

BADGE-FREE BEEMER BELTS IT OUT

Man, machine and music in perfect harmony!



Criss Richards has a passion for IT that overpowers a passion for cars. When it comes to music though, he has found the perfect match.

Self-employed IT consultant Criss seems to have life pretty sussed. Following some time employed by the NHS he now provides IT consultancy on a freelance basis. Mid-thirties Criss has a partner and daughter and a BMW E90 335i M Sport and a passion for music that just won't go away.

Having previously owned and restored an Alfa 159 his next car was researched in fine detail before he purchased it. He even made a trip to see the guys at FOUR MASTER Car and Home Stereo to find out what could be done to make the notoriously vile sounding BMW deliver a much more musical experience. His visit was not without all precedent as Criss has used Car and Home before and knows them to be extremely competent and full to the brim with musical know-how. Once satisfied that his not yet acquired dream car could be made to suit his wishes, he set about finding and purchasing one that fitted his specific requirements.

Once he had laid his hands on his new dream machine, Criss set about the job of subtly modifying it to give a bespoke feel. This included de-badging the car in order to make it as low-key as possible. The biggest visible change is in the dashboard area although the casual observer would be excused for not spotting it as it is so well done. The heated-seat switches have been moved to a panel just forward of the ashtray. This in turn enabled Tim at Car and Home Stereo to move the heater controls down to facilitate the installation of a swanky Pioneer Avic-88DAB, double-DIN head unit. The navigation-equipped head unit boasts both Apple Car Play and Android Auto, the latter being Criss' main motivation for wanting it. I have noticed that IT people are either vehemently Apple or almost chauvinistically not! I have to admit that I am no technology genius and must leave that battle to those that are.

The head unit was employed in his Alfa 159 in which Criss streamed everything having dabbled with Tidal, Google Play and other streaming services. However, he tells me that since upgrading his new car he has moved to FLAC – a good move in my opinion. He even cited the fact that uploading his own music to Google Play introduced unacceptable levels of compression. This may sound a bit nerdy to some readers but when dealing with this level of audio upgrade, such fine points become extremely important.

Criss' musical interest began as a youngster and he fondly remembers his father's classic rock collection being played during long car journeys with artists such as T. Rex, and The Stranglers too. Although Criss played guitar from the age of seven and latterly played with mates (he was too coy to suggest they were a band) he does not consider himself a musician but more a music enthusiast. His enthusiasm has seen him migrate through different genres. In early teenage years he was a big fan of Grunge

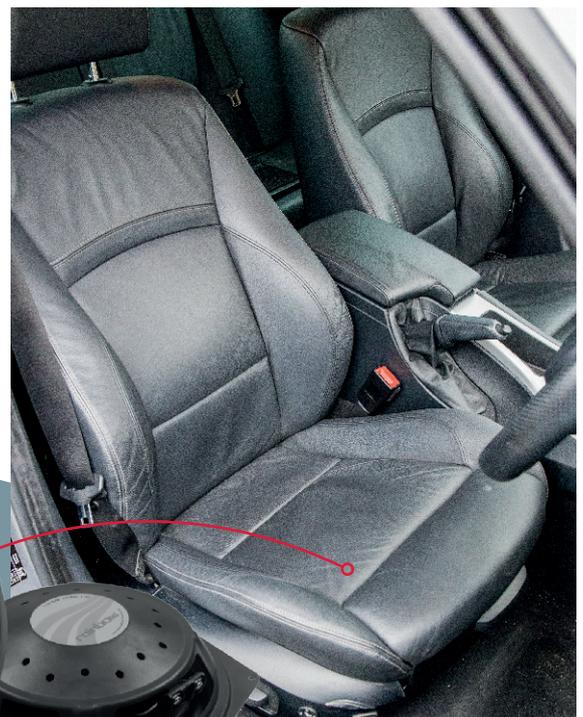
including Nirvana. An early interest in Radiohead led him toward more electronic genre including Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, Chemical Brothers, The Prodigy etc. During his university years in Manchester, he lived with a couple of DJ's and his tastes were very much influenced by his clubbing experiences, developing a taste for Hip-hop and more obscure Trip-Hop. He continued to tickle his itch for rock and is still a big fan of Queens of the Stone Age.

