

toneAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.28 April 2010

John Mayer

**Brings His Battle to
Portland's Rose Garden**

Apple's iPad
IT IS ALL THAT

Exclusive!
Bob Gendron Talks to Stooges'
Guitarist James Williamson

Long Term Test
The Sooloos Control 10
Still The Future of Music

Fab Fact 8
Review of PMC's Latest
And a Factory Visit

Can you dig it?
Anne Farnsworth
Explores the Music of the
Blaxploitation Era

Still at the Top

The Meridian/Sooloos Control 10

By Jeff Dorgay

It's always nice to be right. When we reviewed the Sooloos Music Server two years ago, we put it on our cover claiming it was the future of music. During the next year, other HiFi magazines saw the light and came around to singing its praises.

I was amazed at the Sooloos' ability to organize and display a large music collection, and I purchased the review sample to integrate into my system, which at the time had very good analog and digital sources.

Guess what? I ended up listening to the Sooloos most of the time, using the DAC section of my Wadia 781SE. While it did not have the ultimate fidelity of my discrete sources, the sound was good enough using the DAC that I considered it a serious high-end component. And the convenience was intoxicating, with all my CD's in one spot for instant access and no more review sessions with CD cases scattered all over the studio.

The best part of having a Sooloos was that everyone else could enjoy my music collection, oo. Whatever your level of paranoia with non-audiophiles interacting with your music system – and perhaps your rare discs – ends with the Sooloos. No one has to actually touch your precious anymore. Just point them towards the 17-inch touch screen and hand them a remote to control the volume.

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Even my 75-year-old mother-in-law can find her favorite Ella Fitzgerald album in the blink of an eye. Nothing is more user friendly than the Sooloos, exceeding even Apple in this respect. (iTunes, even in Cover Flow mode, pales in comparison)

However, all version 1.0 products have limitations, and the Sooloos had a few. The system was somewhat cumbersome physically, requiring three separate components to work: the Control, Store and Source were each required to be a fully operational system, and there was no support for high-resolution music files. But it was still a fantastic effort for a fledgling audio company.

Meridian Enters the Picture

In May 2008, Meridian Audio made Sooloos a division of their company, adding their digital and large-scale manufacturing expertise to Sooloos' strength in programming and interface design. When the partnership was made official, Sooloos principal Enno Vandermeer and Meridian founder Bob Stuart agreed that they each picked up where the other left off almost seamlessly in their areas of engineering strength.

The first new product resulting from this partnership is the current Sooloos Control 10, which integrates the former

Control and Source into one component, and barely larger than the original Control. The Control 10 retains most of the functionality of the original Sooloos, with only the analog outputs missing and a pair of analog inputs on the rear panel, which have not yet been defined. Owners of Meridian powered speakers can now plug directly in to the Sooloos via Meridian's speaker link, which only requires standard Ethernet cable. Those wanting a minimalist high-performance system can now just use a Sooloos Control 10 and a pair of Meridian-powered loudspeakers. Very cool.

The biggest advantage of Meridian acquiring Sooloos is the depth of manufacturing expertise at their extensive facility. Control 10's are made in the UK factory alongside their legendary 800-series components. This has also helped dealers, providing more access to stock along with addressing the peripheral issues (such as warranty repair and technical support) with which a small company always struggles. In short, the Sooloos has matured as a product and rather well in a short time. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

Multiple Backup Solutions

In the past, additional Sooloos Stores had to be purchased, and while expensive, still made for the easiest way to keep all of your digital music data covered. After all, who wants to be bothered with backup? While not as seamless, manual backups can be accomplished with ease using your NAS of choice. As the price of hard drives continues to plummet, a reasonable NAS with 3-8TB of space can be assembled for around a thousand dollars, so those with mega collections can still have a reasonably priced backup solution outside of the Sooloos envelope.

If you have a more modest CD collection and don't want to be bothered with manual backups, adding a TwinStore will back up your collection automatically. An MP3 version of your files is also generated so that music can be downloaded to your iPod and taken with you. No fussing with tags and such. Everything gets done as you rip the disc. The entire system is scalable, so adding more storage and backup requires only an open port on your network hub.

This can be configured two ways: you can use one 2TB TwinStore for music storage and one for backup (allowing about 5,000 albums to be stored at standard 16 bit/44khz resolution in .flac format, or each TwinStore can be

configured to use half of it for storage and half for backup, offering a capacity of about 2,500 CD's. While the most expensive backup solution, choosing a complete Sooloos situation is the most tidy. A Twin Store with drives installed is \$3,000.

