

## LAST WORD

# OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Will portable gear ever be good enough to use in the home? Ken Kessler thinks it's now possible...



As evinced by recent issues of this magazine, portable audio's boom makes the original Sony Walkman's arrival seem inconsequential. Many components, such as Chord's Hugo, have true high-end authority. Such devices are so good that they are causing us to re-think just what is needed to have fine sounds in the home... and on the go.

While the 1980s were characterised by people listening on portables (even Cliff sang 'Wired For Sound'), the Walkman and its progeny inspired few listeners to abandon 'proper' hi-fi. Digital-based portables, though, are doing just that.

### ELEVATING SOUND

Most of us have no problem taking seriously the quality of the better portables, like those from Astell & Kern. Audioquest inspired an entire genre with portable USB DACs (not forgetting HRT's seminal role). Every serious headphone maker offers lightweight cans of audiophile quality.

Such convergence may be the high-end's salvation. Ever since the Walkman arrived, both high-end makers and pro-active audiophiles have attempted to elevate the sound quality of portables. Remember that Infinity once had a tape player called the Intimate. And who didn't try out Sennheiser HD414s with their portables?

Now there is a drive to make portable gear good enough to be used in the home as well as on the move. This is nothing new, and I recall tales of Japanese commuters schlepping the bulky combination of Sony Walkman Pro and Stax SRM-001 mini-electrostatic headphones on Bullet trains. With the elimination of physical software, size ceases to be an issue. With no motors to drive, battery life is of less concern.

Undeniably, the initial assault for burying separates forever was led by iPod docks with built-in speakers, but a schism immediately presented itself: could a dock be a standalone substitute for a full system or should a dock be speakerless, to feed a proper system? B&W's Zeppelin and Krell's KiD represent the two schools of thought.

There are others, but these spring to mind for representing, respectively, a genuinely

decent all-in-one standalone system with speakers, and a serious dock for feeding iPods into existing systems. The Zeppelin has little competition, because most standalones with speakers are poor,

and I know people who happily abandoned separates for Zeppelins, especially the neater, prettier '11. Oh, how B&O must despise B&W! As for the KiD, the Krell name alone imparts gravitas.

Our 'Budget Esoterica' series has uncovered what we might call 'bridge'

components that forge a link between portables and domestic systems. I am still reeling from the sonic revelation that is the Geek Out EM [HFN Sept '14], however much I dislike the look, the heat and the attitude. (Imagine Apple run by children with OCD, on a sugar high.) Meanwhile, Musical Fidelity, Focal and B&W make headphones that flatter whatever feeds them.

If USB DACs are the most obvious means of marrying the transportable and the fixed, there's more good news from an unexpected quarter. While most of the proactive brands have been content to concentrate on USB DACs as peacemakers, those crafty Italians at Carot One have come up with a charmer that will do much to add a sense of purist magic to components smaller than a deck of cards.

### GUERRILLA TACTIC

A new Carot One item at the Munich High End Show convinced me it's possible to downsize and still exercise hard-core audiophile sensibility. While we've been pre-occupied with USB DACs that can run off notebooks or tablets, Carot One has issued a far more important device for improving the headphone performance of iPods, iPads, smartphones and other devices unable to host a USB DAC.

Imagine a portable headphone amplifier... with an actual valve in it. How flippin' wild is that? Obscure, expensive at €699, but Carot One's NIK 58-TUBE is a guerrilla tactic. At 58x23x85mm (whd), it's virtually identical to a (Mk I) Astell & Kern player, so you can strap 'em together.

Its lithium battery feeds off any 5V USB charger. A window in the machined aluminium case lets you see the Philips JAN6111WA valve. And with a claimed 102mW/ch into 300ohm, it could drive B&W P5s with ease. Sheer bliss.

OK, this is so 'cult' as to be almost invisible, but the sound is terrific, it's tactile like a fine pen or watch, and it's, er, orange. A no-brainer if you need a headphone amp for indoors and out.

Most importantly, it's so tiny that you could sneak it into the house without upsetting 'Er Indoors. Try that with an amp filled with EL34s. ☺

'Imagine a portable headphone amp... with a valve in it. How wild is that?'

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### ON TEST:

- Group Test: £1500 floorstanders
- Exclusive: Aesthetix Atlas Signature amp
- Exclusive: Magico S3 loudspeakers
- Exclusive: Aurorasound Predo preamp
- Exclusive: Primare 60 Series

### PLUS:

- Investigation: Room tuning from scratch!
- Show Blog: We visit the Hong Kong Show
- Classical Companion: R Strauss' *Zarathustra*
- From The Vault: Speaker testing the digital way
- Vinyl Icons: The Zombies' *Odyssey & Oracle*