

One speaker that got a lot of question dues to its unusual up-firing woofer/midrange was the FJ Om in the Venus Hifi room. I built Dick Olsher's Samadhi Kittens some years back with a similar configuration, which appears to have a characteristically wide, deep soundstage and a broad sweet spot. Electronics included a CEC TL532 CD player (\$2290) and Manley Stingray amp (\$2250). Manley was also sounding good in their own room running with System Audio speakers using their Snapper monoblocks, Shrimp preamp and a Bel Canto CD player (I also walked away with a Manley T-shirt given as a door prize reading "Made in Chino, California, Not China").

I have recently begun exploring the joys of Fostex full-range drivers, so that probably explains why Whiplash Audio got my attention with their small desktop 2.1 system called the Mini Rocket (\$500), which seems perfect for the web-surfing audiophile. This consists of the 4" Fostex FE87E driver in a pair of tiny backloaded folded horn cabinets that would be perfect standing next to my computer monitor since they are shielded and tuned for near-field usage. According to Ryan Mills of Whiplash Audio, the main cabinets are constructed from solid maple with the internal horn path cut from a single solid block of wood. The subwoofer has an 8" driver and a 25-watt plate amp for the bass only (you need an separate amp for the monitors). Unfortunately it was only on static display when I stopped by their room.

Speaking of Fostex drivers in back-loaded horns, Madisound was on hand once again this year with their fantastic sounding BK-16 kit (\$750 including flat-pack unfinished cabinet) based on the FF165K full-range driver. With a T90a super tweeter filling in the top end, this speaker really impressed me last year and this year confirmed what I had experienced (with the way prices are rising due to the value of the dollar I should have bought the kit when I first heard it). They were sharing the room with Fritzspeakers who makes some great looking cabinets, including several bass reflex designs for use with Fostex drivers as well as higher-end designs with the SEAS Excel units. You can routinely find these speakers offered up for sale by the maker on audiogon and ebay.



Two rooms were also featuring complete audio systems that sounded great and were quite affordable given the performances delivered. Jatou had their RC700P pre-amp/surround processor (\$500), Operetta modular amp (\$1000 two-channel, \$200 per additional channel) and Lyra HD-661DX speakers (\$1600). The Lyra speakers are said to be made from "high-density macromolecule boards" to eliminate echo and vibration. ASi Technologies is a Detroit-area company that performs modifications on equipment and offers a "100% Pure Digital System" including a modded Oppo universal player, modded Panasonic XR57 receiver that receives SACD through HDMI and modded Silverline Audio Prelude Speakers for a total package price \$3995 and an impressively clear and dynamic sound.

Speaking of Detroit-area audio companies, I was pleased to learn there were several represented at AK Fest, especially given the current economic difficulties of this region. Wadia recently moved to the area and is making use of former auto suppliers to develop and build their high-end digital products (though products like the iPod dock and upcoming matching DAC are produced overseas to attain more aggressive price points). Another manufacturer using automotive suppliers is RTM Smooth. Last year I was tricked into lifting a pair of the Role Audio Sampan FTL speakers (which were on display once again in the Audio Two room) and nearly flung them across the air due to their light weight. This year I was challenged to pick up the RTM Smooth Dita (\$995) only to find that these egg-shaped speakers are made out of cast iron with an automotive finish. I hate to think what shipping might cost.

In all it was another great year for AK Fest and I'd like to give my thanks to all that worked so hard to put on this fantastic show. My only regrets were that I missed the evening's entertainment featuring guitarist Latih Al-Saadi (<http://www.myspace.com/laithalsaadi>) and I did not have the wherewithal to search through the numerous bins of albums in the LP Swaproom. Ah well, there's always next spring.

