

# bit Play HD

Hi-Definition music for your car!

I have seen plenty of attempts by manufacturers to stimulate a product revolution to match what happened when CD became available in-car. DCC, Mini Disc, even DAB Radio have all tried and failed, as they are all media that favour quantity rather than quality. CD was the last one to promote a significant uplift in sonic quality alongside ease of use from what had gone before. DAB radio will make it eventually, but it is a revolution that has so far been 20 years in the making. iPods, iPhones and MP3 players also delivered boasts of enormous storage capacity but seriously compromised sound quality in order to achieve it, although lossless Apple files are pretty good these days.

This is why bit Play HD from Audison is being heralded (by me) as a major technological breakthrough. It delivers the convenience of browsing your music library via your Android or Apple mobile device whilst allowing you to store oodles of tracks on a flash memory or HDD/SSD all via one music server capable of handling all popular audio formats including 24-bit, 96kHz FLAC files. These can be delivered with superb alacrity to any amplifier with a digital link facility, but does it deliver an ear-boggling uplift in dynamic range and separation as yet unprecedented?

Bit Play HD is the latest in a line of products which bring state-of-the-art digital audio electronics to any music-loving car-owner devoted to enjoying high quality music on the move. Developed by Elettromedia in Italy, this would not have been possible without the dedication of a group of very clever and committed people sharing a common vision.

Digital audio reproduction is not new in the car but many products that work in the digital domain require signals to be converted from analogue to digital and then back to analogue from digital before being passed on to the next device. The conversion process can introduce losses and so Audison began to champion the ability to bypass these many conversions in order to maintain signal purity and therefore end up with a result that was as close to the original as possible. Once they had developed a product that allowed a digital signal to be carried from a CD player to a processor and on to an amplifier in

the digital domain, the weak link became the CD or other 16-bit or lower, source files. How great would it be if even this shortcoming were to be overcome? Well, that was the objective for the development team at Elettromedia.

FLAC is a widely available algorithm for reducing the size of HD music files. It is specifically designed to reduce files sizes by 50% to allow greater capacity on the storage medium and then expand them again without any loss of data at all. This

means that all the data processed on the way in, is available again on the way out (a bit like sweetcorn? Yuk! – Ed.). FLAC is already considered “industry standard” for handling HD music so it was adopted as the weapon of choice for bit Play HD. As other non-HD formats are extensively stored on portable devices, provision was also made to allow reproduction of these. Even if such files are not HD, they still benefit from the loss-free signal path offered by pure digital transfer from source to amplifiers. Similarly, many music lovers have various devices on which they store their music files and so three USB ports are included, one of which is taken up by a Wi-Fi dongle for communicating with phones and tablets leaving two free for HDD or USB memory devices. A handy USB extension cable is included which allows an installer to add a direct USB connection from your dashboard to the device. A product at

this level of sophistication needs to provide solutions for all needs and so an HDMI port is included allowing the device to stream all of the popular video formats in HD to stand alone screens and those built into head units.

It made perfect sense to use existing mobile devices for controlling the bit Play HD and so extensive work was put into to developing apps that offer ease of use and good visibility on smart phone and tablet displays. The user interface is intuitive and necessarily simple.

The all-encompassing design philosophy continues with the inclusion of analogue audio outputs for those who do not currently have the option of a digital input on their amplifiers. This means that the device can be purchased and enjoyed with future upgrades in mind. Similarly, bit Play HD software can be updated via a USB port ensuring that early adopters can enjoy the benefits of all future software developments and improvements.

All of these functions, features and facilities are packaged in an oblong box measuring just 249 X 98 x 41mm which is about three fag packets in old money, making the product easy for the experienced installer to hide away.

In readiness of the arrival of HD in the car, I began to research HD audio files at home. I was desperate to quantify the differences I knew were there by trying to find a way to AB test 24-bit,

96kHz files against 16-bit disc-based versions. This was in retrospect a bit silly, as tracks are often mastered for the specific medium they are targeted for and therefore, the CD version was always going to be different in some respects to the HD versions. Furthermore, with a new medium comes a new appetite to revisit, re-master, tweak, fiddle, and maybe even remix older material.

It was actually a good friend and resident spelling and grammar policeman of this publication, Mike Stewart, who suggested that a better way to evaluate any difference was to listen to whole tracks as some of the differences are quite subtle and analysis paralysis is a real danger while AB testing – Sage words as always from a very experienced listener! As with many other HD adopters, I visited HDtracks.co.uk and purchased some material, most of which I know very well. This I played through a very basic system. I cannot tell you that HD music made me jump out of my skin at least, not initially. It took time and counter-intuitively perhaps, a lack of concentration before I experienced my “eureka” moment!

I auditioned the product in a Porsche that regular readers will recognise. It is installed with a bit 10D, Audison Voce 5.1K amplifier and a pair of Voce AV K6, two-way components run actively and a Hertz Energy ES200 8-inch subwoofer. I know this set up well, as I have demonstrated it at many shows over the years. I felt a little nervous as I selected my first track, as I was a little worried that my in-car experience would be less dramatic than on my modest home system, which had taken some time to dawn on me. I selected a James Taylor track, “Steamroller” from Sweet Baby

James and was completely overwhelmed. Far from being subtle, the effect of the extra bits was extremely obvious. To begin with, I could hear that poor James was clearly suffering from a cold when he recorded the naked opening vocal. I could also hear a very slight fret buzz on just one guitar note such was the separation of sounds. The track builds from the end of verse two and there is a brass section playing over the whole band from this point. The placement was so accurate that I could close my eyes and see where each player was playing. There was no suggestion of their almost bawdy ensemble swamping any of the other instruments and in fact I could even tell that the producer had decided not to use a pop shield on the microphone or, they hadn't been invented yet, as I could clearly hear the microphone clipping on the “puh” sound (plosive) on the word “Napalm” in verse three. Another of many notable elements was the sustain of the reverb on vocals especially. I could hear the reverb decay to nothing despite the fact that many much louder instruments were still playing. At this point I allowed myself a huge grin of satisfaction and delight that the reality was living up to the dream!

My time in the car was limited and I started to panic and listen to short segments of other tracks. This is not the best idea. Although I could hear stunning detail, it was all too much to take in, so finally, I listened to “Moby Dick” by Led Zeppelin. I was struck by how pristine the individual instruments sounded and astounded by the space each one inhabited yet the sum of the parts hung together perfectly. When the drum solo came along, I could fully appreciate the physical presence of what must have been an enormous kit with an enormous drummer sat behind it. I am not generally a lover of drum solos but this is one I would happily listen to, in high definition, until my ears stopped working altogether!

I am not sure who deserves congratulating most for this experience. I guess the biggest praise has to go to Audison and Elettromedia for making HD Music a reality in the car. □

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