

DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

and run around Soo

Setting out for audio perfection



James is clearly very proud of his vehicles and rightly so



Matt from Enigma turned up and ate all the biscuits!

“...the Defender is, even by James’ admission, basically a tractor”



- La Corrida**
Francis Cabrel
- Comes Love**
Stacey Kent
- Airs bohemiens**
Pablo de Sarasate (violin concerto, Played by Gil Shaham and the LSO)
- Andy**
Les Rita Mitsouko
- Whole Lotta Rosie**
AC/DC

James is a very lucky man! Living the bachelor dream while pursuing a musical passion which extends to a massive array of high-end speakers in his living room and of course, as referenced in the title, his workaday Land Rover Defender and FIAT PANDA.

James is a Setting-out Engineer – Anyone? You at the back? No? Well, he is the man who sets out the site of a new building armed with some sticks and a hammer (I think he uses some other tools too!). He is responsible for the exact positioning and layout of a new building.

FOUR MASTER, Enigma in Ashford, Kent, provided me with James’ contact details having told me about two vehicles that had received some major audio love! After a run down of the work they had carried out I was intrigued and determined to see these two chalk and cheese vehicles with my own eyes!

I finally met James in February 2016 in darkest Kent, a county I know nothing about at all. I discovered it is a long way from my home in Oxfordshire and that despite technology telling me it was just two and a half hours away, it took over four hours each way. The only other thing I know is that they used to grow a lot of hops there which is an ingredient I enjoy via the medium of beer – I was therefore, a little disappointed to find that the only beer in the hotel bar came from Cornwall!

Laurence (photographer du jour) and I pulled up at James’ at around 9:30 a.m. and I immediately spied a rather shabby Defender and an old blue Panda in his yard. I leapt out of my car to say hello, whilst trying not to let my disappointment show and quickly found out that these were not the vehicles we had come to see! Those vehicles were garaged behind some giant barn doors. After a brief introductory chat, Laurence marched off to look for suitable backdrops for the photography and I ploughed straight in with the direct and unnerving questions in true journalistic style. Actually, there was absolutely no need for that as James was clearly a really nice guy and we immediately seemed to get on.

James’ obsession for music came from his father who played loud rock music in the family home. This included The Rolling Stones, Lou Reed, Tina Turner but he also has fairly eclectic tastes which have been passed on and James admits to enjoying orchestral music amongst many other styles and genres as the mood takes him. Once the logistics had been sorted out, James wheeled out his magnificent Defender. This is heavily “improved” and James has carried out most of the styling modifications, apart from the retina-scorching LED lights, himself. I was excited to look inside, as the Defender is, even by James’ admission, basically a tractor. All the panels are single



skinned and so there is no place at all for speakers and amplifiers and subwoofers. James told me that all panels including the roof had been heavily treated, which not only set the stage for the audio system but also added much-needed thermal insulation. The vehicle is used mainly as his on-site office and a few “trick” modifications have been integrated to help with this. For instance, a fold-out desk is mounted on top of a centre console that doubles as a subwoofer enclosure with a clamp that holds his laptop. But I was looking for speakers and I soon found them – a three-way set of Hertz Mille series 2’s mounted in seemingly bizarre “this will never work” locations!

As there is literally nowhere to fit a three-way speaker system to a stock Defender, Andy from Enigma had to wield tools and MDF in order to create some. The woofers are mounted in under-seat locations on MDF rings and point toward the front of the vehicle. It was felt that this would work, as bass frequencies are less directional than mid and high frequencies. Meanwhile, the mid-range speakers accommodate the factory positions under the dashboard pointing at the occupant’s knees (why, oh why!). Fortunately, the tweeters sit nicely on the top of the dashboard ensuring some music actually arrives un-reflected, to the ears!

The centre console’s ported subwoofer enclosure

houses a Hertz High-Energy HX 250D. This is covered with durable carpet and looks pretty much like it is meant to be there.

An Audison Voce AV 51K five-channel amplifier powers the speakers and subwoofer. Mounted against the lined rear wall, this magnificent beast features class A, class AB and class D channels of amplification and in this instance are running in a “passive active” configuration. For those of you who do not know your way around these labels, the class of an amplifier relates to the specific configuration of the amplifying components within. They all do the same job but to different levels of fidelity and with differing efficiency levels (Worth spending 79p to download an article entitled “Class system” from Issue IV – www.drivingsounds.co.uk). The term “passive active” relates to the configuration of two pairs of channels and how they run three pairs of speakers. In this case, the tweeters and mid range speakers are run from the two Class A channels via high-quality passive crossovers while the woofers are driven by the AB channels. The hefty 1000 Watt D-class channel powers the subwoofer.

An Alpine double DIN INE-W987D unit provides the front-end of the system. Analogue line outputs carry signal directly to the amplifier and the EQ is kept as flat as possible. James is convinced this is the best thing to do. I am a little less certain as you cannot ignore the effect of the environment within the car and sometimes some remedial tweaking is required to overcome acoustical anomalies within the vehicle. The Alpine unit should provide everything to do a good job here, although an Audison bit product could bring even greater benefits.

