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CES 2012 Report - Kirk Midtskog on Solid-State Electronics \$12,000 and Below (Jan 18th, 2012)

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Ron Sutherland, known for his well-regarded phono stages, has recently brought his engineering skills to building preamplifiers and a power amp. **Sutherland Engineering** offers a brand new line called the **Destination Series** whose models can be characterized by “channel-separated construction”; everything is housed in separate L and R mono chassis, including the new phono stage called the **Phono Blocks**. The **Phono Blocks** (\$10,000) are a further expression of Sutherland's channel-separation approach found in his 20/20 model which houses the two channels' circuits in separate smaller boxes held together by larger outer chassis plates (with quite a bit of space between the two “inner” boxes). The **Phono Blocks** take the separation even further by placing each channel's circuitry in two standard-width chassis. The **Line Blocks** (\$15,000) linestage adds a third chassis just for the control electronics: input selection, volume control, and the display—which gets a bit of retro chic in the form of a pair of 1950s-style Nixie tubes whose elements display numbers depending on which elements (within the tubes) get voltage fed to them. The two other **Line Blocks**' chassis have all the input and output connections, and are where the signals are actually buffered and amplified, thereby keeping the control electronics well away from the audio signals. The most recent addition to the new **Destination Series** is the 400-watt **Power Blocks**, which are housed in the same low-profile chassis as all the other models in the line. The **Power Blocks** are based on the ICE Class-D module, but Sutherland has greatly modified the standard ICE module to suite his needs. I will say that I did not hear the typical chalky grain structure I have heard from many Class D amplifiers. Fronted by a beautiful Merrill-Williams Audio REAL 101 turntable and Ortofon cartridge, the entire **Destination Series** stack feeding a pair of Vandersteen Quatro speakers sounded just beautiful: detailed, intimate, low in noise, musically compelling, and realistic in tonal colors. Sutherland also makes a new all-in-one chassis, full-featured preamp called the **N1**, which also uses the same Nixie display tubes and some other trickled-down technology from the **Destination Series**.