

Listener

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Hot! Rod! Kestrel!

Dont stop drivin' it!
Review by Wayne Donnelly

Hot Rod Kestrel Loudspeakers:

\$1695 per pair

Manufactured by Meadowlark Audio, 800 Starbuck Ave Ste A103, Watertown, NY 13601 (315)779-8875

Type: two-way transmission line

Frequency response: 38 Hz-20kHz (+2dB)

Nominal Impedance: 8 Ohms

Efficiency: 89dB/watt/meter

Tweeter: 1-inch fabric dome

Woofer: 6.5-inch mineral-filled poly cone

Size: 36 x 8 x 9 inches (HxWxD)

Weight: 46 pounds each

I first read about the Meadowlark Kestrels in Art Dudley's *Listener* review back in 1995. Artie had a lot of useful things to say (including an explanation of the transmission line featured in all Meadowlark speakers), and it would be worth your time to check out his piece. (It's on www.meadowlarkaudio.com) But what made the review stick in my mind was Artie's comment, "I think these might actually be the greatest bargain in American hi-fi today."

I didn't listen to any Meadowlarks until three years later, when the *Stereophile* show came to San Francisco. I passed an enjoyable hour in the Meadowlark room, playing for Pat McGinty and his people one selection after another from the CDs I was carrying-including one by the lovely and talented Valentina Lisitsa, much celebrated in the pages of *Listener*. Pat offered no pitch, no structured demo-it was just some guys groovin' on the music. That's rare enough at any big audio show to leave a lasting impression.

When I suggested to Artie that *Listener* should cover the Hot Rod Kestrels, I'd already purchased a pair a couple of months earlier. I was assembling a second system upstairs in my bedroom, partly to create a context for auditioning the affordable-in-the-real-world gear that *Listener* mostly focuses on- and a pair of Kestrels seemed just right, physically and fiscally. I couldn't review this pair, though, because I had already modified them with my favorite audio magic bullet, Jack Bybee's Quantum Purifiers. To save me from having to surgically restore my pair, Pat McGinty sent me some stock (!) Hot Rod Kestrels.

Two of Artie's 1995 observations are particularly relevant here. His only serious negative was that the Kestrels sounded somewhat colored, especially in the critical 2 kHz-4kHz range - which was audible as, for instance, a cupped-hands-around-the-mouth-effect on vocals. And, as a possible remedy, he opined

that the Kestrels were ideal for DIY upgrading with better crossover parts, etc.- i.e., hot-rodding.

Meadowlark says the Hot Rod idea dawned on them after years of doing custom one-offs for friends and dealers using specially requested parts. Having noted what sounded best, they decided there was a market for the improved speakers. Artie was right, it seems. The upgrades to the Hot Rod Kestrel are pretty extensive:

Resonance control is key. The already well-constructed cabinet receives additional internal bracing. A damping material called Keldamp is applied liberally - to isolate crossover components from their mounting board and to isolate the mounting board from the cabinet-and then the crossover board is mounted outside, in the bottom of the enclosure. Keldamp applied to the woofer and tweeter suppresses basket and motor ringing.

Fundamentally, of course, all music is a combination of the resonances produced by instruments, voices, and the performing spaces. (I recently saw a TV infomercial on the Bose Acoustic Wave, wherein jazz pianist Herbie Hancock solemnly intones, "The Acoustic Wave operates through a principle we call resonance." Gee, taking quite a chance getting all scientific like that. But I digress...) However, when vibrations affect electronic parts, as they are wont to do in a speaker, the resulting electro-mechanical resonances affect the signals passing through those components, causing unwanted colorations in the music. Cabinet resonances are also problematical - first, because they tend to fall into a narrow frequency range; and second, because they radiate into the listening space just as the drivers do, adding their one-note colorations to the musical presentation. That's why the sound of cheaply made speakers is so often described as "boxy." Another very talented speaker designer, Michael Kelly of Aerial Acoustics, once commented to me that "the hardest thing about designing a speaker-and the costliest, if you do it right - is the cabinet." Amen, brother.

