

Affordable\$\$Audio

Issue Number 58: October 2010

Miniwatt N2 Speakers p.3	Firestone Little Country 3 Headphone Amp p. 10	Look Back: Tyler Acoustic Taylo's p.17
Musiland 24/192 PCI Card p.6	Lighthouse Interconnect Cables p.14	Perpetuating "A Just Cause" p.22
		From the Pulpit p.27



Gear Swapper Anonymous...

By Jeff Brown

jeffbrown@affordableaudio.org

Last month in this section I discussed the In and Out phenomenon (Not like the movie where Tom Selleck kisses Kevin Kline) but the much scarier prospect of why Audiophiles walk away from audio and what brings them back, or doesn't in some cases. I may have jumped the gun just a bit by posting the thread on AudioCircle.com before the issue went to print so many of the initial postings were not as closely related to the actual article as I might have liked. I did appreciate though that no one got too crazy about his or her viewpoints. There was something interesting that came up during that discussion that I'd like to discuss a bit more here. (Feel free to go back and banter some more, that thread doesn't have an expiration date!) More than one person thought that by leaving the hobby I might have been referring to the idea of keeping a static rig. Which wasn't what I meant at all, I meant selling your rig or boxing it up and kicking the listening habit cold turkey. But that idea of keeping a static rig and the thought that to some people gear swapping is what it is all about is what I would like to discuss this month. Since keeping a static rig is a goal of mine and swapping gear is something I try to avoid, this really piqued my interest.

To some of us afflicted with "Audiophilitis" (Inflammation of the audiophile gene...) the only known remedy is a constant application of more and more (hopefully better or at least more expensive) audio equipment. Some call this the audio quest; others refer to it as their audio libido. Personally, I've never been a gear hound (cables are maybe a different story) but I do know a few. But the constant buying and selling of gear tends to have a negative effect on a person's bank account.

It is a dangerous thing for a magazine editor or even a reviewer to become a "collector". Because of the editing and general management of this fine publication I don't review as much as I used to. So gear tends to stay longer than I would like and I just don't request as many pieces as I used to. I still only purchase one or two pieces per year, and only the best of what comes through. Often, it ends up being cables but an occasional amp might stick around for future reference.

So another discussion thread, I really like the interaction it gives us writers into the mind of our readers will be posted with this introduction as the header: What drives your addiction to audio? There is no wrong answer here, for some it is about equipment and that is just fine, for others the challenge of how to tweak their system into nirvana is what turns their bolts. So I guess the question is, is there a satisfied audiophile or is it all about the journey? These discussions always end up with a life of their own and so no attempt will be made to drive the discussion on my part, as long as we all play nice.

Now some magazine business, a few months back I welcomed Fred Sartin as our behind the scenes word man AKA copy editor. Well it turns out he wants to occasionally write so we have included one of his editorials in this month's issue. For those of you who enjoy a good sense of humor and can pick up his pop culture references hidden in the article that can add some additional fun. Heck, just editing them adds some additional fun for me when they come through. Comments are always welcome address to the writers, or myself; that's why we put their email addresses in the reviews.

ZEBRA CABLES
 Quality Audio/Video Cables For Less
<http://www.zebracables.com>

Miniwatt N2 Loudspeakers

By Jeff Brown

jeffbrown@affordableaudio.org**Specifications:**

Cabinet-

- Optimized curved-sharp to reduce resonance
- 10-layer glossy black piano finishing

Driver-

- 100mm Multiform Cones Fullrange Driver

Specifications-

- Frequency Response: 40-25Khz (+-1db)
- Impedance: 4 ohms
- Sensitivity: 88dB @ 1 watt
- Maximum Power: 40 watts
- Dimensions: 130mm (w) x 130mm (d) x 130mm (h)
- Weight: 12kg
- Price: \$799.00 (Plus \$80 flat rate shipping anywhere in the world.)

Website: <http://www.miniwatt.com/hk/>

It's funny how things work out sometimes. I have thus far reviewed every product released by Miniwatt, starting with the S1, then the N3 amps, and now the N2 Loudspeaker. The N2 loudspeakers and the N3 amp arrived together, and my initial impression of the N3 amp was immediately positive. Everything that was good about the S1 was better in the N3, but I didn't have another single driver speaker to compare the N2 loudspeaker to.

When Derek from Miniwatt learned how much I enjoyed the S1, he offered to send me the N2 and N3 together for review. The shipping has always been surprisingly fast from Miniwatt. Many things come my way from the Orient and I don't know how Derek gets his stuff through customs so fast but once again "Bravo!" to Miniwatt for their fast shipments. I hadn't seen the N2s online, but I was familiar with the demure size of their S1 amp, so when a box the size of a small coffin arrived on my doorstep it was surprising to say the least. As it turns out, Miniwatt goes to great lengths to ensure that their highly-polished, high-gloss black loudspeakers are not damaged in shipment. They also send them in one box, making that single box and all the foam to keep two loudspeakers quite large.

As soon as I opened the box, I found the (construction) attention-to-detail, making Miniwatt's amplifier lineup so captivating, carries over quite well to the loudspeakers. The extremely high-gloss, ten-layer piano-black paint finish is striking, particularly against the chrome accents that perfectly match the metal-domed, customized 100mm Mark Audio driver. The shape of the loudspeaker is also unique and quite attractive. At around 15 inches high and 8 inches deep (including spiked feet), the appearance is simply stunning. Before they even played, my wife thought buying these might be a good idea. I give these speakers just about the highest WAF-rating possible at this price range. As a matter of fact, these speakers (without being weird-looking) could fit in a B&O showroom; they're that pretty.

