

# Affordable\$\$Audio

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Ascend Acoustics  
CMT-340 SE  
Page 4

ASL MG 15 SI DT  
Integrated Amp  
Page 12

Oppo DV-970-HD  
Page 19

Totem Acoustic  
Rainmakers  
Page 27

Portland Gathering  
Photo Essay  
Page 35

Cheap Tweaks Pt.1  
Signal Cable  
MagicCable  
Page 41

Interview: David  
Fabrikant  
Page 9

Underwood Modi-  
fied XCD-5  
Page 17

NAD 3020  
Integrated  
Page 23

Modified Sonic Im-  
pact 5066  
Page 30

Joe Pass: Reluctant  
Guitar Hero  
Page 37

AK Fest 2007  
Page 43

**Cover Rig:** Writer  
Robert Powell



## Good Vibes at AudioKarma Fest '07

By Craig Johnson

Now in its fourth year, AudioKarma Fest is part manufacturer/retailer exhibition and part audio aficionado get together. This split personality (and I mean that in a good way ... I don't want any bad karma) stems from the fact that it was originally created as way for AudioKarma.org forum members to meet and listen to each other's systems.

AK Fest takes place just outside of Detroit at the Plaza Hotel in Southfield, MI. Don't let the hotel name fool you; it's not nearly as glitzy as it sounds. Moreover, you are never quite sure if the elevator is actually going to make it to 12th floor where AK Fest is located. Why in Southfield? "Grumpy," the AudioKarma.org moderator and festival organizer, lives nearby along with "Ms. Grumpy" and all his little grumpsters who help put on the Fest. (Note: AK forum monikers have been used throughout to protect the innocent).

At this event, you'll find the big boys like McIntosh and Marantz set up in hotel rooms adjacent to AK Members showing off their personal systems, most of which consist of DIY and vintage equipment. In one room you might listen to a \$20,000 pair of line arrays and then walk across the hall to "Doc Brown's" room with his thrift-shop \$25 Electrovoice speakers on Red Rose monoblocks. At times, the lines were longer for AK member rooms than the manufacturer/retailer rooms (much to their chagrin, I'm sure).

### My Karma Ran Over My Dogma

AudioKarma (both the fest and the forum) is all about bucking conventional wisdom and



having fun in the pursuit of great sound. As their motto states, "All of the audio and none of the attitude."

Judging by the AK member rooms, it also means taking a less expensive (or in some cases ridiculously cheap) route to audio nirvana.

On the first day of the Fest, "Squidward" had some good sounding tunes coming from an old pair of Klipsch KG2

speakers powered by vintage Electrohome mono tube amps borrowed from another AK member. His preamp was a DIY passive design with a pair of autoformers mounted in a wood cigar box. Components moved between the rooms quite a bit, and by the second day the Klipschs were replaced by a big pair of Electrovoice Century 3 speakers. Vintage equipment was in abundance throughout the rooms. "RetroStereo" had his Pioneer Spec-1 preamp and matching Spec-2 power amp with either a pair of older Thiel 3.6 speakers or AR9 towers. I was drawn back into the room later when I heard Floyd's "Comfortably Numb" filling the room from a pair Dahlquist DQ-10 ... very nice.

Manufacturer Frank Van Alstine of Audio by Van Alstine (AVA) was generating some good karma of his own among the AK members. During setup, "Cosmos" in the room next door had an amp self destruct due to a bad combination of a runaway tube and larger than specified fuses. Frank quickly stepped in with his spare equipment and Cosmos' double pair of KLH9 electrostatics (blue book value under \$1,000 a pair) were back up and running with nearly \$5000 worth of AVA equipment. The sound was warm and full bodied with remarkable bass extension, not what I would expect

from electrostatics.

Tube DIYers were also in attendance, with "Kegger" showing his amp design based on TV tubes shoe-horned into a Dyna chassis. He explained that the wider bandwidth of these tubes meant he could keep them working well within their linear range for better sound.

"MrClassicman" also had a tube system of his own design, featuring an all-tube outboard power supply for the mono amps, with a giant pair of Electrovoice speakers he built.

Prevalent among the AK members as well as the manufacturers and retailers were hard drive based digital front ends. "Speedle" had his Slim Devices Squeezebox 3 connected to a Denon integrated and his homemade speakers based on a design from HTguide.com.

