

toneAudio.

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MEET THE FUTURE OF MUSIC



The Sooloos Music Server

ALL OF YOUR MUSIC, ALL OF THE TIME — Jeff Dorgay

Just so you know that I haven't fallen off my rocker, I still love analog. I own about 4000 LPs and a pretty darn good analog front end to boot. But the more time I spend listening to music, the more digital intrigues me because it's become so much more listenable in the last few years AND because it's terribly convenient.

Like it or not, that's the word, convenience...

Hold that thought and let's take it a few steps further. The iPod came along and iTunes let you have a lot of music in a central place, which was a lot of fun for casual listening. Being one of the crazed ones that started importing in lossless from the beginning, I built up a pretty good collection of music on my computer at high resolution. The problem still came linking the computer to the hifi in a meaningful way. This led me to the Squeezebox, which allowed me to have the collection on my network and this great little box in my living room that I could scroll through when I wanted music. It was cute and fairly easy to operate, but had some limitations.

I also tried a few of the other music servers, with acceptable results, but I still found myself wanting something more and still screwing around with the process way too much. Again, convenience!

Just so you know that I'm not a technophobe, I've been using computers, digital cameras and Photoshop since day one and have been an early adopter of darn near everything. (But not an iPhone!) I tell you this so you don't think that I'm not able to understand compression rates, i.d. tags, filing album art and all the other hoo hah that goes along with managing a digital music collection. I've been there and done most of it.

The big problem is that after all of these years, I'm sick of it! I want the promises that Steve Jobs made years ago to be kept. I want these things to be as easy to use as a toaster, so I can just enjoy music. I DON'T want to dink around with any of that stuff, especially because I do this for a living. And I certainly don't want to do it for my friends or family either. I hate being the tech support guy in my spare time, it really makes me testy.

Finally, the promise has been fulfilled with the Sooloos.

No more screwing around. Turn it on, rip some CDs and enjoy your music. No more filing, tagging, or categorizing and then doing it over because you did it wrong the first (or second, or third) time. Once you have all of your music loaded into the Sooloos music server, you can just enjoy it, and for this writer, that's what it's all about. If you are really lazy, the folks at Sooloos will even pre rip your whole collection on your server so you don't have to lift a finger, just push play!

I'm going to take a guess that if you really enjoy music and are like me, you probably have at least a few thousand CDs, maybe even ten thousand CDs. (maybe even more) **But even though you have all that music, you listen to the same two or three hundred CDs most of the time. Why? Convenience.**



No more screwing around. Turn it on, rip some CDs and enjoy your music.

Even if you have all of your CDs in alphabetical order or some other kind of mental relational database in your head, some days you just don't want to stretch or try and remember what's on that Blondie album you haven't heard in a few years.

Let's face it, we are all visual people. When you see those CDs all lined up on the shelves, or the big list of song titles on the iTunes screen, it doesn't really register, because you need the visual. The latest versions of iTunes with the flipping album covers is a step in the right direction and helpful, but not enough. Should you have a really big music collection, you also know that iTunes becomes pretty cumbersome to use once you get about 1000 CDs loaded and almost unusable if your collection is in the thousands.

Music guys are behind this thing, that's why it rules.

'We wanted a music server that would hold our personal collections!' That's the answer you get out of the guys at Sooloos. Make no mistake they are hard core music lovers (with backgrounds as recording engineers, and programming people) that have pooled their talents to make what I feel is the most significant consumer electronic device since the Macintosh computer made the scene.

The last time I saw Laurie Anderson, she said that we tend to buy new technology but end up just throwing it in a drawer with all those other gadgets that we don't use because we are too overwhelmed or just too lazy to figure out. Rob Darling, one of the three principles of Sooloos put it this way: 'Whenever I'm at a party and someone is listening to music on a PC, no one interacts with it. But if I go to someone's house with a Sooloos, everyone is hanging out, waiting to pick the next song!'



