

Last word

Rick O'Neil

The final frontier

I'm busy... real busy. Right now I'm working on two distinct projects and, as usual, instead of asking somebody for help, I find myself drowning in magazines, books, brochures and other distractions as I try to find out everything I need to know. I like to make it look easy, if you know what I mean.

Project One is a multi-room post-production studio for a friend of mine, and Project Two is a 1964 XM Ford Futura motor car for myself. I was convinced that studios were the ultimate accessory sport, until I started playing with motor cars.

Cars, now here's a language that makes studio jargon look like the Queen's English – for every one dB (decibel) studio dweebs have, revheads have 100bhp (brake horsepower). To make matters worse, while revheads are generally good blokes, they're not the kind of guys I drink with on a Saturday night. In fact, I don't even know how to talk to them, so I'm reading up and trying to fudge my way in.

Things had been getting kind of sorted, until recently. The main items for the studio were settled – mostly digital with some high end analogue stuff to smooth the sound out. The car? Well I'm keeping mostly the original '64 driveline, with some high end polyurethane bushes and billet aluminium parts to trick up the performance. So what have post-production studios and my car got to do with this article? Not much at all, until the other night...

It's 2:00am and I'm at the Stanmore Seven Eleven perusing the car magazines. I make my choice then realise I haven't got any cash, so I cross the road to the auto teller. As I insert my card, I can hear some kind of rumble, like distant thunder, but it's a clear night with no sign of rain. That's kinda weird. I enter my PIN and the machine scans the analogue magnetic strip on my card (I bet you thought auto tellers were digital, huh?). Anyway, as the machine thinks about my code, whether I have any money, and whether or not it will give it to me, the rumble turns into a constant loud thumping. It sounds like one of those really loud car stereos, only when I look up and down the length of Parramatta Rd, it's empty. No cars, no stereos, nothing except the moon and this increasing thump. Finally the auto teller spits out 50 dollars and, to my amazement, over the horizon a car appears. This is definitely the source of the noise.

Now I know you've all seen this car before, or its twin sister. It's a purple Datsun 120Y with colour coded bumpers, yellow mag wheels, yellow mirrors, yellow headrests and a sticker on the back window saying 'No Fear'. Inside the car is a fairly generic looking fellow who I'll call Tony, because that turned out to be his name. Anyway, Tony is more than a little overweight, 25 years old, still lives at home, and has taken the \$900 Datsun he got for his 18th birthday just a little too far. Don't get me wrong, I love sound and I'm starting to fall in love with old cars. But for some reason, spending your adult life welded to your only possession – a purple stereo that pumps 155dB and drives 155km/h – is more than a little strange.

Tony looks like a whale jammed into a fish tank as he pulls up at the Seven Eleven. Stanmore is under the flight path for the Sydney airport, but I've never seen the plate glass windows of Johnson's Bakery shake like this before. He turns the stereo off and the silence that follows is, well, unique. I felt as though I'd just been to see AC/DC again, except now they played dance music and performed inside colour coded Datsuns.

I'm a noisemaker by trade and it figures that I was more than curious about his system. After a little wheeling and dealing (I had to show him a CD with my name on it and buy him a Coca Cola Slurpie), I find myself sliding into the cockpit of an all-original western suburbs space shuttle. Tony seizes his chance and immediately dives for the volume knob, but I'm too fast. I tell my new friend that I have to take it slowly because it's my first time. Carefully, I turn up the volume until it reaches bone crunching levels, my shirt is flapping and my vision is blurry. All I can see is white.

This guy has two 15 inch woofers bolted to what was probably a back seat, before it evaporated. I turn the stereo off and Tony is looking a little distressed. "Are the subs too loud?" he asks, but I'm too busy looking around inside the car. This thing has more speakers than the United Nations. Aside from the two 15 inch woofers, there are four 10 inch speakers, two waveguide horns, and at least six tweeter-looking things, spread out from arm height, across the roof and somewhere down the back.

Because of my recent studio project, I'm thinking that I've learnt everything there is to know about speaker placement, room sizes and getting the correct stereo field. Acoustically, this car is looking like a bad joke, but I



couldn't tell what it sounded like because it was so damn loud and I didn't know the song he was playing. I politely asked Tony if I could play a CD of mine, one that I produced and mixed, so I could tell what I was hearing. I also asked him to turn off the subs, and he moaned and said "what, all of them?". Because he's still looking a little distressed, I tell him to just turn off the 15 inch woofers.

To my complete amazement, without the bass woofers this car sounded absolutely stunning. The bottom end was extended (to say the least), and the separation was, well... separate. It wasn't stereo or quad or surround or anything I'd ever heard of. It was totally 360 degrees, front, back, up and down. I was completely immersed.

I could feel every organ in my body shaking from the inside, but the music wasn't that loud. What was going on? Well, let me tell you about the Earthquake Bass Shaker. It looks like a 12 inch speaker but instead of having a paper cone it bolts directly to the car's floor panel, and the four inch voice coil shakes the entire car body subsonically. Tony's got two of them. That's right, this lunatic is using his entire car as a complete all over body vibrator!

The thing is, without the audible sound pressure levels of the subwoofers, the bass from the Earthquake

Bass Shakers feels phenomenal. You can't hear it, you just feel it, like some kind of magic. Combined with speakers everywhere except where you would logically put them, this car sounded like... well, it sounded like drugs, or sex, or I don't really know but I was loving it.

I remember when I mixed the CD in my studio, the instruments that I'd moved with a pan pot went from left to right. But now they kind of travelled right through you, like that liquid chrome thing in Terminator II. The experience of sound in this car was complete, more than complete. I was lost. I know a car cabin shouldn't, can't and doesn't sound better than a big studio. But Tony's space shuttle really was some kind of exception.

There is no longer life as I know it. Acoustics are a load of crap, stereo is for nerds, and surround is for dweebs. I'm heading for 'Complete Sound' (now there's a catch phrase, stick around, you'll see). So what's the point of this story? Well, my XM Futura is going to cost another six grand for the stereo, and I'm trying to figure out how to fit an entire post production studio into a '76 Datsun. I've seen the future and it's not pretty. Subsonic transducers – the final frontier...



Rick O'Neil is a producer/engineer and runs the Turtlerock Production Company. He hopes to have his Futura on the road in time for the Olympics...

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