"RichPA" was using a Roku Labs device with a Modwright Perpetual P1A DAC, Monarchy preamp, Forte amp and ACI Sapphire III speakers. "MarkusIII" took a different approach with a dedicated music server, flat panel LCD for selecting music and CAL sigma DAC that could be heard through his own Heil-based loudspeakers powered by a Citation II tube amp. It is clear that streaming digital music now affords a relatively low-cost yet very high-quality music source that sounded great on all of these systems.

But if you wanted to sit back and enjoy the luscious sounds of vinyl, karma was on your side because nearly every room at the Fest



included at least one turntable. There was also the Swap Room, your one-stop shop for a complete system that would transport you back in time. You could walk out with an armload of albums, vintage turntable, '70s era receiver and speakers for less than you'd pay for a Squeezebox or

Roku.

### The Heavy Hitters

Rumor had it that McIntosh brought somewhere around a quarter million dollars worth of equipment to the Fest. This included a pair of prototype line arrays with 28 1" tweeters, 52 2" midranges and 2 subwoofers per speaker. The sound overpowered the small hotel room so it was difficult to get a good sense of the

quality, though I'm sure things would have been better in one of the larger meeting rooms downstairs. Electronics were of course all McIntosh with music coming from their new MS300 music

server. The room was co-sponsored by AudioClassics.com, who specializes in used McIntosh equipment, so I made sure to grab one of their catalogs before leaving.

The IDS by R. Russell room also had an overpowering impact with their IDS-25 line array.

At nearly \$20,000 a pair, these take a somewhat different approach with 25 3.5" full-range drivers per channel (the equivalent surface area of a 16" woofer). The strange look on my face while listening wasn't so much because of the huge sound and tremendous bass blasting from all those speakers, but rather my mental calculations that the price per driver comes out to nearly \$400 (at least that way it sounds more affordable).

Marantz and Snell occupied a pair of rooms together. One contained their top-of-the-line equipment with Snell C7 speakers (\$6,000) and Marantz Reference Series electronics including the MA-9S2 monoblocks (\$8,000). Sound was good with CDs, but really got interesting when the TT-15S1 turntable (\$1,600 including a Clearaudio Virtuoso cartridge) started spinning Pete Townshend doing an acoustic version of "Pinball Wizard."

The adjoining room highlighted an eminently more affordable system consisting of Snell's K7 speakers (\$1250) and Basis 150 sub (\$850) along with a Marantz SA8001 SACD player (\$1000) and PM7001 integrated (\$650). It provided a very neutral presentation, though admittedly lackluster after hearing the full-tilt reference system. A special-edition Marantz tube amp was on static display here as well, clearly residing in the "if you have ask how much then you can't afford it" realm.

Moving on to the Selah Audio and Salk Sound rooms, I was happy to find speakers using the SEAS Excel magnesium cone midrange/woofer drivers. I've been attracted to the sound of these drivers ever since I first heard them in the now defunct Hales Transcendence line of speakers. Their incredible speed, detail



and delicacy provide the clarity of electrostatics with a wide, deep soundstage that is absolutely breathtaking when properly implemented. Such was the case in both rooms.

Selah Audio had their Peridot loudspeakers (starting at \$4,450 a pair) combining the SEAS Excel drivers with a Fountek ribbon tweeter.

Driven by Fountek's Altitude 3500 integrated tube amp (\$1,350) and a Music Hall CD player (\$600), the result was an incredibly detailed sound that never seemed aggressive or harsh. The speakers also had one of the best looking finishes at the show with an unusual "figured"

eucalyptus veneer.

Not to be outdone, Salk Sound was showing off their excellent HT3 speakers (starting at \$3,899) which also pairs Fountek ribbons with the SEAS Excel drivers. Likewise, the finish was as stunning as the sound with a Pal Dao veneer and a Mexican Zircote front baffle. Not familiar with these woods? I wasn't either. When Jim Salk finds an unusual veneer, he uses it on a set of speakers for himself which usually end up getting sold once a buyer sees them (after all, how many people call up looking for Pal Dao veneered speakers). Case in point: his roommate for the show, Frank Van Alstine, left with the HT3 speakers.

