

SYSTEM
PROFILE



AMERICAN BEAUTY



BRETT GIDEON GETS ALL PATRIOTIC WITH THE BEST OF AMERICAN HI-FI

So many people are angry with the Americans these days, blaming them for every misery from global warming to reality TV (not to mention Britney Spears). But let's give credit where credit is due. From an audiophile's perspective, the USA is home to some of the most obsessed and fanatical audio designers around, and while the Yanks can't build a car to save themselves, they definitely do design some of the world's most amazing hi-fi gear.

Reading American hi-fi magazines always makes me willing to sell a kidney to get over there, so when Frank and Mike at Denco Audio invited me to listen to some fine American stereo gear, I was on a plane to Christchurch before the Ed could bemoan the strain on his editorial budget.

What was immediately clear was that this all-American system is almost as good to look at as Gwen Stefani in a sauna. Audio Research components are designed around a solid industrial theme and they look great. Stark fusions of form and function they may be, but the unique Thiel CS3.7 loudspeakers are gorgeous statement products and the heart of this system. And it's all pretty darned impressive when cabled up with python-thick Kimber cable.

The CS3.7 floorstanders are the flagships of the Thiel range and are the culmination of three decades of innovation from Jim Thiel, a man who is obviously tuned into the beat of a very different drummer. A pair of the CS3.7s will get you exactly one dollar back from a twenty thousand dollar cheque, so the investment is sizeable, though not unreasonable in the world of high-end audio, and you do get a lot of value for your money.

These sweethearts are hand made in Lexington, Kentucky, and their curved, sealed cabinets are constructed with 15

sheets of laminated hardwood. It's as solid and acoustically dead as a large rock and home to some of the strangest drivers I've ever seen. Starting at the top of the sloped aluminium front baffle, we have a concentric tweeter mounted in the centre of the corrugated 4.5-inch aluminium midrange driver. The corrugations make it exceedingly stiff, allowing it to reach frequencies most midrange drivers can only dream of, and the fact that it's effectively a flat surface means there is no interference with the tweeter. Two 10-inch aluminium drivers fill out the rest of the baffle and the bottom of the frequency range. The lower driver is a passive radiator, which avoids any port-related issues, but the woofer is very much driven, pushed around by a huge two-kilogram magnet anchored in a solid six-kilo structure.

While Thiel speakers have always been renowned for imaging, speed and dynamics, they've a bit of a reputation for being hard to drive. Given the 3.7s have a sensitivity of 90dB this is obviously no longer the case, and they should be easy to slot into most real-world systems.

The source and power side of the equation were handled on the day by some big Audio Research boxes. A CD3 MKII CD player spun silver discs, feeding into an LS26 preamp with an HD220 power amp at the end of the chain. The AR gear had a feeling of solidity. The CD3 MK II, HD220 and LS26 were built less like tanks and more along the lines of World War II battleships, with the thick faceplates and front grab handles contributing to the imposing stature. Even the volume controls felt like they belonged in a gun turret.

The CD3 MKII is a development of the original CD3, which dates back to the mid-1990s. It's had some basic changes over the years but they've been minor. This is a standard (dare I say traditional) CD player, with nary an SACD decoder in sight. ▶

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The valve-based pure Class-A LS26 preamp is the second from the top of the range, sharing technology with the Reference 3 preamp and offering both balanced and single-ended inputs and outputs. The HD220 power amp is a hybrid, packing valve input stages and solid state output stages. With a strong 220 watts into eight ohms, the HD220 is more than capable of driving the CS3.7 pair to volume levels that will please everyone besides those hard-of-hearing old-school AC/DC fans.

Mike fired up the boilers of the HD220 while I settled in for a leisurely morning's listening. The first music of the session was 'Poem Of Chinese Drums' by Yim Hok Man, taken off a German Burmeister demo CD. My first impression was that the dynamics and imaging were superb, with headroom in abundance for that big drum sound and plenty of that lovely ability to go from silence

to crescendo in nothing flat. The decay after each slam of the drums as the sound echoes and slowly dissipates was as natural as if Mike was bashing on an actual set of drums just behind the speakers. The 3.7s had no problem filling Denco's big listening room with low bass, but then, four 10-inch drivers will do that every time.