Price Drop

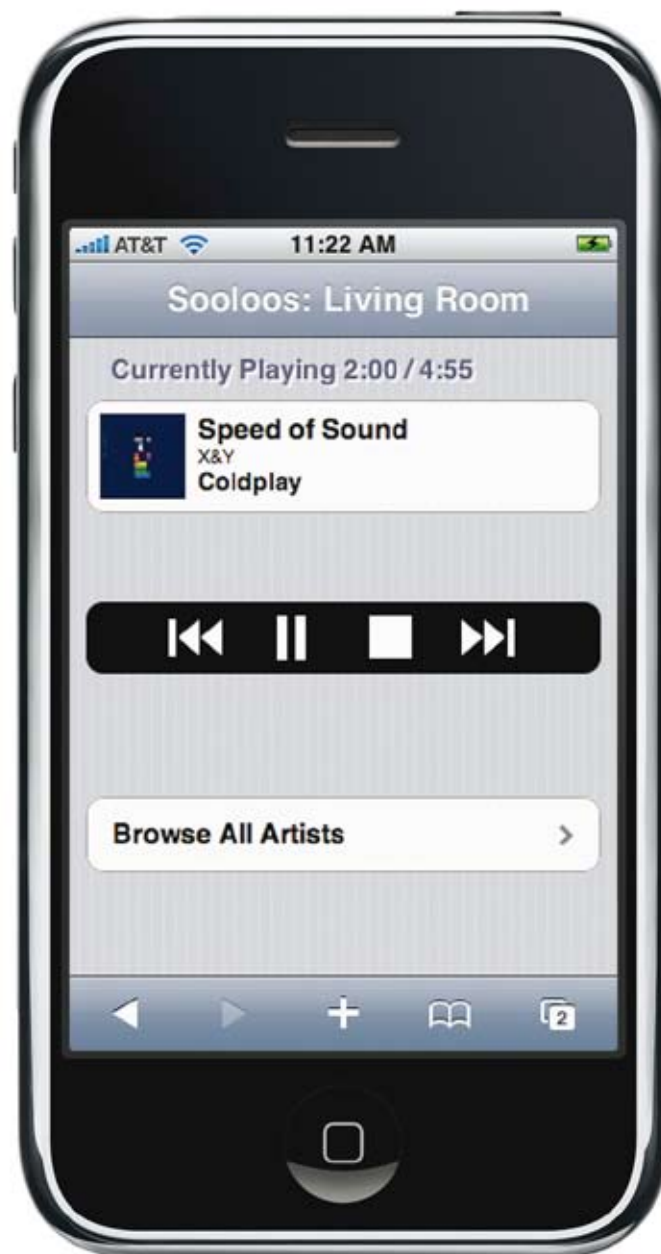
The first Sooloos had a five-figure pricetag, which put it out of the market for many, but the current hardware has come down in price. The Control 10 has an MSRP of \$5,500 and combines the features of the Control and Source in one component. Pairing it up with a single Twin Store that can hold 2,500 CD's brings the total system cost to \$8,500.

While this is by no means inexpensive, it is a game changer for Sooloos. If we make a quick comparison to its nearest competitors from QSonix, McIntosh, Naim and B&O, the Sooloos actually has more features, more functionality and greater expandability than its rivals, which are all priced very closely.

Those of you more in the DIY frame of mind can put a computer-based music system together from scratch for \$1,500 - \$2,000, but it will not provide the ease of use or the level of support that the Sooloos does. And forget about your wife allowing it in the living room, or any hope of resale. *(continued)*

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With Control Mac/PC installed on other computers in your home environment, anyone on the network can play the music from the collection locally, without affecting playback on other zones.

The ultimate value of the Sooloos is a turnkey system that you can enjoy now. I've read countless tales of woe on the internet about ripping, tagging, finding album covers, etc., etc. If you just want to start enjoying your music on one platform, just buy a Sooloos. It is as easy to use as toasting bread.