Bass overloading was a recurrent problem in many of the small hotel rooms, but the AVA and Salk Sound room seemed to remedy this by arranging their system diagonally and using judicious amounts of sound treatments. The sound was truly outstanding if you were lucky enough to get a seat in the room. Music came

from FLAC files stored on a laptop and streamed via the Slim Devices Squeezebox (\$250) into an AVA Ultra DAC (\$1599), Ultra SL Hybrid Preamp (\$1449) and Fet Valve Ultra 550 Amp (\$2199).

Proving that audio-philes on a budget don't have to give up their lunch for great sound, Blue Circle had a battery-powered linestage and headphone amp built into an empty plastic sandwich spread container. They also brought along their small and affordable SB Series of components which include a \$495 linestage, \$895 stereo amp and \$995 monoblocks. In keeping with the spirit of Audio-Karma, speakers were a pair of vintage Altec studio monitors pumping out Talking Heads' "Fear of Music" on vinyl ... "all I see is little dotsdotsdots."

Manley Labs was also present, as could be evidenced by the "Tubes Rule" stickers finding their way onto everybody's name tags. The diminutive Mahi monoblocks (\$2500 pair) were demoed in both triode and ultra-linear modes through System Audio Ranger speakers with a CEC CD player and Manley's Steelhead preamp (\$7300). The UL mode supposedly has more control for head banging, but in my brief listening I preferred the amps switched to the more refined sounding triode

mode.



Other manufacturer rooms included Adam Speakers with Bryston amplification and a Marantz SACD player. Their A.R.T. (Accelerated Ribbon Technology) tweeters are based on the "Air Motion Transformer" developed by Dr. Oskar Heil back in 1972.

Renaissance Audio Electronics was showing their Opus 2 Power Amp based on the KR Audio T-100 tubes, a fully balanced design from input to output with microprocessor controlled DC autobiasing. This was paired with the \$15,000 a pair Escalante Design Fremont speakers with music coming from CEC and Theta electronics.

### Bang for Your Dollar Heaven

For me, the highlight of the show was the Madisound room for its incredible price to performance ratio. This DIY speaker parts supplier is offering some great sounding speaker kits that are relatively easy to put together at

prices that blow away most comparable retail offerings. Listening was done with the excellent Fountek Altitude 3500 integrated tube amp (\$1350 available through Madisound) and a Teac CD player.



Most notable was the BK-16 kit (\$650). It is based on the Fostex FF165K 6.5" full-range driver in a

folded horn cabinet with a T90A super tweeter augmenting the top end from about 10kHz on up. The kit includes a pair of flat-packed cabinet panels pre-cut and routed out. All you have to do is glue it up, sand and finish. The sound of this system given the price was truly amazing and had a lot of people talking. Bass was plentiful and tuneful, albeit limited in ultimate extension given that is a single 6.5" driver (I'd like to know what the 8" version it sounds like in a similar cabinet design). With no crossover on the full-range driver, the mid-range was wonderfully fleshed out and transients were sharp and well-defined.

If \$650 is still a bit too rich for your tastes, you can always eliminate the super tweeters from the BK-16 kit which drops the price to about \$350 for a pair. Considering that the full-range driver goes out to 17kHz, this may be a viable option.

However, with the super tweeters unplugged, I did notice some loss of top-end sparkle and a slight reduction in soundstage width and depth.

Madisound also offers the SEAS Loki kit (\$450 per pair with cabinets) based on a 7" coaxial driver with the tweeter mounted at the base of the woofer cone. The cabinets come assembled and finished on all sides with a nice real wood veneer. Though not as open sounding as the BK-16 folded horn, the Loki speakers were very enjoyable with a somewhat more forward sound. They are also easier to build.

A walk back to the Selah Audio room revealed that they also offer a stand-mounted speaker based on the same SEAS coaxial driver as Madisound's Loki in a seemingly identical cabinet for \$495 a pair fully-assembled. How-

ever, Selah's version has an entirely different crossover design. Luck (or karma) would have it that both Madisound and Selah were using the Altitude 3500 tube amp so that a more accurate comparison could be made. I preferred Selah's version which seemed to locate the soundstage behind the plane of the speakers and extend it deeper and wider, though this could have been the result of room differences. Perhaps a head-to-head shootout between these two speakers can be arranged (nudge-nudge, wink-wink).



One last item worth mentioning in the Madisound room was what looked like a powered subwoofer sitting on a table. In actuality, it was a prototype table-top stereo consisting of a Kiega 2.1 channel amp mounted on top, a 7" down-firing subwoofer underneath and a pair of small SEAS coaxial drivers for the left and right channels on the front.