At first you might think that of course, one of the guys that designed this thing would say that, but now that I've had a Sooloos for a while, I couldn't agree with him more.

Listening to music is one of my favorite pastimes in the whole world and whenever I can, I always enjoy sharing it with others. But those of you that have a decent system know that it often discourages casual listening. When your friends come over and you start digging through the stacks of music (no matter how well you have them categorized) they start to glaze over and talk about buying Jet Skis.

Having a Sooloos in my living room has changed all of that. The minute we installed this baby, everyone went crazy! Best of all, my television has been pretty dark and the DVR has only been about 40% full instead of the 98% full that it used to be. Anything that keeps TV time to a minimum is a good thing in my house, especially with a teenager!

Ok, Let's Address The Techie Stuff, Shall We?

The Sooloos requires three components: The Store, The Control and The Source.

Having a Sooloos in my living room has changed everything. The minute we installed this baby, everyone went crazy!

The Store is where the hard drives are stored to hold your music. You can get them configured in any size that you need, depending on how expansive your music collection is. They come in pairs because the system is always backing up your library. The Store uses convection cooling, so it is very quiet and should not offend the fussiest audiophiles in the crowd. If you really need silence, just run an Ethernet cable and put your stores somewhere else!

The Source has the DAC and analog output circuitry and depending on which one you purchase (we have a Source:five) will determine how many separate analog zones you can control from The Control. The Source is completely silent.



At the rear the Source:five has four Ethernet jacks to connect the other Sooloos components and five sets of analog RCA outputs for the other 'zones.' There is also a digital output for zone one, so you have the option of running one zone through an external DAC if you have one. I use mine with Wadia's fantastic 521 and am very happy with the results. The Control is the 17" touchscreen panel that looks very similar to an Apple flat screen computer monitor, finished in silver with a slot in the base for you to import your discs. Thanks to this big panel, you don't have to worry about losing a remote control!

Initial Setup is Extremely Easy

Once you unpack and decide where you will place the Source and Store units, Connect the Source to a router and the internet, then connect the Stores to the Source. Then you run some Ethernet cable to where you would like the Control to be. I suggest a nice central location, because no matter where you put the Control, it will get a ton of attention! That's all there is to the setup.

While there are other music servers that offer a bit more flexibility by being wireless, they are not without their pitfalls. The Squeezebox and Transporter glitch constantly, especially if my network has a lot of traffic. While only mildly annoying, it still takes away from the convenience that this kind of device is supposed to provide in the first place. Darling concurs: 'We just couldn't get the reliability we wanted with a wireless system, especially since we are using FLAC files.

And we felt that with a lot of people putting the Sooloos into a multizone system in a big home they would probably have all of their electronics in a central location anyway.'

Ultimate Flexibility

When you insert a CD in the slot of the Control you will notice that it takes a few minutes longer to rip than on your standard PC, about six minutes compared to about three or four on my laptop. It takes a while because it has to do some specialized things.

The Sooloos stores everything in FLAC format, so when it comes back out to analog, it is in a lossless format, ensuring absolute fidelity. For those of you not familiar with FLAC, you can read more here: <http://flac.sourceforge.net/>. And as they are ripping, they do many things - hidden sector synchronization (jitter correction), detection of read errors, and heavy error correction at multiple speeds - to compensate for the weaknesses of redbook cd players.

Now, they aren't the only ones to use FLAC or take advantage of what a computer can do better than a CD player, but they are the only ones who rip the album as one large file, so you get truly gapless playback. Gone are the little ticks between tracks in Dark Side of the Moon or at the super quiet pianissimo between movements. They also analyze the average volume of the track so that during a party you can turn on 'Radio Mode' and all the songs will play at the same volume. They also look for the actual start of audio so songs don't start with silence during a party.

You can tell these guys know music, because they've thought of everything! They've even made it possible for you to easily go in and change the album art on your collection (via the Control PC function) so those of you with import or collector versions can have the right album art.

