

SAM'S BY SAM TELLIG SPACE

THIS ISSUE: Sam digs La Rosita's new streamer and two more Bluetooth receivers.

Streaming Music with Ethernet, WiFi, & Bluetooth

La Rosita is a Mexican restaurant near Louisville, Kentucky. It is also a town in Starr County, Texas.

Beyond tacos and Texas, "La Rosita" is the third track on the classic jazz album *Coleman Hawkins Encounters Ben Webster*, recorded in 1957. The jazz tune inspired Dan Bellity and his confrères in the south of France to produce streamer-DACs that have been available in Europe for several years now. The Alpha New is now available in the US for \$2995. Both its software and firmware are said to be upgradeable. (If only I were upgradeable, too.)

As a simpleton, I appreciate products that make decisions for me by eliminating useless features and distractions. Freedom from choice. Just as in Soviet Russia.

The Alpha New has an Ethernet input, left and right analog RCA outputs, and one S/PDIF digital output so you can send its datastream to your favorite DAC. Not that there's much point in doing that; the Alpha New's own DAC is superb.

Keep your present DAC if you still spin CDs and listen in real time. You can't play CDs straight into the Alpha New. And you're limited to 16 bits and 44.1kHz. Hi-rez files take a haircut; they get lopped off.

Controversial? I laugh my evil laugh.

I caught up with La Rosita's Cyrille Guyot last summer, at a French café—not in southern France, *hélas*. Ever try to chew, chuck, chat, and take notes at the same time? I got the gist of La Rosita and e-mailed my questions, after I'd settled in with the Alpha New. (Nah, never heard the Alpha Old.)

Dan and Cyrille dismiss spinning CDs and listening in real time as *ridicule*. That's why the Alpha New has no S/PDIF input. To play CDs, rip and stream them to iTunes and play them back from your music library. This way, per Dan and Cyrille, you'll avoid the errors and jitter that plague CD playback on the fly.

I'll stick with my Parasound Halo CD 1, a computer disguised as a CD player. The raw data streamed from a CD goes into the Halo's buffer, where the stream is analyzed and errors corrected before the music plays. The *raisons d'être* of the Halo CD 1 and La Rosita's Alpha New seem the same: to free the streaming bits from your spinning CDs. *À nous la liberté!*

To phrase this another way: Direct, on-the-fly CD playback limits the sound quality more than does a resolution of 16-bit/44.1kHz. *Harrumph, harrumph*. Right, Chief?

You don't need to use iTunes with the Alpha New. It's claimed to work with (almost) any datastream, and any



Dan and Cyrille dismiss spinning CDs and listening in real time as ridicule.

device that works with Apple's Airport Express. That black box protruding from the rear of the Alpha New is, according to La Rosita, an Apple WiFi bridge.

If you dislike iTunes as much as I do, you can use TuneIn for Internet radio, or go directly to

your favorite Internet streams, where you might have a choice of streams or codecs.

Things may change this fall, but, as I write, Airport Express limits users to 16/44.1. This is what makes John Atkinson grouse, even as he *enjoys* an Airport Express at home.

Harrumph, harrumph. Or hooray, hooray?

According to Dan and Cyrille, you can *wrest* good sound—JA's favorite verb, because hi-fi is a struggle—from 16/44.1. Do you need those chaotic, confusing, costly, high-resolution downloads? Must you jump on *every* audio bandwagon?

With music downloads, hi-rez or lo-, I don't feel as if I'm buying anything. Files, in a bewildering array of formats, some of which might become unplayable in the future, to store in the cloud...? I have no faith in the cloud. I would rather store my files (if I had any) in hell, where they would be waiting for me when I croak. I want *things* I can *collect*, rather than files that could just get... lost in space.

Encore, je ris mon mauvais rire. Don't abandon your CDs. You can have Perfect Sound Forever, just as Sony said in 1983. What they didn't say then was that you couldn't have it until 2014.