Speaking of price range, the N2 speakers are \$880 per pair, shipped anywhere in the world. Not exactly the bargain of a lifetime for single driver loudspeakers. My initial question to Derek was, "Why are your loudspeakers twice as much as your amplifiers?" Apparently the cost of designing and manufacturing an attractive single driver loudspeaker is almost double that of an amp. It takes a lot of time to get that beautiful high-gloss finish, and they couldn't get the guy who designed the compact curved cabinet to work for free, either. We will just have to see below if that high price pays off where it counts, in a dark room with just you and the music.

My original idea was to put the N2 loudspeakers in what I thought would be their most natural habitat. Hooked up to N3 integrated amp. I played them like this for hours on end. Loudly and softly... with rock, bluegrass and folk music alike... and they sounded good. There was pretty good bass but nothing to write home to momma about, while the highs were sweet enough, but the midrange just seemed to be lacking something. They didn't have the syn-



ergy that I was really hoping to find between these (seemingly) matched components. There were some dynamics, and some sweetness, but I knew from experience that the N3 could definitely sound better than this, so the N2 must have some more in stored-potential amazing-ness. Thus began the hunt for what it would take to get this potential into my ears!

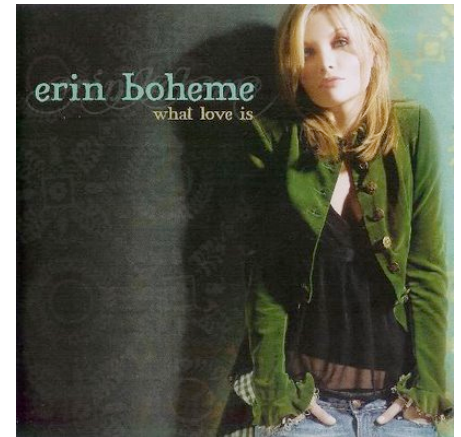
So I headed out to the garage to find something that might match them a bit better. The driver is rated at a pretty low efficiency, so I was thinking I would need some bigger power—but the driver is also ratted at a pretty low powered maximum. The first amps I brought out were my Antique Sound Labs AV-20s. These are 20-watt 6L6 tube-based amps. The pair I have has a slight hum to them but the tone is still pretty sweet. The 6L6 tubes and their 20 watts seemed to give the N2s a ton more dynamics and the extra control over the driver was apparent from the very beginning. But, as usual, the hum drove me nuts in short order.

My ~20 watt go-to amp was on loan to a neighbor when I first started this experiment, but I was beating down his door to get my Ideal Innovations amp back and left him with the hum-heavy AV20s for a bit. Wow! Now *there* was the sweet spot; that magical place where the equipment and the music become married in a way where the result is far better than the sum of the two parts. Most of us know that place, and it's a wonderful place from which to listen.

Once I found the companion amp for these speakers, I did some more hunting around and found that they are not particularly finicky and can sound very good with many amplifiers. I also listened with the Class D Audio 120-watt kit I reviewed a few months back, and as long as I was very careful with the volume control, the N2s sounded quite nice with it as well. There is a sonic depth and dynamics to these speakers that is really pretty cool when driven with between 10 and 35 watts of power.

Some speakers seem to be voiced to almost to a specific type of music; they are rockers or just sing with female vocals. Well, since these speakers don't have a crossover, that seems to have done away with the voicing as well. They sound equally good rocking Cake's "Italian Leather Sofa" off of the album *Fashion Nugget*, as they do playing melt-in-your-mouth soulful Erin Boheme's "One Night With Frank" off of her album, *What Love Is*. These speakers also do that small-speaker magic trick of vanishing when placed properly in a room.

How about the standards of soundstaging and imaging? Well, when underpowered, the soundstage is somewhat shallow but still very easy to live with, and in the same situation the imaging feels a bit hard to nail down. Driven with at least 10 watts though, all of these problems melt away. Immediately the soundstage matches the performance, and the imaging, while not exactly "pin-point" (could be a problem with my room?), is really good.



The one possible downside to these loudspeakers seems to be their inability to completely "rock the house." If you want the wall to shake and the neighbors in the next town to complain about your music, these are not the loudspeakers for you. They are quite pleasant and they play comfortably past the volume level at which I become uncomfortable, but for most true rockers that just wouldn't do. Also these loudspeakers do have bass, and will get your toes a-tappin', but once again, the neighbors will not be complaining unless you share a wall with them. These are great speakers, but just like anything else, something always has to give.

For all the sound quality of these speakers I don't find them expensive. You could build them with similar drivers for much less money, but that is generally true in the loudspeaker world. The case design, I believe, adds a great deal to the sound quality, while the piano finish is *absolutely lovely*. I sure do hope some of you out there get to enjoy these speakers as well.

Associated equipment:

Miniwatt N3 integrated amp
 Ideal Innovations Elite 80+
 Antique Sound Labs AV-20
 nOrh ACA-2b
 Stager Silver Solids
 Niteshade Audio Lighthouse Interconnects
 Audioquest CV-4 speaker cables