Crossover components in the Hot Rods are impressive: The tweeter circuit features Auric capacitors and heat-sinked Caddock resistors. These musically excellent parts are really quite extravagant for sub-\$2000 speakers. The heat sinks on the Caddocks allow the speaker to play louder for sustained periods without the tonal and dynamic compression one often hears from small speakers under stress. In the woofer circuit, a perfect lay 14-gauge air core inductor enhances amplifier damping, yielding quicker, more articulate bass.

Each Hot Rod Kestrel sports two pairs of sturdy binding posts for bi-wiring. I am skeptical about the benefits of bi-wiring, especially in a two-way speaker with a simple first-order crossover. For the last 20 years, the gospel of bi-wiring has gone mostly unchallenged, and the guy who thought it up must be the hero of every wire marketer. I don't fault Meadowlark for doing it: The market virtually demands it, and I'm sure their retailers appreciate the chance to sell more speaker cable.

On a side note, one of the more outspoken voices in high-end audio journalism, Martin de Wulf's *Bound for Sound newsletter*, has been on a crusade against bi-wiring. His April 2001 issue describes several instances where he modified a bi-wired speaker for single-wiring and heard better sound. Maybe he is starting something: Pat McGinty says they're getting a few requests for single-wired Hot Rods, which they are happy to provide (another benefit of dealing with a small, responsive company). Something to think about. More on bi-wiring re: the Kestrels below.

The above-mentioned upgrades have banished the slightly honky coloration that Artie heard in 1995. The Hot Rods deliver remarkably neutral mid and high frequencies, unsurpassed by anything I have heard at or near their price.

The Hot Rods got workouts in each of the two systems *chez* Donnelly. I guess it's confession time: Two audio personas inhabit this one porky body. Sensible Wayne writes for *Listener*, and nothing tickles him more than finding terrific hi-fi gear at a reasonable cost. Evil twin Lunatic Wayne is an obsessive audiophile, inching bit-by-costly-bit toward that ever elusive sonic Nirvana. This crazy guy has assembled what we might call his My-God-What-Have-I-Done system, for more money than he cares to think about. What unites these guys is an obsessive love of music - including attendance at about 40 live concerts a year.

Review Scenario One: The Hot Rods go into the MGWHID system, right next to the nine-times more-expensive Eggleston Andras. (I should remove the Andras, but they weigh over 200 pounds each, and I have a bad back.) After four days of break-in, I clap on my critic's hat and have at 'em. First up is the Reference Recordings CD of Bernstein's Suite from *Candide* - one of the best-recorded orchestral CDs ever. (Hint for future reference: Unless I discuss a negative, any recording cited in a review is recommended.) The Hot Rods don't go nearly as deep as the Andras, or handle this disc's explosive dynamics with the same aplomb, or throw as wide and as deep a soundstage...big surprise, right? But beyond those expectable differences, something else seems wrong. I try a few more CDs and then some favorite LPs, but I'm not relaxing into the music. The notes are there, but I can't get happy.

All of the speaker cables I use in the MGWHID system are single runs. In setting up the Kestrels, I put Transparent Reference cables on the bass and Nordost SPM on the treble. These megabuck cables - both costing multiples of the Kestrels' price - are terrific individually in the big system, but they don't seem to be getting along here. Aha! Another indictment of bi-wiring? Well, not exactly. I chuck out the high-priced spread and install a very reasonably priced (under \$300 bi-wire set of DH Labs T-14. Immediately things sound better - more focused and coherent. The problem here was apparently not the bi-wiring itself, but two dissimilar cables fighting each other.

