

JACK ENGLISH ON UNDER-\$5000 LOUDSPEAKERS

Fabio... Ice-T... plastic surgeons... investment bankers... maybe even a few lawyers working the O.J. case. After all, we were in Los Angeles, and the crowds in the rooms with the monster speakers were *huge*. But maybe, just maybe, some of those jeans-and-T-shirt-clad folks were only wannabe lottery winners or wishful long-lost heirs and heiresses. Maybe some people, once the voyeurism and dreaming faded away, indeed had some interest in less expensive speakers.

That would be great, because wonderfully musical sounds were coming from both the **Signet/McCormack** and **System Audio/Densen/Nordost** rooms, where the featured speakers cost less than \$400!¹ Signet's new just-under-1-cubic-foot SL256 (\$360) features a 3/4" dome tweeter and 6 1/2" polypropylene-cone woofer, 88dB sensitivity, a nominal 6 ohm load, and a stated frequency response of 47Hz–20kHz. Powered by a McCormack Micro system with Signet cabling throughout, the sound was much larger than seemed possible from such a modestly sized and priced setup. It was surprisingly extended in the lows and sufficiently musical to satisfy almost any audiophile.

Not to be outdone, newcomer **System Audio**, from Denmark, was getting equally incredible sound from their diminutive model 905s (\$399) powered by **Densen** electronics and connected via **Nordost** Flatline cables. The 905 combines a 19mm "texdome" tweeter with a 5" coated woofer to give a sensitivity of 89dB, a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, and a specified frequency response of 60Hz–22kHz. The im-

mediacy and rhythmic drive in this room was so arresting on the wonderful European rock and blues we were listening to that I had a very hard time not playing the air guitar. The Signet SL256 and System Audio 905 ended in a dead heat in the contest for Biggest Bang for the Buck at the Show.

But low price alone wasn't the only good news. **PSB** announced a *decrease* in the already attractive prices of their very popular subwoofers. The Alpha Sonic, Subsonic II, and Subsonic III were reduced to \$249,² \$599, and \$799, respectively. **Alón** was equally pleased to report that they were now in full production of the \$995 Petite, which was a hit at the 1995 Winter CES. While this small minimonitor was proudly on display, it was the impressive-sounding Alón V Mk.II, which *maintains* its price at \$4995, that was reproducing the music. **Joseph Audio**'s RM7si minimonitor (\$1299) also sounded very impressive with or without the bevy of strategically placed M&Ms. The '77 combines a 1" silk-dome tweeter with a 6 1/2" glass-fiber woofer; its bass performance at the Show belied the specified 45Hz, –3dB point.

Companies best known for their minimonitors were making all sorts of news; two of them got my nod for Best New-Speaker Introductions at the Show. The first was **Totem**'s Model 2 (\$2995). Since Totem has yet to produce anything other than musically faithful speakers, I wasn't surprised to find the stand-mounted 2 sounding wonderful powered by **AudioPrism** electronics. The second was **Epos**'s floorstanding (yes, floor-standing) ES 25 (\$3495), driven by a modestly priced **Creek** setup. The

sound may well be ground-breaking for Epos, who, like Totem, have a superlative track record in providing wonderful performance relative to cost.

A growing number of audiophiles are captivated by the sound of low-powered, single-ended triode amplifiers, but it is hard to find loudspeakers to use with such amplifiers that have both a high sensitivity and a benign impedance load. At the heart of this burgeoning approach to high-end sound is the ever-gracious Dr. Bruce Edgar. Unlike most speaker designers, Edgar publishes complete plans for his speakers for DIY devotees. He sells plans, parts, complete kits, or fully assembled **Edgarhorns** for \$3500.

At the Show, the Edgarhorns were doing all the great things typical of horns—eg, effortless dynamics (no doubt due to the specified sensitivity of 103–105dB!) and revelatory detail presentation—while significantly minimizing many of the things, such as ragged frequency response and honky midrange colorations, that have prevented the popularity of horns. For the hobbyist, the marvelous Edgarhorn could offer multiple levels of involvement for years to come. Unfortunately, its 3dB-down point of 100Hz means you'd need to add a separate subwoofer for true full-range performance.

Bipolar designs, once considered radical, are now commonplace. Leading the way at the Show was **Paradigm**'s Eclipse/BP (\$1799). The speaker—which uses two each of Paradigm's 1" pure-aluminum dome tweeters and 8" polypropylene cone woofers in a heavily braced bass-reflex box—sounded noteworthy in its deep-bass extension and overall spaciousness.

Another now-accepted design

¹ All prices listed are retail prices per pair of loudspeakers; the price given for a subwoofer is for a single speaker.

² The three-piece PSB Alpha satellite/Alpha Sonic subwoofer system is now reduced in price to an amazingly low \$448.

I never get tired of hearing that disc. Darned if it didn't sound just slightly smoother up top the second time 'round. No need to unpeel it, I'll wear it home. I bought a pack for each of me and whistled on my way.

Let's hear some Real World high-end in the **Rotel** room. Michael Bartlett was only too happy to indulge me by playing Dave Alvin. Another nice-for-the-price setup, and their

squatty little RMB100 monoblock cube amps (with balanced inputs!) are as intriguing as they are cute. In keeping with the theme of something going wrong for just about every exhibitor at The Show, he'd lost all of his racks and furniture. What to do? Why, he went to **Ikea**, of course. Not bad-looking stuff, either. How many people ask you for literature about your audio racks? "Funny you should mention it..." Ha!