From when he first started sitting in cars as a grown up, Criss couldn't believe how poor they sounded and began researching just what might be possible. By the time he got his Alfa, he determined that he would not put up with below par sound and sought out Car and Home Stereo in Macclesfield who changed the mids and tweeters for him. At the same time he became interested in the idea of using his Android devices as a musical source and discovered that some head unit manufacturers were aiding this by adopting Android Auto.

When Criss finally took his new BMW to Car and Home, ace installer Tim had already made some equipment decisions. As always, although not a stickler for budget, Criss did not want the cost of his new system to become out of control. Tim designed a system around Rainbow and Audison equipment. He knew that the system would need to be "tweakable" due to the burgeoning genre interest Criss was still developing. He also knew that Criss would want to be able to remind himself of his halcyon clubbing days and therefore a modicum of bass was going to be necessary. Tim decided that the front-end speakers would come from the much-loved Rainbow Intelligence line. This meant that they would drop into the factory positions quite nicely although the internal wing mirror trim plate would need replacing to accommodate a tweeter – can you believe that a car of this prestige and value is shipped without separate tweeters unless new customers agree to an expensive upgrade? Appalling! Anyway, even having to purchase the tweeter housings offered a considerable cost saving over having them custom-made. Plenty of sound deadening material went into the vehicle in the form of Skinz Expert and some wave diffuser established a solid foundation. The woofers mount under the front seats, not ideal but, the Rainbows do a fabulous job even given this physical restriction.

"FINALLY, WE WENT MENTAL WITH THE PRODIGY"

Rainbow under seat woofers make the most of a less than perfect mounting location



At this level of installation, installers always prefer to run speakers actively, with separate amplifier channels driving individual speakers. This offers a huge amount of flexibility with set up and allows for time correction and filtering to be set to the specific environs of the car. Tim employed the highly versatile Audison Prima 8.9bit, 8-channel amplifier for this task. He runs the tweeters and mids from a dedicated channel each and then bridges the final two channels to run the under seat woofers which require a bit more oomph. The advantage of this amplifier over many other multi-channel amplifiers available is the built in bit processor. This is absolutely awesome and enables myriad tweaks and adjustments both in time and equalisation to be carried out. Criss was also extremely interested in this technology although he has been too frightened about undoing Tim's tweaks by playing with it himself. Shame there isn't a second setting he can play with himself as with his feel for technology, I am certain he would enjoy having a go – hmmm, I wonder if something could be done here, like some kind of remote selector to allow switching between two settings – any ideas Tim?

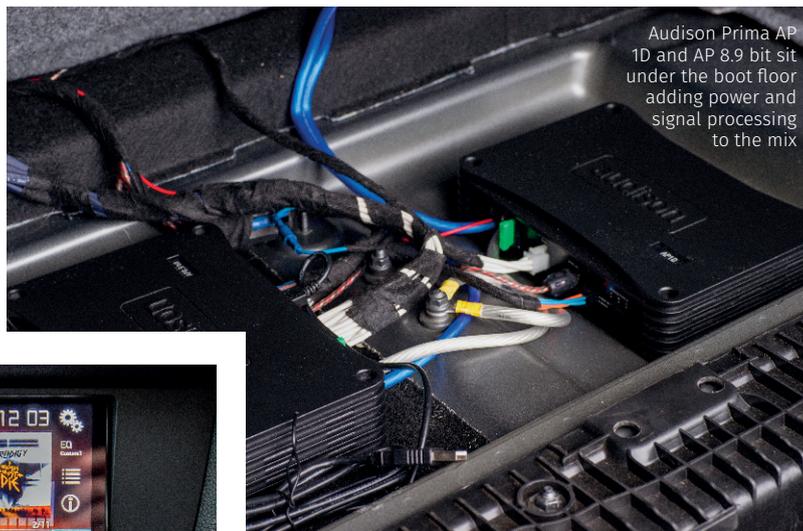


Criss' aforementioned bass requirement is satisfied by the addition of a separate monoblock amplifier, the Audison Prima AP 1D and an Audison Prima APBX 10DS subwoofer box. This houses a 10" subwoofer and the box is designed so that it can fire upwards or down toward the floor. In this particular case, it is sat on its edge so that the sound fills the luggage compartment. In this way, a little more shopping space is preserved. This box and subwoofer are designed with efficiency in mind. The AP 1D drives it magnificently well and provides plenty of low bass that blends perfectly with the front end.

On a technical note, Criss' Android device is quite power hungry and he and Tim came across some shortcomings in the original installation related to the USB ports. After some investigation it was Criss who discovered that the original wiring to these was not man enough and so this had to be upgraded in order to get his phone to work correctly.