After the T-14 has run in for a couple of days, I'm no longer focusing on what the Kestrels can't do; I begin to relax and appreciate what they *can* do. What I like most about my Egglestons is their utterly natural, come hither midrange. (The secret, I think, is that the midrange drivers run full-range with no crossover.) The Kestrels, while not resolving as much inner detail, have a similarly relaxed, enticing quality. On Dave Alvin's wonderful *Public Domain* CD, I quickly

lose myself in the rich texture of Alvin's expressively rough vocals and the lively, rhythmically potent acoustic accompaniment. (These Kestrels definitely do rhythm.) Listening to the Bach solo and double violin concertos, the distinctive-sounding period violins of Andrew Manze (brilliant and penetrating) and Rachel Podger (warmer and darker) are clearly etched against the tart sonorities of the Academy of Ancient Music (Harmonia Mundi). The Kestrels' soundstaging and imaging, while smaller in scale than the Egglestons, have a similar precision of placement and scaling of instruments.

Review Scenario Two: I substitute the core electronics of my second system - VTL 2.5 line stage and VTL Tiny Triode monoblocks - for my Thor line stage and VTL 750 Reference monoblocks. Besides price, the big change here is going from 750 to 25 watts per side. (The Tiny VTLs will do 45 watts in tetrode mode, but I prefer their triode sound.) This change imposes more sanity in staffing levels on, say, Mahler, but the Tiny Triodes drive the Hot Rods surprisingly well, considering the volume of space to be filled. And, using the front-end sources of the MGWHID system, there's nothing to complain about. Perhaps the strings of The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields playing Barber's *Adagio for Strings* were a bit lusher before, but without going back for a direct comparison it's hard to imagine a more radiant sound from this treasured Argo LP (Argo ZRG 845).

Review Scenario Three: The second system moves upstairs. The digital source becomes an inexpensive Pioneer DVD player (hot-rodded by Jack Bybee), no turntable. Along with the T-14 speaker cable, I use easily affordable DH Labs and Linn interconnects. The Kestrels are placed 7 feet apart, toed in almost 45 degrees because my listening chair is only 6 feet back. The floor is now carpet over wood rather than carpet over concrete. The ceiling is much lower than the 20 foot vaulted ceiling downstairs.

In this smaller space, the Kestrels *rule*. On the more resonant floor, the bass sounds fuller, if less precise. The overall impression is of greater authority, and I like it. Although I don't demand the same kind of spatial resolution I want downstairs, the system images like a champ. The soundstage is narrower but has stunning depth, even with a 32-inch TV and an equipment rack between the speakers, I'm amazed when, playing the DVD of the Zeffirelli *La Traviata*, the voices are placed perfectly on the screen, and the offstage sounds are properly offstage. (And Stratas and Domingo sound Fabulous!) Who needs a center channel and subwoofers and surround speakers? This is plenty of home theater for me.

Briefly, I substitute a 50 WPC Arcam integrated amplifier for the VTLs. It's a different sound, of course, and I will have more to say about the Arcam in an upcoming review. For now I'll just offer that it also makes an excellent combination with the Kestrels.

Everything about these speakers says *class*, from the protective shipping cartons to the lucid owner's manual to the beautiful workmanship and materials. My review pair came in a beautiful straight-grain ash veneer, and Meadowlark offers several other striking finishes. With their compact footprint, clean lines, and tasteful black grille sock (although I prefer the sound with it removed), the Kestrels are a less intrusive physical presence than any speaker I know of that

comes close to their price/performance. (There aren't many.)

After a price increase this year, the Hot Rod Kestrels are now \$1695; the standard model is \$1395. I haven't heard the latter, but McGinty tells me they are selling more of the Hot Rods, which gives us some idea of what people are hearing in the stores. Are they still "the greatest bargain in American hi-fi"? I don't know. But I will say that they are a superb value. They play music that makes me grin, that makes me cry. Even that old reprobate Lunatic Wayne, if fate should deprive him of his expensive toys, could learn to be happy with the Hot Rods. I'll bet you could, too.

Quality: Excellent

Value: Superior value for the money. A great deal. Only a gift would be better.