

PLAYBACK

Something

by Jay Richards

During the past few years consumer audio and professional audio production have come closer together. Now, more than ever before, there must be a good insight into the end use of the recorded product in order for the producers and engineers to do their jobs most effectively.

Just as professional recording has become more sophisticated, so has consumer audio. Over the last decade the quality of hi-fi has improved dramatically. Conventional forms of distortion (IM and THD) have been greatly reduced, if not eliminated. The consumer audio industry is now exploring other factors affecting the natural reproduction of music.

Ten years ago the industry consisted of a few American manufacturers catering to the hobbyist. Consumer audio was still in its infancy, but the stage had been set for a marketing explosion over the next decade.

In the early Seventies new names slowly penetrated the American market, forcing American manufacturers to play by a new set of rules. What started as a trickle, quickly became a flood of Japanese product. The Japanese not only provided competitive product, but also a whole new marketing philosophy. Instead of just appealing to the hobbyist, they appealed to a much larger market segment... and created the "stereo consumer."

Many American manufacturers of electronic audio products could not effectively compete with this flood of product. Many tried having their products manufactured in Japan, but generally with poor results. Most eventually sold out to the competition. Other areas of consumer audio have not been significantly affected by outside competition. The majority of loudspeakers are still made in the U.S., as well as much in the way of hi-end electronics, phono cartridges, and signal processors.

Over the past ten years, as we said earlier, consumer audio has gone through an evolutionary process. During one phase manufacturers were emphasizing power, not unlike the automobiles of the mid to late Sixties. It was an all out power race, culminating with the introduction of a 300 watt per channel receiver.

At the peak of this power race something

strange happened. A company introduced a \$330 receiver rated at 16 watts per channel, emphasizing overall performance rather than just power. While the rest of the industry was snickering at this non-competitive product, it sold exceptionally well. This was a major breakthrough and proved that the American market was finally realizing the importance of a balanced, musically accurate product. Finding that the consumer was interested in more than just output power, manufacturers began optimizing other factors and the specsmanship battle began. New forms of

distortion quickly became problems leading to unique solutions. At one point it seemed like everyone was searching for the perfect square wave.

Today most manufacturers are sensitive to the desire for clean, accurate reproduction of music, not just symmetrical waveforms. This has spawned a new generation of quality recordings and pressings, directing a dramatic new attention to the program source.

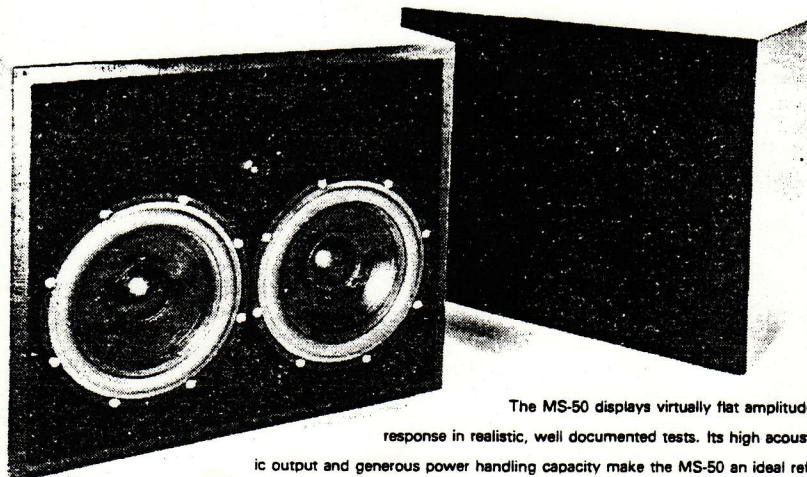
Those responsible for today's recordings can no longer afford to overlook the sophistication of even the average playback system. Each year playback systems are becoming more refined and the consumers are becoming more demanding of the quality of source material.

"Playback" will be a monthly column in *Mix*, covering areas of consumer audio that we feel will be of interest and importance to music recorders. December will feature premium quality record labels. We welcome your suggestions as to subjects and areas you would like us to discuss.

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