

# SSSSOUNDS SPECIAL

Snake Davis demands  
the very best sounds  
for his Audi





Saxophone impresario, Snake Davis, is internationally renowned. He took time out between a recording session in Buckingham and an extensive tour of Japan to speak with us about his car audio system. Not only is he extremely pleased with his system but he must also be the world's nicest guy!

Snake Davis has made a huge imprint on UK pop music. He has toured with the biggest names and recorded a huge catalogue of top hits since the 80's and continues to be one of the music industry's hardest working session musicians. It is with slight irony that I suggest you may have heard his playing on hits such as "A Million Love Songs" by Take That or the many M People hits he recorded whilst a member of the band or tracks by Lisa Stansfield, Ray Charles, Tom Jones, Paul McCartney, James Brown, The Pet Shop Boys – the list goes on and on! But as a true-to-his-own-heart musician, as well as hundreds of collaborative projects he has always found time for his own music. His latest, named "Classic Sax Solos" is an encyclopaedic collection of the best-known and loved saxophone solos of all time. These were not necessarily played by him on the original recordings but a quick listen will convince you that they easily could have been.

So it was with a huge deal of excitement that "snapper de jour" Laurence and I travelled to Echo Studios in Buckingham where Snake was laying down tracks on an album project; "The Man Who Told The Word" by AJ Rococo (aka Angus James Robertson). One thing that never fails to amaze me is that the music business, often cited as a rotten industry full of money-grabbing charlatans, is actually full of really nice people who are always polite and enthusiastic. I have met many people in the industry and only had a small handful of bad experiences and hey, we can't all be perfect can we Van?

We were greeted by the affable Snake and introduced to Jamie Masters, the studio owner/engineer/producer. We were very nervous about making a nuisance of ourselves and getting in the way of a paid-for session despite being told not to worry. We busied ourselves with Snake's car initially.

Snake had previously told me that he drives a lot. He is almost perpetually on tour or travelling to and from recording and teaching assignments and when he was

considering a system upgrade for his house, he decided that the car would be a better place to listen as he currently spends little time at home. Snake is no stranger to upgraded car audio as he had previously upgraded at a car dealership but lived to regret it – never do this folks! He almost did the same again with this car, an Audi A6, as he was offered a fancy-pants upgrade with a famous brand name associated with it. Fortunately, this time, he was able to listen to what he would get for his £3000+ and decided it wasn't all that special after all.

He instead took to Google and found the FOUR MASTERS site and subsequently Source Sounds who are one of the best installers in the UK. The people at Source it is fair to say, really know their onions and are great at matching customer's musical tastes to hardware and installation techniques to achieve complete customer satisfaction. Having spent some time perusing the digital collection Snake had in his car, I would say they needed all of that skill to come up with a system that would play such wide-ranging material. Fortunately, they had a potential customer who also knows an onion from a shallot when it comes to sound and having spoken at length to both parties, I can more than imagine how smooth this made the design and quote process compared to dealing with "money no object" less musically attuned customers.

So, what did Source come up with? It is quite handy that the Audi features mounting locations for three-way component speakers. The woofers and mid-range speakers are in the doors – unfortunately, the mid-range speakers fire directly into the door handle that they are mounted directly behind! Whatever the reason for this piece of design genius, Source decided to go with these positions. Thanks to the vast improvements made by Hertz, the speaker manufacturer of choice for this project, it is creating less of a problem than even three years ago when installers were left having to fabricate new A-pillar trim to accommodate mids that could actually be heard! The tweeters are mounted behind the dashboard and face directly upwards on to the front screen. Once again, this idiotic choice of mounting positions is compensated by great tweeter design and a very clever piece of engineering that has allowed Source to put some tilt on the tweeters so that they project sound toward the interior of the vehicle. Even a few degrees can make the world of difference here and it is this kind of invisible attention to detail that makes this car sound so much better than many I have listened to!

With only a passing acquaintance with car audio brands, Snake was happy to allow Source to make the major decisions within a set budget however, every suggestion they made was closely scrutinised. Paul Ellis at Source Sounds suggests that it probably took as long as a month of background communication before the final design was nailed down. One area that might have been put under the microscope was the eventual decision to use Class D amplification. I am happy to report that this is a class of amplifier that Hertz have very much got completely sorted.

