

Ferguson Hill speakers clearly tuned to your MP3 player

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Ferguson Hill Studios opened shop in England as a maker of high-end speakers about two years ago, and has just started selling its products in Canada. The arrival of its main system, the FH007 speakers and FH008 sub-woofer, reveal a lot about the state of sound engineering.

Most improvements in sound have concentrated on such things as compression algorithms, iPods, cellphones with music storage and computer sound cards. Speakers, however, have taken a much different road. Aside from new ear buds, headphones and the tiny computer speakers, speakers have not really kept pace with the quality of sound we now reproduce. There has been some development of speakers for home-theatre buffs, but few new speakers can match the quality of sound we have become capable of putting on discs.

The Ferguson-Hill FH007 is a large system - it's a pair of loudspeakers with horns made from transparent cast acrylic, two spherical bass speakers made from the same clear acrylic material, and a 16-watt amplifier, a bookshelf-sized aluminum cube with a cyclopean design featuring a volume control in the middle under a bright white LED light.

Ferguson Hill speakers Fergusonhill.ca FH007 tweeter and base units (\$649) FH008 sub-woofer (\$349)

Because the FH007 speakers are intended to deliver precise, distortion-free sound, they are at their best amplifying MP3 players, which are hilariously tiny in comparison. And because the speakers are expensive - \$649 - it seems silly to invest in them if they are so much bigger and more expensive than MP3 players.

Ferguson-Hill speakers are not designed to attract the local authorities the next time you throw a dance party, but for listening to quality music, TV or playing console games. If you want to be buffeted by heavy metal thunder or test your sanity by pumping up the volume on The Great Kat's shred guitar solos, go elsewhere.

Still, the Ferguson Hill system can approximate thunder well enough with the matching sub-woofer, the FH008, sold separately at \$349. And since the sound of the system really needs the sub-woofer to carry it properly, you're in for a \$1,000 purchase for the whole system.

The clear acrylic horns and spheres are not merely nice design elements, their transparency makes them appear to take up a lot less visual room than they would had they been opaque; the horns are 27 cm along the length of their ovals, and the bass speakers are about the size of volleyballs. Let these float on their thin tubular aluminum stands and they pretty much disappear.

Except for the sub-woofer, that is. This unit is slightly smaller than a sophomore's beer fridge and requires some thought about placing it without smothering the sound or hiding its volume controls.

Together, the design and sound have a high-octane wow factor. The speakers differ from their bookshelf or free-standing cousins, whose tweeters are usually confined for high frequencies above 2 kHz; in comparison, the FH horns start at about 340 Hz before progressing to 20 kHz. The spherical bass speakers cover a range between 75Hz and 350Hz. This is a tremendous range, but still doesn't deliver that deep bass rumble we all seem to crave. That's where the

sub-woofer comes in, with a range between 50 Hz and 150 Hz, adjustable by two knobs on the back.

The optimum position for this system is sitting on a couch with the speakers positioned just so to deliver precise sound - so they are ideally suited to watching TV in bed, or to enjoy multimedia experiences in the home theatre room.

Globetechnology.com setup ended coincidentally with the TV was tuned to PBS, featuring a concert by Ladysmith Black Mombazo on Austin City Limits. The octet's a cappella vocal range and tonal subtlety couldn't be better suited to testing these speakers. The result was so mesmerizing it was impossible to change the channel.

Switching channels resulted in a series of mixed conclusions about the speaker system's strengths and limitations.

The FH system requires a significant investment in activity - they require regular adjustments to the wildly varying volume and tonal qualities of each TV channel or CDE played. There are too many variables in room acoustics and quality of sound recording to be more specific.

The speakers can also be frustrating: The FH007 and FH008 units have no fade feature, meaning they can't be used for surround sound. They come with surprisingly short cords, which demand they be placed near the entertainment centre.

Most puzzling, though, is that since they are high-end speakers in both price and performance, it's a wonder Ferguson-Hill didn't include an optical sound input, such as a SPDIF or an HDMI connector. Since just about every system is moving to digital sound, it's puzzling that Ferguson Hill continues to labour in the vineyards of analog, which is difficult to understand in a system as expensive as this.

Finally, the speaker volume is controlled by an old-style volume control knob on the front; there is no remote control. And although the volume can technically be coupled with the audio source, so you can control it from one remote control, it proved difficult in practice. The Panasonic large-screen digital TV used for testing would not couple the speakers to the remote unless the TV was no longer connected to the other components with an HDMI interface, bought specifically to make the setup simpler and more effective.

Frustrations such as these seem out of keeping with a system as good as this. They could be vastly improved by digital inputs, longer cords and a remote.

But if your demands are satisfied by what the FH007 and FH008 now offer, you're not likely to find much better - unless you go for the even-higher-end Ferguson-Hill FH001, whose two horns each stand a metre and a half in height and a half-metre deep, with beach-ball-sized bass speakers and a 100-watt amplifier. That system sells for £2,562.50 in England - more than \$5,240 in Canada.

Now try to imagine hooking up a set of speakers almost as tall as you are to your best digital player. Like your iPod.