

# A fresh look at the LS3/5A

Ken Kessler on your options for buying the mighty BBC monitor brand-new

**TOP:** Clockwise (l-r) – handbuilt LS3/5A 'No 1', prototype of a BBC LS3/5 (left of image), which would become the LS3/5A, Rogers LS3/5A, original ads for Chartwell and Rogers models, period shot from inside Rogers

**BELOW:** Original pages from *HFN* Jun '01 showing the 'shootout' between 11 LS3/5A rivals

More than 20 years on from the legendary 'LS3/5A shootout' undertaken by this magazine [*HFN* Jun '01], the minuscule BBC monitor remains as popular as ever. With a proliferation of models having appeared since that multi-version test, the speaker and the community which still reveres it deserves a fresh look.

Why does this limited-purpose monitor, nearing its 50th birthday, warrant so much attention? Easy answer: it's unique, and not just because of the performance which belies its size, with a midband so perfect for voice that it's difficult naming anything that betters it.

Sound being subjective, however, the mythology demands more. And

wracking my brain, I cannot find another product in the history of hi-fi that shares the following qualities or conditions with the BBC LS3/5A.

## BROUGHT TO BOOK

First and foremost, it is the only audio product to have been contracted and licensed to more than a dozen manufacturers. Yes, other BBC-approved monitors such as the LS5/9 were also commissioned from a handful of makers, to ensure government neutrality, but none have mirrored the LS3/5A's ubiquity, reputation nor appeal.

And how about this fact? It is the *only* hi-fi product about which an entire book has been written: *LS3/5A – The Immortal Legend*, by Wun Yi Mei, published in Hong

Kong in 2005. Adding to the uniqueness, I cannot name another component that was produced by any manufacturer other than its original creator. Not even classics from Tannoy, Quad, Wharfedale, AR, McIntosh or other sources were licensed to other companies.

For those who think the LS3/5A is an anachronism, I was staggered when Falcon Acoustics' Jerry Bloomfield said there are more than 40 LS3/5A-alikes on the market today. That includes both licensed and unlicensed versions.

## CLONE WARS

Bloomfield thinks only five brands are still paying fees to the BBC. Add them to the 'kosher' first-generation LS3/5As since 1975, the myriad limited editions, eg, KEF's Raymond Cooke Memorial Edition, Rogers' 60th Anniversary model, *ad infinitum*, and there have been around 100 variants in total.

Bloomfield also observed that a number of companies, for whatever reasons, do not wish to 'reverse engineer' the KEF T27 tweeter and B110 bass unit, nor the complex crossovers. He says that



an LS3/5A conforming to the BBC specification *must* have a genuine B110 woofer and genuine T27 tweeter, an FL6/23 crossover, and a damped cabinet built of selected grade Baltic Birch ply with beech battens. It *doesn't*, for example, have air-cored inductors, electrolytic capacitors or plywood battens.

'Clones use a multiplicity of components and drive units – new and secondhand – with [non-spec] cabinet construction techniques. They should not be called LS3/5As. It's gotten to the point where any small speaker using a 5in woofer and a ¾in tweeter calls itself an LS3/5A to try and make money off the reputation of the marque.'

### SILLY MONEY

'The concept of the genuine LS3/5A has been progressively devalued as a result', Bloomfield continues. 'The BBC no longer has the resources to effectively police what we see taking place. It is up to us as LS3/5A aficionados to call out the imposters.' Among those which do adhere to the rules are Falcon Acoustics, Rogers, Graham and the reborn Audiomaster.

Buying pre-owned LS3/5As is simple enough because there are something like 100,000 pairs out there. Well-heeled collectors still pay silly money for BBC-badged examples, Chartwells, and the like, though the £10,000-per-

**RIGHT:** Rogers' return to making LS3/5As in 2020 required reverse-engineering of both the B110 woofer and T27 tweeter, all to the original BBC specification

**RIGHT:** American consumers can buy this US-only version of the Falcon Acoustics standard LS3/5A made for Mobile Fidelity and badged 'MoFi'

**FAR RIGHT:** The cover of *LS3/5A – The Immortal Legend*, written by reviewer and collector Ah Ming and published in Hong Kong

**BELOW:** 'Behind the scenes' shot of the models used for the *HFN* 2001 'shootout'. One can only imagine their combined value today



differences. This mirrors Bloomfield's experiences when Falcon issued a severely limited edition with accurate recreations of circa-1970s crossover components and cabinets. Says Bloomfield, 'We are the only maker of the genuine B110

pair exchanges seem apocryphal. What I can

say is that it's possible to pick up 15ohm models for £1200-£2000, slightly less for the later 11ohm/bi-wire versions. This begs the question as to why anyone would pay as much as £4000 for brand-new LS3/5As from the cream of the makers that adhere to BBC specification, whether paying the license fee or not.

If there is a truism about the myriad LS3/5As, it's that they should all sound identical if up to specification. Joseph Szall of Audiomaster21 paraphrases George Orwell with, 'All LS3/5As are equal – but some are more equal than others'. We know that's the case, because there always was a margin of error – however tight the tolerances – that enabled us, back in 2001, to grade 11 pairs.

Andy Whittle of Rogers, like Szall and Bloomfield, emphasises the differences the cabinets make, along with which approved crossover is used, presuming the presence of KEF drivers. His affinity for panzerholz compressed ply and its use as an optional baffle material for Rogers LS3/5As attests to his belief in these

woofer and T27 tweeter as designed by Malcolm Jones. We have not compromised the original vision of the R&D staff at Kingswood Warren, nor the Design Department staff who created the LS3/5A'.