Total parts cost should be around \$500 including the cabinet. Though channel separation was limited, the sound was quite good for an all-in-one system you can use with an MP3 player.

### Retailer Roundup

Numerous local and regional retailers were displaying a wide range of speakers and components. Audio Two (Windsor, Ontario) surprised many listeners with the sound, size and price of the Role Sampan FTL speakers (\$995). They are incredibly small (8"x4"x9.5") and lightweight (less than 5lbs.) considering the full-range sound they are able produce from a single 3.5" driver in a folded transmission line. Electronics were a Croft battery-powered preamp and amplifier and Connoisseur CD player.

Arthur's Audio (Orchard Lake, MI) had Usher speakers in heavy rotation. Both the CP-6381 (\$3400) floorstanders and X-718 monitors (\$1300) look fantastic (on par with the Selah and Salk products) and were making incredible music with a huge sound-stage driven by VTL monoblocks and a Musical Fidelity digital front-end. They also had the Final 400i PL electrostatics (\$2999), but the Ushers drew most of the attention as it

was hard to ignore the sound and value they offered. Another stand out room among the retailers was David Michael Audio (Royal Oak, MI) where the Harbeth 7ES-3 loudspeakers (\$2995) were attracting large crowds with their rich, musical sound. Amplification came from a Belles 350A power amp (\$3995) and 28A preamp (\$4500) with a Rega CD player performing digital duties.

Venus HiFi (Lansing, MI) had the Cain & Cain W3 (Walla Walla Wall-of-Sound) on display in their room with Melody tube equipment.

Though you could hear some of that single-driver "magic" in the mids and upper frequencies, these side vented horns were just too much for the tiny room and the bass seemed heavy and bloated. On the other hand, the Audio Dimensions (Royal Oak, MI) room sounded a bit thin on the first day with the Magnepan 3.6 speakers, Audio Research electronics and VPI Scoutmaster turntable. Planars can be notoriously difficult to get setup just right, and after some positioning adjustments for day two, the bass filled in nicely and you'd swear Johnny Cash was standing right in the room. The Magnepan/Audio Research combination never ceases to amaze



me when I have the opportunity to hear these icons of the audio industry together.

There were also a couple of stores present that primarily focus on used and reconditioned high-end audio equipment (in addition to AudioClassics.com in the McIntosh room). NOS Valves (Burton, MI) had a pair of speakers based on the Klipsch LaScalla with a Music Hall MMF-7 turntable and Juicy Blueberry preamp. In addition to providing equipment restoration

services, NOS Valves is also offering their own line of tube amps under the label VRD. Black Swamp Audio (Waterville, OH) also had a pair of horns built on what appeared to be pro-sound JBL speakers. Though they sell a lot of used equipment, they were using their lines of new equipment including a gorgeous Acoustic Solid turntable, Atoll preamp and DeHavilland Amps. I don't generally care for the sound of horns, but it was a lot of fun to hear what can be accomplished when coupled with a good analog front end and quality tube amps.

Then there were the retailer rooms at the more exotic and pricier end of the scale. High Water Audio (New York, NY) had Thöress FR-20 speakers from Germany featuring a full-range driver plus a ceiling-aimed compression driver that adds ambience and extends the top end, but without sounding harsh since it fires straight up. I'd never heard guitarist Steve Tibbetts before, but his music filled the room nicely when played on a TW-Acoustic turntable with a Dynavector tonearm, Tron electronics and a Silvertone amp. Superior Sight and Sound (West Bloomfield, MI) brought Balanced Audio Technology electronics along with Tetra loudspeakers. The unusual looking

506 speakers had people wondering if these were triangular monitors perched atop oversized stands. But the base portion is part of the speaker, which, according to the Tetra representative, "are tuned like a musical instrument." He was also quick to drop the names of the numerous musicians that use these speakers (though I'm not sure I'd trust Keith Richards' hearing at this point in his life).

### Door Prizes For Everyone!

Though this may be one of the smaller audio events, it is certainly a lot of fun. The fact that there were more door prizes than attendees by the end of day two certainly made it even more enjoyable. Judging by the goodwill and karma created at this year's AK Fest, I would guess that next year's is sure to be bigger and better.

More photos can be seen at:

<http://www.audiokarma.org/gallery/showgallery.php?cat=3028>