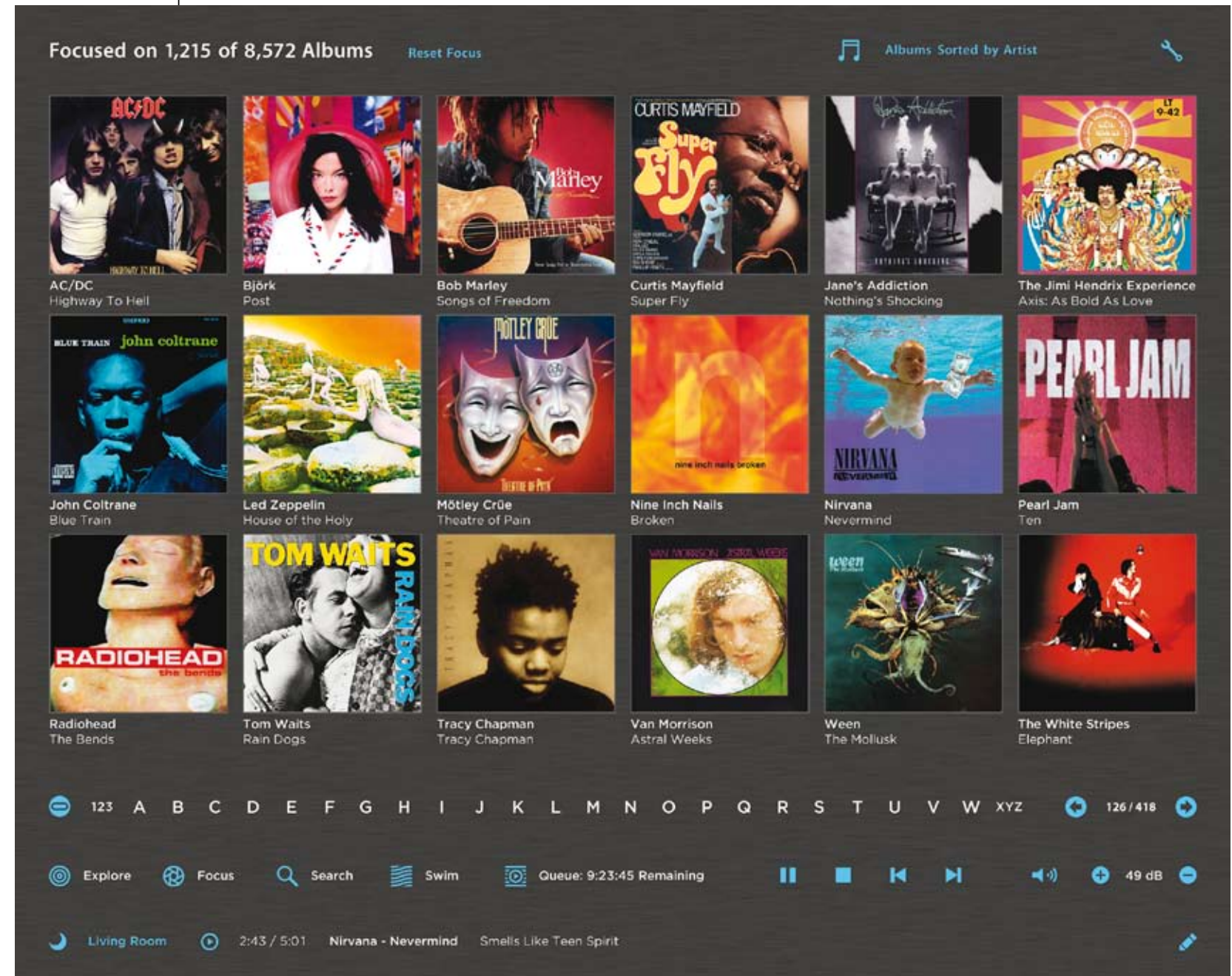
Additional Network Functionality

One of the only weaknesses of the Control 10 is the laptop CD drive used for importing CD's. It works well for the occasional CD that you bring home from the music store, but if you have a large collection to import, talk to your Sooloos dealer, or else use a Mac or PC on your network. Thanks to the Sooloos Control Mac (or Control PC for PC users) application, you can use your desktop or laptop computer to import music from disc or files.

Based on EAC technology, the quality of rips I've experienced have been consistently high. And the use of All Music Guide for album artwork and metadata has been accurate about 90 percent of the time. If you have multiple computers on your network, you can rip from each workstation. Commandeering a few friends' laptops for the weekend allowed me to rip a thousand CD's in short order.