The final equipment list includes 3-way Mille Legend speakers running actively from two Hertz HDP 4 amplifiers. A Hertz Bass Baby runs from two bridged channels of one HDP 4 providing sub bass. The Bass Baby is a loaded reflex ported subwoofer enclosure with a Hertz Energy ES 200.5, 8" subwoofer inside. One of the first things

I check on a car to get my ears in is sub bass articulation. This is the ability of a subwoofer and amplifier to provide musically distinct low notes without disturbing peaks and troughs or in some cases an unholy mush that refuses to be deconstructed by even the keenest ears (18-year-olds typically like this effect – I don't I'm

Hertz Mille ML 1650.3 woofer and ML 700.3 mid-range fit behind standard grilles without too much of a fight





afraid). In this case, I used an old favourite of mine, “The Wheel” by SOHN. The three recurring low notes running through this strangely wonderful song reveal much about the equipment and its settings – This test was passed with flying colours. Musical sub bass – Hallelujah!

Musicians understand the importance of middle frequencies and their role in rendering this incredibly busy area of the audio spectrum in a way that makes all of the sounds within it recognisable. All too often in factory systems, this area is completely closed in and it is hard to tell the difference between a guitar, a blown instrument and a keyboard as they all fight for space in a flat and lifeless reimagining of what the artist intended! Again, in the context of getting my ears in, I threw Led Zeppelin’s “Heart Breaker” at it. This remastered version is quite tricky, as it requires great mid-range reproduction to establish a proper balance between guitar and snare drum in particular. Not in this car. Everything was exactly where it should be including the amp buzz during the tacet (silent) part of the guitar solo.

I had determined to use Snake’s own top five to audition the system and his own incredible attention to detail in all things (I suspect) meant he turned up with five tracks he wanted me to hear. These were on various CDs and also an SD card plugged directly into the standard head unit.

### “For Once in My Life” – Stevie Wonder

Recorded in 1967/8, stereo was still a novel new toy. As such, the positioning of the instruments in this Tamla classic is particularly noteworthy. It begins with up to three guitar tracks all panned hard left with understated drum kit hard right. In this car, these were all playing almost entirely outside of the vehicle as the aforementioned angling of the tweeters did its stuff to great effect. Soon the drum kit is joined by piano and bass guitar with brass rising from the left while strings float somewhat nebulously around the mid-point accompanied by some handy piccolo which adds height to the image – I was tempted to look up! The vocal, and later harmonica, are placed slightly left of centre. The track is light and breezy and everything can be picked out easily. I particularly like the “hoity” backing vocals around 1:15 over on the left-hand side – lots going on over that side of the car but balanced nicely by the addition of tambourine on the right and increasingly busy drum kit and piano, both of which seem to be wrestling to keep up with the unexpectedly deep, busy, bass line. Harmonica solo kicks in at about 1:30 and is positioned exactly where the vocal was, which makes perfect sense as both come from the same artist! The track comes to a fairly abrupt and heavy fade so, I put it on again, twice more.

### “Shenandoah” – Van Morrison and the Chieftains

This rendition of a traditional 19th century American folk song is tricky to unpick. Van and the boys have thrown everything at it from bass trombone at the beginning to lavish strings and chorus and I am sure I could hear a very sparingly used harp too. The beginning features forceful bass from the trombone and electric bass guitar but these blend and combine beautifully with the gentle acoustic guitar and strings before the vocal entry. Van’s voice is heart-melting (unless he is swearing at you!) and takes ever so slightly left of centre stage while the previously busy accompaniment is pared down to piano, guitar and strings and yes, definitely a harp! At around 56 seconds the Chieftain’s influence comes through with the appearance of pipes, fiddle and whistle playing an end of line phrase in unison. The second verse is layered with a rich vocal chorus and the textures continue to build and wrap you in a fur coat of sound. Despite the complexity,



bit One processor slots neatly underneath criss-cross Hertz 4 amplifiers

the staging in the car and the panoramic width allow each element to be placed and the image remains stable despite the various comings and goings of the thousands of musicians employed.

