

Passing Notes 5

IN WHICH JULIAN MUSGRAVE GETS AN EARFUL FROM STEVE, WIRES UP A MOGGY, AND PUSHES THE BOUNDARIES



Steve's Stonking Stunts - 2

What do we say to full range drive units from the likes of Lowther, Fostex and Audio Nirvana? Well, many of us, most of the time, say “buzz off”, with the emphasis on the “buzz” and I can understand that. I understand it right up to the moment when I’m sitting in front of the blighters and they are telling me stuff, musical stuff, that I hear from no other type of speaker - and that includes some of the most technically advanced and expensive speakers on the planet. Yes, for better or worse, full range drivers are in a class of their own.

Which brings me on to Steve Andrews’ latest project, using drivers sourced from www.commonsenseaudio.com. The Super 10 Ferrites use a 10in paper-cone for the LF and midrange with a central whizzer for the HF and a copper phase plug. I have no idea what a phase plug does.

Does a phase need plugging? People who try to blindside me with technobabble are barking up the wrong lamp post (IMHO). I’m vaguely interested in technicalities, but only as long as the words have no more than two syllables. Any more than that and I start to whimper pathetically. I’m happy to leave being clever to equipment designers. Do audiophiles need technobabble? After all, if it sounds manky, all the phase plugs, global blowback and switching power muppets in the world are a waste of space; if it sounds good then I don’t give a fig how it got there.

The quoted frequency response of the Super 10 Ferrite is 34Hz – 20kHz, so it’s a classic full range drive unit. Steve has mounted these in an open-backed plywood baffle supported at the side and angled up towards the listener, and is one of many designs on the blissfully muddled and OTT www.commonsenseaudio.com website.

Driven by a fleawatt valve amp these super-budget (about £400 including wood) speakers communicate so intensely that you can understand why people get hooked on them. It’s like having your head inside the piano or your ear an inch from the business end of Satchmo’s trumpet. Every time I hear full-range drivers I’m fascinated by them right up to the moment when I get a migraine and have

to leave the room before my head explodes. (It’s the same with horns!)

One day I will find a niche for this take on music in my own audio ecosystem, but at the moment I can’t quite think where that would be. Evidently Steve thinks the same. They, like the drain-pipe-mounted jobbies I wrote about previously, are not keepers. Bye....

Saturday is Set-Up Day

After a week positively brimming with meaningful, high octane activities like LP-buying expeditions, coffee shop sorties with the grandchildren, and afternoon naps, it is a pleasing prospect to clear a few hours on a Saturday dedicated to the artisanal pleasures of fitting, fettling and faffing over the various audio systems strewn about the house.

These activities are usually treated with lofty disdain by Elisabeth, except that she’d particularly asked me to move the utility room system (Rig 4) into the TV lounge (home of Rig 3), so that her CD player and TV fed the integrated amp and her colour-coordinated B&W speakers. Yes, I hear your sharp intake of breath, and you are right; this is a task fraught with challenge. Only a seasoned audiophile could do this.

It started well. I mostly remembered to unplug stuff before walking off, and personal injuries sustained during the carrying/tripping/dropping phase were largely inconsequential. So there we were. All the kit laid out neatly on the TV lounge floor, with the various wall-wart power supplies plugged in, their cables lying on the floor in neat rows; de-knotted and straight as a Roman road. Then the cat stalked in and sat down on the TV power supply output plug. It’s surprising what a trifling twelve volts up its jacksie does to a cat.

I could see immediately that coaxing him down from the ceiling was going to be a challenge. This called for a ladder. Once up the ladder, Plan A was the gentle ‘Kitty, kitty, kitty’, disengage paw, one-by-one method. But as you turn to the next paw they re-engage the one you’ve just crowbarred from the plasterwork. Most discouraging. Plan B was that I heaved at the hissing fur-ball bodily but he just clung on tighter, snarled at me and then used his teeth. Blood everywhere. A spot of first aid needed before getting the welding gauntlets from the shed and having another go at Plan B.

I mounted the ladder, gripped the cat by the midriff and shook hard. This is when the ladder collapsed from under me. Did you know that a suitably anchored cat can support the entire bodyweight of a dangling audiophile? No, me neither. So there I was hanging from a cat who

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was also hanging from the ceiling when Elisabeth, alarmed by all the caterwauling and snarling, came in. At which point the ceiling gave way: cat, self, assorted plasterwork and light fittings were distributed liberally over the floor, carpet, furniture, curtains, house plants, and Madame.

To say that she took a dim view is an understatement. She was upset about the mess, but even more upset about the cat, reckoning that its legs had stretched by three inches and it was my fault. Nonsense, of course; cats simply shouldn't sit on live cables then elevate to the ceiling in a huff. Anyway, a bit of leg stretching is positively Darwinian; helping it to see over walls while creeping up on mice and stuff like that. I suggested she put the wretched thing into the feline equivalent of Crufts, which didn't exactly go down well either.

Once Elisabeth had taken over cat-calming duties, however, peace was restored and I was able to announce 'job done' after a mere seven hours (on the audio front). (Apparently, clearing up the debris is still going on, but now banned from the TV lounge, I wouldn't know about that.) That said, it's deeply satisfying that we audiophiles can make such a positive contribution to the wider community. Plasterers, electricians, carpet fitters, feline evolution and so on are all enriched by our activities. Just make sure we don't grab a cat, however, as they do make an awful mess.

Music Room

Our music room was created by a rather nifty loft conversion that made a roughly 7x7m room that, after much experimentation, has evolved into a calm and relaxing space both for listening and playing music. Frequency sweeps show an end-to-end primary mode at 27Hz, but sloping side walls eliminate any significant second mode or the floor-to-ceiling mode. Apart from taking out first reflections with absorbers I have so far done nothing more. Acoustically speaking, small rooms have big problems, while big rooms have small problems, so little more needs to be done. At some stage I will try to take out the main room mode which will allow me to dial the subwoofer a few dB, but that can wait.

The Rt60 time, however, is a different story. The carpeted room began with an Rt60 of about 0.3s; though clean, it sounded a bit dead. Removing the carpet and installing a boarded floor lifted that to 0.45s, which is much better for listening, if a bit lively for live rehearsals.

Expansion

But change is in the air. More space is required to house an exponential LP collection growth. An



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Autumn building project will push a wall about 4m out over the back of the house, allowing a tripling of LP storage space (filled in about two years at the current rate of expansion). It will also create a new office space, and that will need its own audio rig. Will this be ultra-chic, streaming via PC, Dragonfly and active speakers? Will this be cobbled together from existing spare kit in storage? Or maybe a valve amp and single driver speakers, as above?

My current favourite, however, is none of these. I rather fancy one of those classic 1970s Japanese receivers: something from Marantz, Yamaha, Luxman or similar. They have lights, meters, tone controls and knobs of various sizes. Row upon glorious row of them which means that at one o'clock in the morning you can be listening to FM radio while masterfully throwing switches, watching dials and twiddling knobs, pretending you are docking Dan Dare's space ship in the Mekon's orbiting research facility. A Real Receiver from the Golden Age. An age when being more complicated was so obviously better and when massive brushed aluminium leviathans roamed the world of hi-fi, stamping on squeaky little Quads before they could scurry off and hide. An age which came with bragging rights that put you up there with owning an Aston Martin.