Chris told me that since he had this system installed, he has begun revisiting long lost tunes from his past. This is a good thing to do when a significant upgrade in fidelity is achieved. We chose to use Criss' own track selection for the audition and started off with "Around the World" by Daft Punk. The boxed-in start exposes a lot of audio compression on the bass synth. This is quite common in pop recordings as it keeps timing and dynamics really tight. When the track opens up and the hand claps and rest of electronic percussion kick in, the bass continues to sit right at the bottom tonally without any interference from the kick drum which was a little shocking at first but showed that the system had great separation even if the track itself is quite sparse. Lots of sounds going off all over the sound stage but the handclaps panned hard left made it clear just how wide the soundstage is and just how well this car reproduces it.

Track two was "Breed" from the Nirvana album Nevermind. The drums are crisp and wide with the distorted bass guitar figure adding a truly hypnotic feel to the track. I can imagine much hair being swung about to this at live shows. Producer Butch Vig having a crazy time with the pan control accompanies the guitar solo. The guitar swings from left to right adding sonic interest to the track. The same can be said



Audison Prima AP 1D and AP 8.9 bit sit under the boot floor adding power and signal processing to the mix



Compact Audison Sub box takes up very little room but provides big-bass

Above, heated seat switches expertly moved to accommodate oversized head unit

CRISS RICHARDS'
TOP FIVE
DRIVING
SOUNDS

Around The World
Daft Punk

Breed
Nirvana

Organ Donor
DJ Shadow

First It Giveth
Queens of the Stone Age

Invaders Must Die
The Prodigy

for the question-answer vocal toward the end where the response comes alternately from the left and right hand side of the sound stage. This system brings the true spirit of rock and roll to life in this car.

Track three had a very familiar feel. This is because DJ Shadow made the track, "Organ Donor" almost exclusively out of samples from other tunes. The naked 60's sounding drum kit carries the track that has, for me, a rather annoying Hammond Organ theme running all the way through it. There is a very distorted Hammond too reminiscent of early ELP or even Deep Purple and maybe it was taken from one of theirs? The sounds are great though and again demonstrated great balance across the audio spectrum with the bass hanging together really well despite its distance from the front speakers. I can imagine this going down really well in a club. Criss by choice leaves the rear speakers on but at a low level to enhance the club feel and this certainly adds ambience to this track.

Track four is "First It Giveth" by Queens of the Stone Age. The track has a slightly closed-in feel. If it had been the first track I listened to in the car I might have felt something was wrong but once you get used to it, you can hear the merit in the production, particularly as it allows the chorus to add vital explosive dynamics. The bass at the start of the track reaches very low and the Prima subwoofer and box do their job brilliantly by delivering it articulately and never overloading the bass or low mid-bass that can happen when such ferocity is reproduced. The other very notable thing



Rainbow Intelligence Line mids and tweeters slot easily into factory positions

“INSTALLERS ALWAYS PREFER TO RUN SPEAKERS ACTIVELY”

is the mix between guitars and vocal. Once again these are separated beautifully allowing the listener to unpick the lyrics very easily. The panning hard left and hard right of the guitars leaves the centre of the soundstage for the vocal and that only enhances the instrument and vocal separation.

Finally, we went mental with The Prodigy and “Invaders Must Die”. Seven seconds of distorted bass guitar with surprisingly deep reverb serves as a short introduction to the mayhem about to be unleashed. Other sounds are introduced calmly although fairly quickly with the drum track especially “dry” and subdued. The band is formally introduced at 26 seconds (“We are The Prodigy”) after which a nuclear chain-reaction breaks out! In this car, you get the distinct feeling of being in a club with a really good sound system and actually feel like jumping around like a loon! The top line comes in around 46 seconds offering a promise of calm and stability that never comes. In fact the track breaks down at around 2 minutes then comes back with redoubled ferocity. The sub bass is far lower than I remembered and articulates really well. The APBX 10DS doing the most fantastic job at controlling the violence of the bass sounds and not allowing them to overwhelm the sounds around it. Meanwhile there is far more going on up top and in the middle reaches than I had previously been aware of – this car sounds awesome!

Well done Criss and Tim for your collaboration on this project. You are certainly doing the equipment justice despite the obstacles presented by the car. Huge thanks for allowing Laurence and I to get all over it for a few hours – most enjoyable! □