Here's another of the areas that the Sooloos stands head and shoulders above the rest of the music server world – that extra time it takes to rip a CD is because it is also creating a backup FLAC stream AND a separate MP3 stream that you can download to your iPod! (ever try keeping a whole collection of both full-quality files and mp3s? Insane!) Once you are done ripping a CD, it's already backed up and ready to go on your iPod as well. You will have to log in to the Sooloos with your computer and transfer the tunes you want through iTunes, but that is very easy. Best of all, you can rip your CDs while you are listening, not interrupting the music flow! Again – convenience!!

A Touch of Greatness

What really defines the Sooloos is its ease of use via that giant touchscreen. I currently have about 3000 CDs loaded on mine and it's a blast! It takes about a minute and a half to fully boot and the screen comes up at a random spot in your library so you don't always see the same albums at startup. If you are like me and just leave it on at all times (so you can always play music!!), this is completely a non issue.

Navigation is across the top in alphabetical order, with tabs similar to what you might see at your favorite record store. Each page on the screen displays 18 album cover thumbnails that are a very legible 2" squares, with each album's title and artist description right beneath it.

The bottom of the screen features a pair of arrows to take you forward and backwards in the collection. When you flip from page to page, the response time is instant, and if you hold the navigation button down, it will whip through the pages. If you can read as fast as Mr. Data, you can probably scroll through my 3000 CDs in about 15 seconds!



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Also along the bottom there is a window that lets you know what album and track are playing, as well as how much time is remaining on the current song and how much time is left in the song queue. The middle has the standard play/pause, forward and reverse buttons. The next window lets you know which zone you are accessing and there are a couple of tool icons in the lower right corner.

The one that looks like a magnifying glass, brings up a touch screen that lets you search the entire database by album, song or artist. If you just have a fragment, it will work just like an advanced search on your computer. There is also another great button here that looks like the aperture of a camera lens and it is appropriately called the Focus button.

The Ultimate Music Lover's Treat

This is where the Sooloos really gets powerful. While you can make playlists on the fly, Focus allows you to categorize your music by Genre, Credits, Labels AND Credits. Want to find all the music in your collection produced by Mutt Lange? No problem. Want to find all the music in your collection that Prairie Prince played drums on? Easy. You can add them to a focused collection and go for it. Try that with your Squeezebox!

Lets take it a step further: we can even sort by mood! To try this, I just chose 'trippy' from the menu and it reshuffles the music available on the screen and sorted down from 3000 CDs to 210. It did a pretty good job of choosing too: Flaming Lips – good, Greatful Dead – definitely trippy! Pink Floyd – pretty trippy indeed. To go back to the whole collection, just touch the Focus button again and hit refocus. That will put your whole collection back at your disposal.

If it just ended here, the Sooloos would be the ultimate server, but there's more. This thing is KILLER fast. Want to go from listening to Blondie to YES? Instant. Our Club Mix correspondent Scott Tetzlaff oversees data management and server building for one of the top advertising agencies on Earth and when he saw how lightning fast the Sooloos was he said, 'Dude, that thing is fast! Those guys know what they are doing!!' And it works this fast with all five zones going at once!

When you queue up some tunes to play, you can pick individual songs, or whole albums. Once you start listening, you can add more songs to the end of the queue with the Add to Queue button, put a song in rotation next with the Play Next button or if you are like my good friend Skeptical Roy (who we sometimes tease and call ADD boy) hit the Play Now button. When the selection has played it goes right back to your playlist, which is quite excellent when you need to hear something RIGHT NOW.

But wait, there's more! Instead of using the Gracenote music database that iTunes does, the Sooloos uses the AMG (All Music Guide) database for its information. Instead of just giving you album art and song titles, you get the release date, full album credits and even a review at your fingertips! Like I said, if you are a true music lover, this is the grail indeed.

Want to really blow your mind? Put the Sooloos in 'Swim' mode and it will just do the random shuffle thing, still allowing you to pick your favorite songs at random and then go back to swimming! I can't wait until I have 10 thousand CDs loaded, I may never take it out of swim mode!