I was thrilled to find one of my favourite tracks, the live version of 'Stimela (Coal Train)' by Hugh Masakela, on the same Burmeister CD, and the Thiels showed off more of their dynamic strength by giving the vocals and instruments plenty of air to rise from a deep, dark soundstage. Every part of the track, especially the crushing drum solo, sounding totally controlled by the amplifier. The drummer on this track is one of the hardest-working men in music, and this system makes all that sweat and effort tangible.

Classical music was next on the agenda, and while I'm not a classics nut, I appreciate the way that the right composition can severely test an audio system and show up any shortcomings. Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* has a dynamic range that's crushing through the right system, and the Thiel/AR package is definitely the right system. Turned up quite loud, the drivers blasted out the bass-heavy crescendos with splendid vigour over a soundstage that felt at least six metres wider than the room, but which still managed to maintain the delicate filigree of tiny details that round out the piece so nicely.

Gary Pearce's low bass mainstay, Stanley Clarke's *Passenger 57*, went on next, and it didn't take long to deduce that the Thiels really do get as low as I'll ever need a system to go. Seriously, anyone who needs to add a subwoofer is probably either deaf or dead.

I asked Mike to tee up another of my favourites, 'Keith Don't Go' by Nils Lofgren from his *Acoustic Live* album. I love acoustic guitar and this song never fails to make me smile, but hearing it here almost made my face crack in half. I swear that it sounded like Nils was hidden behind the wall-hanging rug, treating us to a live show. In a word: stunning.

All in all, this is one of the most enjoyable systems I've heard. The imaging and dynamics in particular were fantastic. There was no sense of any part of the system struggling to keep up and there was nothing fatiguing about the sound, it got my feet tapping with every track and made me feel good enough to want to start singing 'The Star Spangled Banner' and eating apple pie. If this is America the beautiful, I'm there like a bear. ■

CONTACT

www.dencoaudio.co.nz

SPECIFICATIONS

AUDIO RESEARCH LS26

PREAMP:

\$13,320

VALVES: 2 x 6H30 dual triode

FREQUENCY RESPONSE:

0.2Hz to 160kHz

DIMENSIONS: 48 x 13.4 x

30.5cm.

WEIGHT: 7.5kg

AUDIO RESEARCH HD220

POWER AMP:

\$22,870

POWER OUTPUT: 220 watts

per channel into 8 ohms,

380 watts per channel into

4 ohms

VALVES: 2 x 6H30, 2 x 6922

FREQUENCY RESPONSE:

0.5Hz to 200kHz

DIMENSIONS: 48.3 x 22.2 x

49.5cm

WEIGHT: 26.8kg

AUDIO RESEARCH CD3

MKII CD PLAYER

\$12,470

• Balanced and single

ended outputs

FREQUENCY RESPONSE:

0.5Hz to 20kHz

DIMENSIONS: 48 x 13.4 x

31.1cm

WEIGHT: 11.4kg

THIEL CS3.7

SPECIFICATIONS

\$19,999

• 10-inch aluminum woofer

• 10-inch aluminium passive

radiator

• 4.5-inch aluminium

midrange with

concentrically mounted

1-inch aluminum dome

tweeter

FREQUENCY RESPONSE:

33Hz to 26kHz ±2 dB

SENSITIVITY: (2.8v - 1m, true

anechoic): 90 dB

IMPEDANCE: 4 ohm (2.8

ohm min)

RECOMMENDED POWER:

100 to 600 watts

SIZE: 32 x 53 x 114cm

WEIGHT: 41.5kg

The vinyl countdown

It's getting late, hours of listening have flashed past, I'm as happy as Larry but there's a turntable nearby, so my vinyl juices are flowing and my curiosity is aroused. It's a Swiss-made Thorens TD2010 fitted with a Dynavector 17D3 cartridge. At \$4813, it's little more than a third of the cost of the primo Audio Research CD3 MKII CD player. How would it compare?

A new 200g pressing of Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway To Heaven' was first up on the platter and within seconds I knew that vinyl is still king. This song has been part of my life for as long as I can remember; I've heard it on everything from 8-track tape and cassette to SACD,

but this was by far the best I've ever experienced. I use the word "experienced", not "heard", for a reason. I've always felt that there's a real synergy between the analogue turntable and valve amplification and it was here in all its glory, sounding so good, so emotionally right and so fundamentally musical.

We also spun 'Graceland' by Paul Simon and 'Stormy Monday' by Ray Gaines (from *I Got The T-Bone Walker Blues*). Both songs were stunning, with levels of detail retrieval that amazed me. You need a CD player but if you were shopping for a system like this, adding a turntable would be mandatory.