Falcon offers various LS3/5As, the latest of which will wind up UK

readers but will thrill enthusiasts across the Pond: it produces a version for Mobile Fidelity 'based on the "classic" Falcon, not the newer Gold Badge edition'. It

sells for \$1995 USD, 'making it the least expensive BBC-licensed LS3/5A available in North America'.

### LONG GONE

Szall, with EAR-Yoshino's Haden Boardman and Raphael Saarbach in Germany, revived the Audiomaster brand as AudioMaster21, producing the LS3/5A Classic 15 Ohm (circa £1500/pair) and the LS3/5A 40th Revival Limited Edition. Only 40 pairs of the latter were produced, and they're long gone. That version, says Szall, 'incorporated all the best "ingredients" available to make an LS3/5A. As discovered in the *HFN* ☞

'There are now more than 40 LS3/5A-alikes on the market'





**LEFT:** Made in Italy, the revived version of the LS3/5A from Audiomaster21 harks back to the original Kingswood Warren cabinetry, with removable (screwed-in) front and back panels

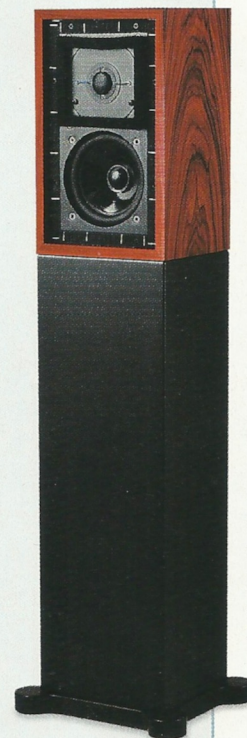
**OBJECT(IONS) OF DESIRE**

Just because the LS3/5A was and remains a self-contained design, which one doesn't customise as one might, say, an amplifier with upgraded capacitors, or a turntable with various mats, that doesn't mean they are left alone. Leaving aside the now-unpopular detour into 11ohm designs with a bi-wiring option, the cult aspects of LS3/5As revolve around the choice of stands, subwoofers, and 'to stack or not to stack'.

Unfortunately, the consensus is that the two best-ever stands for LS3/5As are both out of production. IF's Tallis and Cliff Stone's Foundation were both dedicated to LS3/5As, their top plates corresponding exactly with the speaker's footprint. The two share only their height and top plate dimensions, as the Foundations work with mass and four pillars, while the IF is lighter, a single-pillar type and is more 'tuned'. A quick online search shows a number of stands which look like reasonable facsimiles, so finding something close shouldn't be too difficult.

Subwoofers are more contentious. Although Rogers produced the passive AB1 and more recently the active AB3a [*HFN* Oct '21], purists seem to shy away from subs. I have found the judicious use of active subs with a wide range of adjustments like Wilson Audio's LoKe [*HFN* Sep '22] to be a way to add extension and level, albeit with trade-offs.

As for the latest tweak, it's the even more divisive practice of stacking two pairs, the top one placed upside down so the tweeters are close together. Of the trio of manufacturers I spoke to for this piece, Joseph Szall loves stacking (he's a student of the late Tim de Paravicini, who popularised it), while Jerry Bloomfield disapproves and Andy Whittle is ambivalent. And that perfectly illustrates why the LS3/5A continues to fascinate...



**ABOVE:** Rogers' active AB3a subwoofer is the most closely-matched powered subwoofer to date, but the use of subs remains controversial

"shootout", the cabinet followed the recipe of the ten first pairs made in the Kingswood Warren facilities: 8mm birch ply with 8mm damping bituminised pads and a removable rear back-plate. These cabinets were surprising. We followed the exact recipe as outlined by [Dudley] Harwood and both the weight and the sound was impressive, compared to the standard commercial one'.

Szall also insisted that the crossover was made along classic lines, noting 'We found some excellent hints in Wun Yi Mei's book on the LS3/5A, using NOS components like ERO and Philips capacitors. The high-pass tweeter autoformer/inductor is a critical component that needs to be of the highest quality and performance, such as Drake Transformers'.

As with Falcon's recreation of the original BBC version, Audiomaster21 follows the BBC design brief of 1976. Like both Falcon's and Rogers' current models, it is a 15ohm version with B110 woofer and T27 tweeter. The cabinets are made in Hungary and follow the structure of the first ten pairs made internally at

Kingswood Warren, with the 8mm birch ply plus 8mm bitumen panels, removable front and rear. To Szall, 'These cabinets are really surprising in sonic and "lack of resonance" terms, very much confirming the results of the 2001 "shootout" test'.

**FANS' DEMAND**

The crossovers in the Audiomaster21 model employ classic autoformer/inductors. The loudspeakers are produced in Italy, with the standard 15ohm version using a 12mm cabinet and modern condensers.

Just as we once suffered a dearth of valves – many forget they were almost impossible to find in the 1980s – so did devotees of the LS3/5A once fear the demise of that speaker when KEF decided to stop production of the necessary drivers. But, in this instance, consumer demand for an esoteric, limited-application speaker, known for truncated bass and the inability to go loud, transcended commercial concerns. So 48 years after it was developed, the LS3/5A is alive, and as one fellow devotee noted, sounding better than ever. ⚡

*'The LS3/5A is alive, and sounds better than ever'*



**LEFT:** The 'Holy Grail' of revived LS3/5As to some aficionados, Falcon Acoustics' superb, ultra-purist Kingswood Warren Limited Edition, all 50 pairs having now departed the UK