

Race bred

The F80 portable home entertainment system is one of Meridian's most interesting products since the company's inception, some thirty years ago, says David Price...

Way back in 1974, one of the most striking pieces of industrial design the hi-fi world has seen surfaced - in the esoteric shape(s) of the Lecson ACI/API preamplifier/power amplifier combination. At a stroke, the two men behind it, Allen Boothroyd and Robert Stuart, marked themselves out as one of the greatest design partnerships in the British audio industry.

In 1977, when the Meridian brand was launched on an unsuspecting world, the Boothroyd/Stuart partnership again showing itself as capable of conceiving one of the world's most arresting combinations of form and function, in the shape of the 101/105 pre-power amplifier. This combo sounded superb by the standards of the day, and looked, worked and felt like absolutely nothing else on the market - its stark minimalism a dramatic contrast to the massive, button-festooned amplifiers coming out of Japan, for example.

Meridian went from strength to strength, the company becoming one of the most successful British specialist names, and has never been anything less than highly respected since, with a copper-bottomed reputation for design and build.

As an ex-owner of a Meridian 101B/103D pre-power, and a real fan of Boothroyd-Stuart designs, I personally feel the brand has had its eye slightly off the ball for the past few years. There's no question it has been doing great things with DVD, but I have found some of the visual 'freshness' that the early designs showed has gone from Meridian's latest range of rather conservative looking but highly competent products. What they've needed, in my view, has been something as radical as the Lecsons or 100 series, to breathe what car journalists used to call 'edge design' back into a mature, stale hi-fi market.

Well, here it is. The Meridian F80 is not a serious 'hi-fi separates' product, and anyone who reviews it as such is missing the point. It is

here to serve two functions. First is to put Meridian on the cultural CE map. As editor of a hi-fi magazine, I often find myself explaining the industry to casual acquaintances. Whilst such 'civilians' will invariably have heard of brands like Ferrari or Aston Martin, mention the words Meridian or Linn and they'll look at you blankly. To me, this is the biggest problem our industry faces - we don't have any big global brands that transcend 'mere' audio equipment, and we should have.

By doing a joint venture with Ferrari, who supplied some of the

construction technology, Meridian will be in markets it

could never previously have reached. It is an excellent idea from Bob Stuart, but I have to ask why he didn't do it fifteen years earlier - he and Allen Boothroyd are precisely the people who could come up with 'a design for life', in my opinion.

The other raison d'être for the F80 is to give people the option of buying a very high quality portable music (and movie) centre. Basically, it's a glorified table radio with DAB/AM/FM and silver disc (CD, CD-DA, CD-R/RW, MP3, WMA, DualDisc, DVD-V and DVD-R/RW) functionality - but this is to understate what's inside, and what it can do. This is no pale Bose imitation, but hi-fi in miniature, with all the technology that Meridian use (albeit in on a larger scale) in their separates. The

elliptical shape is striking yet simple and elegant, and comes in five official Ferrari colour options, while limited edition luxury finishes will be unveiled later this year.

This is not designed to replace a home hi-fi, but to complement it. The idea is that users of high end audio systems used to hearing serious sound will be able to enjoy the F80 in their spare rooms, studies, holiday homes or even hotel rooms. Meridian says it has built the F80 in the tradition of a proper 'home wireless': one that would be a focus for ears and eyes and fill a room with sound.

Inside its high quality (408x230x185mm) plastic shell, the 6.5kg F80 sports a solid diecast metal base, and three loudspeakers



mounted in separate, inert enclosures created from a special alloy-injected composite. "It was within this field of materials technology that Ferrari's close co-operation and specialist expertise proved invaluable", say Meridian. The electronics are impressive – there's a DAB/FM/AM tuner with built-in