This thing is KILLER fast. Want to go from listening to Blondie to YES? Instant.

We Keep Coming Back To Convenience

The Sooloos just makes it so easy to enjoy a large music collection, I can't imagine not having one of these anymore, and I am totally addicted! The wife acceptance factor on this piece of gear is fantastic and I'm told by a few of the Sooloos dealers I've talked to that it's often the wife that wants one even more than the man of the family. Ok, I'll tell you the bad news, a basic Sooloos system will set you back about \$12k, but considering who this product is aimed at, and the convenience offered, I feel it is reasonably priced.

I'm sure the computer geeks out there could kluge something together for a few thousand bucks, but I guarantee that it would not have the look and feel of the Sooloos and it certainly wouldn't have the elegant operating system that this offers or a fraction of the features. Know anyone who's successfully outdone the Macintosh OS yet?

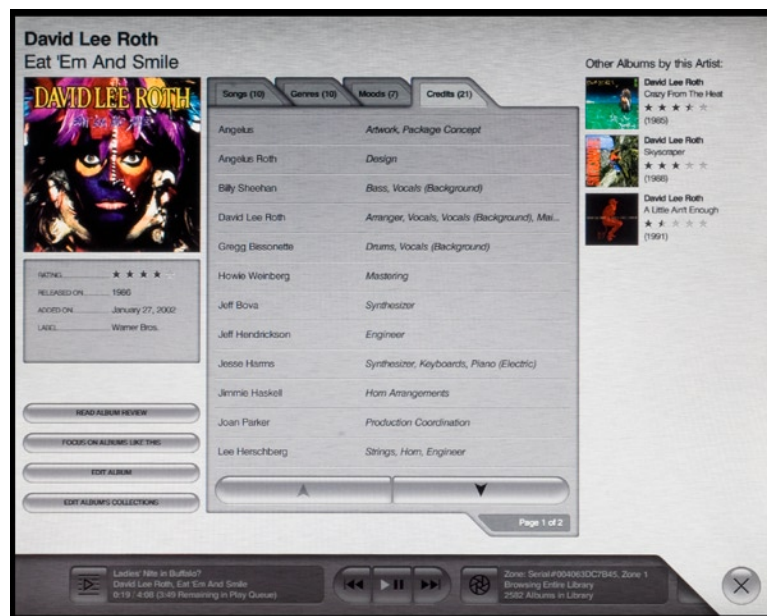
You are paying for elegance, convenience and speed here folks. Yes I know that the new 26 thousand dollar Hyundai sedan has one inch more legroom than the 90 thousand dollar BMW 760i, but I know what I'd rather pull up to the Grammys in. You get sneechny designer appeal and incredible server performance with the Sooloos.

The Sooloos music server can easily be used in a large home with multiple music zones as it comes from the factory, or it can be used as an audiophile component in the best systems with an external DAC. Straight out of the box, the sound quality is on par with what you'd expect from a CD player in the \$2000 range, but with a good DAC is as good as you would expect with a very high end digital player. I've been using mine with the new Wadia 521 DAC and the sound is comparable to what I get from my Wadia 581i player. You will need a good external DAC if you want the best performance from the Sooloos.

To Buy or Not to Buy a Sooloos

For some of our readers, a five-figure music server is not the right choice and is probably out of reach. There are tons of other products out there, but I haven't seen anything that comes close to being this intuitive, elegant and easy to use. However, considering there are people paying more than this for a one-meter pair of interconnects, it's not ridiculous by any stretch of the imagination.

I've had quite a few of my family members and friends over to interact with the Sooloos now and it's unanimous, they all LOVE it.



As a music lover, it is so much fun to have your friends over and let them just go at it to pick out their favorite songs. On one level I wish this darn thing was a touch more affordable, because in my 30 years of being a high-end audio enthusiast, I've never seen anything that gets people to connect with music like the Sooloos music server.

And if that's your objective, the Sooloos is the ONLY choice. ●

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