It's geeky white music," Ms. Gottwald said with a shudder, the farthest sound from Ms. Budoff's beloved deep soul, gutbucket R&B and doo-wop. But the periods are the same, stretching from the 1950's to deep in



the 1970's, when disco took over.

In the cab on the way home that evening — Mr. Fetterman lives on Ninth Street — the two discussed speakers and record washers and each found in the other a kindred spirit.

"When I heard that he'd had his Dynaco speakers since college," Ms. Budoff said, "I knew that he was not a 'civilian,' and that he, too, qualified as being from another planet."

Mr. Fetterman has since taught Ms. Budoff to D.J. — she goes by the name D.J.



For a collector of vinyl, a pitch-perfect abode.

Mobita, in honor of Moby the parrot. They have been playing before the burlesque shows at Riffi, a bar and former theater on East 11th Street. Ms. Budoff now spins for his Internet radio program, "Quiet City: Radio in Hi-Fi," on Luxuriamusic.com.

A few weeks ago, all three sat around the 1954 Gimbels metal dinette table that belonged to Ms. Budoff's parents — exhumed and given a new elliptical bite-proof top by Ms. Gottwald (so that Moby could eat with Ms. Budoff). They all wore architectural eyewear and looked like the members of a late 1970's New Wave band. Mr. Fetterman favors a thick black frame; Ms. Budoff's frames were bright green; Ms. Gottwald's a shimmering red that matched her hair. Ms. Budoff's apartment, with its glittering silk pillows, vinyl-filled shelves, and slyly updated 50's furnishings, made an apt backdrop. Indeed, it might have been the cover of one of Mr. Fetterman's easy-listening records.

They broached a term for Ms. Budoff and Mr. Fetterman: vinyl archaeologists.

For their Christmas party invitations this year, Ms. Budoff and Mr. Fetterman have made a wreath of his old record covers and photographed it with a swirly title: "How's This Sound for Christmas?"