

ROCKY MOUNTAIN AUDIO (LOVE) FEST 2012

The 2012 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF) in Denver is a wrap. This is their eight year and as the show matured it has become the mainstay of audio shows in the US. They had over 300 brands in 160 rooms along with seminars, panel discussions and concerts. But RMAF is so much more than 'just' an audio show, it is a labor of love. Especially from the hard working volunteers from the Colorado Audio Society. It is really the Rocky Mountain Audio Love Fest. It just feels different.

I love this show. I like Denver. I like the hotel. I like the people. I went to a show in New York earlier in the year and my only memory is spending \$32 on a hamburger. The tone of RMAF is not just about sound but also about accessibility to the industry and being a social gathering. There are so many audio industry people here it is like a Hollywood premier. You can wander the halls and meet and talk with many of your favorite reviewers, company owners and designers. We are honored to walk the halls with the who's who of the audio world.

This show is also special because there are always so many new companies participating, people who are taking the plunge and taking their passion to the next level. No other show in the US has this many small companies year after year.

I think I made it to most of the 160 rooms. I always fear I missed the latest and greatest product just because I skipped a crowded room, a loud room, or a room that was materially challenged (bad music). This year I heard a lot of new products and many sounded great.

One product that has been around a while but is finally coming of age is the wireless speaker. All of them at RMAF were running via standard WiFi. All the wireless speakers I saw were on the small side and targeted to the



Methm Maarga. Note the shaped phase plug.



Gary Gesellchen and Rick Kernen of Vanatoo Audio.

mid-fi crowd. I suspect the marketing wonks know the high end community is not ready for wireless yet.

The product that raised the bar for me was the Vanatoo Clearbass which is technically a self-powered speaker but they had it wireless through Apple Airport. It costs \$499 for a plug-and-play pair and they sounded very good at this price point. I think this my bargain product of the year. Dynaudio was also showing a well thought out product (wireless) but it was not sounding well in the hotel room. Some rooms were boomier than others.

Another technology that continues development is the single driver speaker. The concept has been around since the dawn of the industry yet we still see improved designs. I was very impressed with the Voxativ at a previous show and they were here at RMAF as well. I have never heard a single driver speaker cover the lower octaves like the Voxative. It also has amazingly clear mids. I was also impressed with the Rethm Maarga.

It is not technically a single driver speaker as it has a subwoofer but the main driver is running full range without a crossover and it sounded very good. The driver looked familiar but it is in fact hand made in India. They are also experimenting with a shaped phase plug which I think is an understudied science.

PETER SMITH





The CD is dead. Just a few short years ago the music server and file compression was the third-rail of any audiophile discussion. Today almost every room was running server software via Mac or PC. There were a number of rooms that did not have a CD player at all but most did have a turntable. I carry a CD with my test tracks so I was out of luck in some rooms. The software I saw most often was the Amarra server software for Mac by Sonic Studio. There were a number of products running Windows based servers but the only one that comes to my mind is JRiver. There were also a number of very capable audiophile server units including Baetis, Wyred for Sound, Mojo and more. This is the future of high end audio whether we like it or not. I for one cling to my physical media like the dinosaur I am, but when I work from home I admit I stream music. I don't have an opinion on which servers sounded best or which have the best features as there is not evaluation enough time in a hotel room. I think it will take some time before the leaders emerge in this product category.

Music Hall, Zodiac, and many more. I think there have been more DAC introductions in 2012 than any other audiophile product. The prices start in the hundreds and go into the thousands so pick your price point. The plethora of units makes it especially difficult to choose but I am sure with a good listen there will be some that outshine others in every price range. The important point here is that there are now a lot of low cost DACs that perform very well. One does not need to spend a lot to get good DAC performance. We should be grateful as this is the product that will connect the iPod generation to the audiophile world and it may save our industry. We are also seeing the continuing development of class D amplification, every year it gets a little better. I think this is the first year I could not immediately tell an amp was class D. Next year they may be as-good-as class AB, so we hope. Now if they can just make them look as cool as tube amps...



In one room, the owner ran around dropping these pink cotton balls in places he thought he heard resonances, "that's better".



Doshi and Wilson: excellent match.

At the room level there were a few rooms that really stood out. The Doshi Audio room with Wilson speakers and Transparent cables was my best-in-show room. The sound was full range and luscious with clear details. I also liked The Sound Environment (Omaha Nebraska) room with their BAT electronics and Rockport speakers. The German Physics room had great imaging but little bottom end. KT Audio Imports takes the prize for best looking room with their stunning NAT Audio Magma tube amps and Triangle Art turntables. Also stunning were the Audio Power Labs tube amps, possibly the best looking amps I have ever seen. I did not get to listen to either room as they were packed. Many rooms had great sound; almost any room with a Vandersteen speaker; any room with a Joseph Audio speaker. Ayre had the most comfortable room in a 1950s retro mode.

The 'good room' list is a long one along with room after room of beautiful looking great sounding gear. High end audio is peaking in sound quality, looks and bang-for-the-buck. We have never had so many great choices and RMAF is my venue of choice. See you next year!

No music server discussion is complete without talking about DACs and there were a lot at RMAF. The list is long: Mojo, iFi, Cypher, Berkeley Audio, Rega, Modena,