station name, bitrate, stereo/mono mode, radio text and the station names of one bank of presets. Press the right hand arrow button and it displays the station names programmed into the next bank of presets. Switch source to disc, and it shows the track and time information, and the display above the row of buttons changes to offer other options. The idea, then, is that there's an 'adaptive interface' – the lower display section, in conjunction with six unlabelled buttons in the centre of the row, operates all the functions necessary. It works very well, requiring very little acclimatisation, and the only other control on the whole machine is a rotary volume knob on the bottom right hand side of the case. The other key point is the F80's connectivity. Around the back, there are sockets you'll never find on any other 'table radio'. There's a 3.5mm minijack stereo input, optical digital input and output, a 'dock' input (for a forthcoming bespoke iPod dock), plus composite and S-

lots of detail and a sense of finesse that shows its high end origins. It is dry tonally – don't expect the rich sound of an old valve table radio – but by no means stark. Rather, the F80 makes more than a half-hearted attempt at trying to reproduce accurately and in an uncoloured way, what's on the disc (or radio). The Meridian impresses by giving real midband insight, yet doesn't sound thin. The rear mounted subwoofer sees to that, by offering real bass reinforcement, but doesn't seem boomy or semi-detached either.

With a decently recorded CD, you get a genuinely musically enjoyable sound, and this is even when you've just been listening to a serious separates system. – it is taut, controlled, punchy and clean. Placement is of course an issue, and the sorts of locations the F80 is likely to find itself may not flatter it sonically. It's best of all in open space in the centre of a room, but even shoved in a corner sitting at an angle, it still fills a decent sized room with sound (and the system has a range of DSP settings to compensate for room placement). Even when you 'hit the loud pedal', the Meridian remains clean and undistorted, showing the benefit of what must be very rigid internal construction – there are no rattles or hums here.

Downsides? Well, it's just a tad veiled in the treble (what do you expect, they are full range speakers!) and there's the slightest hint of



antenna for local radio reception, and dual connections for external antennae.

To give you an idea of the detailed thinking that lies behind the F80, these are individually assignable so you can use one for AM and the other for cable radio, for example. The speakers are all under digital signal processing control, with three power amplifiers delivering 80W to the two front speakers, plus an integral rear subwoofer. The loudspeakers themselves are special full-range designs, custom-made with powerful neodymium magnets and cones fashioned from magnesium and aluminium alloy.

This is all well and good, but for me it's the display and control interface that are really going to sell the F80, and it is interesting to say the least. The front of the unit has a superb fine-pitch dot matrix 'organic LED' display, which gives extremely comprehensive information. For example, in radio mode, it shows the

Video outputs for the DVD player. All this means that the F80 does a better than average job of connecting up to the outside world.

TRACK TESTING

Of course, this is not – repeat, not – designed to compete pound for pound with a £1,495 separates hi-fi. However, in two respects at least it is far better, as the F80 is a joy to use and to look at. Sonically, I found this half moon-shaped Meridian to be like most hi-fi – it sounded mediocre cold, out of the box. Given a good few 'warm up laps' however, things really shifted up a gear, and I could hear that the company has put serious work into the audio performance of the F80. It really does sound rather good, which makes it quite unlike any other product of its type I've heard so far, even including the likes of the B&O BeoSound One (£850) which is its closest obvious rival.

Like all modern Meridian kit, it has a very clean midband, with

"with a decently recorded CD, you get a genuinely musically enjoyable sound"

sibilance sometimes, when you've just switched on. The video isn't amazing – a bespoke £200 DVD player does better, but it's still a great feature to have for bedrooms with small TVs, for a spot of casual viewing. My only real criticism is that I'd like it to have been wireless enabled, like the MagicBox Imp Wi-Fi radio – what better way to listen to the music on your laptop?

Overall, this is a product that is very hard to argue with. Sure, it is expensive, but its target customers won't really be too bothered about that. Brilliantly conceived, superbly executed and eminently 'fit for purpose', I hope it's the beginning of many more interesting 'out of the box' thoughts from Messrs Boothroyd and Stuart.

VERDICT

One of the most interesting products to hit the market for years, this is a brilliantly designed and made compact music system.

MERIDIAN F80 £1,495

Meridian Audio

+44 (0)1480 445678

www.engineeredtoexcel.com

FOR

- design
- build
- functionality

AGAINST

- price