When using Control Mac/PC, it is very easy to edit metadata. So if you have a special pressing that isn't listed, the correct album covers are only a drag and drop away. If all else fails, a digital camera will capture JPEG files, and you can import the album art. This proved to be invaluable when digitizing older LP's or rare CD's that are off the AMG radar.

With Control Mac/PC installed on other computers in your home environment, anyone on the network can play the music from the collection locally, without affecting playback on other zones. This is another great way to let your kids or guests have access to your full music library with ease.



High Res Support

Now that the Sooloos works with 24/96 files, I've been able to greatly expand my music collection on the system, downloading files from Naim and HD tracks as well as burning most of my DVD-a collection. Utilizing the Nagra LB digital recorder, 24/96 captures have been painless, and adding my favorite LP's to the collection allows me to enjoy my vinyl collection that much easier,

especially with recent 45 rpm records having 5-8 minutes of music per side. For those who require even higher fidelity, Sooloos principal Enno Vandermeer has hinted that a future software upgrade may even offer 24/192 capability ...

The ability to play standard CD, high-resolution and streaming files together from one location makes the Sooloos a ubiquitous part of your system. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

The Sooloos Control 10

MSRP: \$5,500,
(2 TB TwinStore,
\$3,000 additional)

MANUFACTURER

Meridian Audio Ltd. (UK)
+44 1480 445678

Meridian America Inc.
(US) 404 344 7111
www.sooloos.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier

Burmester 011

Power Amplifier

Burmester 911 MK.3

DAC Wadia 781SE,
SimAudio Moon 750,
McIntosh MCD500,
dCS Paganini stack

Speakers

Verity Audio
Sarasro II, GamuT S-7
and S-9, MartinLogan
CLX w/JL Audio
Gotham Subwoofer

Cable Shunyata Aurora
interconnects, Shunyata
Stratos SP speaker cable

Power Running Springs
Dmitri and Maxim power
conditioners (system),
Shunyata Hydra 2 power
conditioner (Sooloos),
RSA Mongoose and HZ
power cords, Shunyata
Python CX power cords

Now you can enjoy *all* of your music in one place. A music server is only of limited use if it can only access part of your music collection. The minute you have to hunt around for other software, it becomes less interesting.

While I haven't lost my love for physical media, the Sooloos adds to my musical enjoyment in two ways: I get to sample a wider range of music on a daily basis because it is so easy to access, and I'm not putting additional wear on my vinyl collection for "casual listening." Now I listen to my LP's only when I can give them my full, undivided attention.

Rhapsody Support and Internet Radio

Thanks to the recent 2.1 update to the Sooloos software, it also supports the Rhapsody music site. There are more than nine million tracks on demand, and you can access all of them for your Sooloos and via the search function, listen to a track or the whole album, or make the album part of your permanent music collection.

This is another treat for the music lover looking to expand his or her vocabulary. While Rhapsody only streams at 128kb/sec MP3 rate, it's still more than acceptable for background music or for sifting through an artist that interests you. It probably won't save you any money on music purchases (if anything, you will probably buy *more* music), but the percentage of stuff you buy that you truly will enjoy will go up dramatically.

I've had great fun using Rhapsody as a place holder for music in my vinyl collection that I'd ultimately like to digitize, so that I can listen to the music in the meantime. It's also been very handy for creating an ongoing wish list of music that I'd like to own in physical format. This is especially good for exploring artists with deep catalogs.

Sooloos 2.1 also features support for internet radio, though somewhat limited at this point. It only allows the choice of your favorite stations, which can be saved for future use. Unfortunately, the station chosen does not include any information about the music while it's being played. If you have a computer handy, you'll find that many channels have a feed online that allows you to keep track of the music. It would be outstanding if the next release of the Sooloos software would offer this functionality.

To Know it is to Love it

After almost three years, the Sooloos Music Server is still the one to beat. The interface is easier to use than any other product on the market (and I've used all of them), and that's the key to truly enjoying a product like this. If you are forced to become an IT person, it takes the fun out of music. The Sooloos will work well with a moderate collection, but is only limited in its scalability by the amount of hard-drive space you can add to your network.

Nothing has brought me (or my family and friends) closer to a larger percentage of my music collection than the Sooloos music server. Thanks to high-resolution file support and Rhapsody, my enthusiasm for the product is even higher than it was the day I took it out of the box. ●

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