During audition, I was encouraged to sit in the passenger seat. This is somewhat unusual for me and I initially found myself shifting about uneasily as I searched for a sweet spot. The system is however, set up for two seat listening and the image was rock solid wherever I put my head. Considering the crazy speaker positions, the soundstage was astonishingly accurate – testament to the performance of the Mille speakers and the setting up skills of installer Andy at Enigma. By this time, Matt, the proprietor of Enigma has joined us. He came along to fill in a few technical details about the install. He was very keen to point out the lengths Andy had gone to in order to accommodate the double DIN head unit. This required some switches to be moved out of the way and so a dash top switch panel was fabricated which looks very neat.

Matt recommended a track by Yello. This was a bit of a blast from the past for me as “The Race” is a track that was regularly heard pumping out of cars throughout

FEATURE CAR

and some brass stabs run into the introductory “lyric” and then a funky guitar riff kicks in at around 54 seconds. Some incongruous slide guitar turns up slightly later – the whole track is quite mad really but it offered promise of prominent mid-bass, which I really like.

Next up came a choice from James - “Vogue” from Madonna’s “Immaculate Collection”. High strings and a keyboard figure which I am certain is stolen from the Genesis track “Supper’s Ready” blend perfectly under a deep bass line and some finger clicks (or silicon equivalent). Drum entries can reveal a lot about a system. In many systems, once a track gets going, the sound and in particular the position of the instruments can shift. No such problems here as everything remains in its own luxurious space as Madge orders us all to “Strike a pose”. I hadn’t previously noticed that the word “Strike” is panned hard left but by the time we get to “pose” she is over on the right! The production by Shep Pettibone is strictly “disco” so not a lot of subtlety but a really good work out for this system. We listened to a lot of tracks and I concluded that the performance was much better on modern electronic music than it was on the more laid back rock tunes that I threw at it. This is clearly music James enjoys driving to and is where the system



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is an absolute winner. For my tastes, a few nudges of the subwoofer level control in the minus direction were required but as many will know, I drive without a subwoofer in my own car. This began as an experiment but is a strategy I have kept to. I can clearly understand those who get a kick from heavy bass particularly when driving a tractor at speed around country roads! ☐

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Detailed and very dynamic

So, on to “run around Soo”. Soo was the sensible character in the Sooty and Sweep show and was a Panda and so is James’ run around (humour abounds!) although, his is four-wheel drive and I suspect a real blast to drive in his rural surroundings. James was perfectly happy with the performance of the Mille’s in the Defender and decided to stick with the same for this new project. However, in the intervening months, Hertz had released the Mille Legends, a considerable upgrade to the series 2’s. James also has slight concerns regarding the performance of the 10” High Energy subwoofer in its compact albeit ported enclosure. He feels that despite providing tight and punchy bass, it lacks a bit of warmth and presence. I feel that perhaps more could be extracted from the sub with the addition of a bit of processing but that is a matter for the experts! Due to these concerns however, James plumped for a Morel subwoofer for the FIAT. I was interested to hear how it would blend in with the Mille Legends.

The three-way Mille Legends are mounted in the front door (ML1800) and a pair of brilliantly crafted fibreglass A-pillar builds

(ML 700 and Tweeters). As James wanted to increase the mid bass in this vehicle, he also had a pair of ML 1650’s fitted into the rear doors. A Hertz HDP 4 (mid-range, tweeters and rear woofers) and HDP 5 (front woofers and subwoofer) drive this impressive array of speakers. The amplifiers are mounted under the front passenger seat while the crossovers are situated under the drivers seat. The head unit is another Alpine INE-W987D. Getting this to fit the Panda was more of a challenge than with the Defender. A switch box had to be manufactured to move the switches away from the lower centre console area and a new surround had to be fabricated. This matches the A-pillar builds and the result looks decidedly factory – Andy has really excelled with the fabrication of this installation and everything is well thought through. The switch box on the top of the dash is given extra depth to make it look good, and it does!

I put on a favourite Gregory Porter track, “No Love Dying”. This played so well that I think even James was a little taken aback. He picked out the sax solo for particular mention. Sound stage was spot on and the

Morel subwoofer was invisible to my ears as it blended in perfectly with the low bass of the Mille’s. One slight negative for me was that the vocal sounded just a little honky and for me the 3” mid was a little too prominent. This is easily fixed however. Next up was Sohn’s “The Wheel”. This is a good track for checking bass articulation or the ability of the system to accurately separate very low notes. In this car it passed the test with flying colours.

We tried a number of other things and found that the mid-bass and bass were a little less violent than with the Defender. This is probably down to set up more than anything else and also it is quite possible that once driving, the Defender sounds quite different due to the sound of its enormous engine.

Everything we threw at this system sounded clear and detailed and very dynamic. All in all, this was a fantastic day out for me and I enjoyed spending time listening and generally celebrating the exceptional performance of both of these systems.

A huge thank you goes to Matt and James for their time and expertise.