### “St. Louis Blues” – Herbie Hancock

When I was young, I often went to sleep listening to my dad playing the piano downstairs and this song was one he returned to many times. He would definitely have approved of this version! In Snake’s car the opening slap bass, drums and piano entry immediately takes you off somewhere else. These are joined by harmonica, Hammond organ and vocal and all elements take their own funky highway to the song’s conclusion. The drums at the beginning are unusual in that there seems to be two snare drum tracks. One uses brushes while the other uses sticks – it may be that this was somehow managed live, I don’t know, but the effect was initially perplexing then most enjoyable. At around 2:09 the track breaks down before reinforcing its funky bass roots and introducing more harmonica and scat vocals that sound for all the world like they were undertaken by Stevie Wonder! The Hammond player gets even more animated for the second half of the piece but the piano is always going to win the battle and the resulting counter point would, I am certain, make me want to press slightly harder on the accelerator pedal. This track is a terrific listen in this car and demonstrates the precision of the amplifiers in the all-important middle-reaches along with the accuracy of the Mille speakers.

### “Red Rain” – Peter Gabriel

From his most famous album So, Stewart Copeland of The Police plays a hi-hat intro joining regular go-to drummer Gerry Marotta. The tinkling piano with heavy reverb serves as a warning to those who know the track, and the bass and keyboard stabs make even more obvious the mayhem which is about to be unleashed. At 27 seconds explosive thunderous bass joins the tinkling Red Rain and the track proper has begun. The drama of these opening few bars is such that I went back to the beginning turned it up to 11 and listened again. I was a little worried at first that I had overcooked it and would experience distortion. But despite the sound hitting me like a 40-foot North Atlantic wave on a beautiful sunny day, there was none and every instrument was articulated perfectly despite the high level. I did however back the volume control off to a more

### Snake Davis' TOP FIVE DRIVING SOUNDS

#### For Once in My Life

Stevie Wonder

#### Shenandoah

Van Morrison and The Chieftains

#### St. Louis Blues

Herbie Hancock

#### Red Rain

Peter Gabriel

#### Agolo

Angélique Kidjo





Hertz Bass Baby subwoofer looks lost in space while swamping the car with lustrous bass

Hertz ML 280.3 tweeters angled toward drivers position unlike standard tweets

reasonable listening level, as there is absolutely no need to be listening loud in this car. Even at very low volume levels, the finest detail can be heard. I love Peter Gabriel, and I love this track and urge you all to get a system upgrade in your cars and enjoy it to full effect. The wind down at the end of the track exposes the full emotion of Gabriel's vocal and helps to return adrenaline levels and blood pressure to safe limits.

### **"Agolo" – Angélique Kidjo**

African, Grammy award winning Angélique Kidjo recorded this track at Prince's Paisley Park studio in Minneapolis. The track begins with an extremely low percussive beat that is accompanied by high-end tings and mid-range toms and bongos and other percussive accoutrements that come from all over the sound stage. You get the impression that there are a great number of musicians involved as it is clear they had to stand so far apart in the sound stage. At around 24 seconds a drum kit and bass guitar lay down a beat reminiscent of "I Love Your Smile" by Shanice. However, this track is more uplifting, filled as it is with manual rather than electronic percussion instruments and unison vocal before the verse proper begins at 45 seconds. Here the percussion is pared back somewhat and the prominent vocal is underpinned with keys and then swelling brass figures. Snake was responsible for co-creating and playing the brass

arrangement on this recording. Its understated presence is testament to the tightness of the whole brass section. Had I known, I would have listened more carefully. The truth is that the track has one hell of a lot going on in it. The lead vocal is very much front and centre and the instrument placement remains stable and "directional" all the way through. The mid-range is crisp and precise and renders the funky guitar figure on the left really well but without overstatement. The snare drum is surrounded but not engulfed by heavy reverb that comes to the fore at around 2:17 when there is a break in proceedings while the percussive intro is reprised. This track demonstrates how brilliantly Source has managed to blend the Hertz Bass Baby with the Mille Legend woofers without any obvious level steps and certainly no hint of annoying overpowering resonances that less musical bass is prone to delivering. I really enjoyed this track and can imagine it being a family holiday favourite or something related to bright sunny days and relaxed happiness.

This is a fitting end to the piece as Snake also has the air of relaxed happiness. I have seen him at work and apart from being completely jealous I am in awe of his talent and enthusiasm for all kinds of music.

Huge thanks go to Snake and to Source for making this car sound so good and for allowing me to experience it first, err, ear as it were. □