Don't believe me? Listen to La Rosita's Alpha New—or the Parasound Halo CD 1.

I tried ripping some of my CDs to iTunes, a tedious and time-consuming task. Then I played them back, comparing the Alpha New with the Halo CD 1. They sounded almost the same.

About that Ethernet input. If you don't have an Ethernet connection nearby, you can purchase an extender router

bit rates. AAC+ at 96kbps sounds wonderful on Radio Swiss Jazz. I heard it last night (August 9) in a live stream from Tanglewood: Stéphane Denève conducting the Boston Symphony in Tchaikovsky's Symphony 4. Yes, the sound was slightly congested in some of the more, well . . . *congested* passages. But the broadcast and the Alpha New captured most of the dynamics and all of the flow of the music. Musical sonorities—especially brass and woodwinds—were ravishing.

Why own downloads? Stream!

Subscription audio streaming may be taking off in a big way very soon. Naxos, for instance, is set to make a big announcement this fall. This is clearly what I want—not costly digital downloads that can be as much a pain to store as the physical discs. I want to pay as I go, as my wife and I do with Netflix and Hulu. If we love a movie or series, we may buy it on Blu-ray.

The Naxos Music Library: Listen for free

Twenty-five years ago, HNH, the parent company of Naxos, saw the classical recording industry on the edge and into a tailspin from which it has never recovered. They had a unique idea: that an \$18 CD was worth five or six bucks. Needless to say, the then-major record labels looked on, aghast.

Naxos will make a big announcement about streaming this fall. (Nick at Naxos is keeping Sam in the loop.) Meanwhile, your local library might be offering its patrons the Naxos Music Library and the Naxos

Jazz Library for free. Tens of thousands of CDs—some available weeks before their official release. From the Naxos Music Library website: "Complete catalogues or selected recordings of over 640 labels such as ARC, Berlin Classics, BIS, Capriccio, Chandos, EMI Classics, Erato, Finlandia, Hänssler Classic, Harmonia Mundi, Hungaroton, Naïve, Naxos, Nonesuch, Nimbus, Ondine, RCA Records, Sony Classical, Teldec, Virgin Classics and Warner Classics."

Someone pays, of course. That would be your local library, which has probably cut back on buying CDs. The minimum number of listening stations (or seats) is five. The annual cost per seat for institutions is \$250 for the classical library, and an optional additional \$75 for the jazz library. Individual subscriptions are available, but maybe it's best to wait for the big announcement. If seats get filled, you're bumped. You wait until someone gets off his/her ass and logs out.

Does your local library already offer it? If not, might you suggest that they do?

Here's the catch. "Standard" sound quality is 64kbps. "Premium" quality is 128kbps and costs a premium: 50% more. The forthcoming announcement may offer higher resolutions. Meanwhile, individuals can subscribe, too: www.naxosmusiclibrary.com. But even at 64kbps, the Naxos Music Library can sound surprisingly good, especially with La Rosita's Alpha New. Of course, it depends on the particular recording.

FOCAL UNIVERSAL WIRELESS RECEIVER

Bluetooth receivers keep coming and coming. These two are reasonably priced and offer aptX, which *does* improve Bluetooth sound, provided your sending device has it. iPhones and iPads don't, as of August, but that might change this fall. I have aptX on my Macbook Air. According to Focal, "The aptX codec achieves a 4:1 compression ratio, allowing for near-CD quality listening."

Focal's receiver is tiny: 2.75" high by 2.25" long by 0.5" thin. If your RCA inputs are spaced the standard 0.6" apart, you can plug the Focal device directly into your preamp or integrated, no interconnect needed. Otherwise, there's an adapter. There is no digital output; no space for the



dingus in a device this small. Price is \$119.95.

Never mind. I plugged it into the

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- Sam Tellig, Stereophile

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back of my LFD LE V integrated. No fuss, no clutter, except for the power cord and wall-wart power supply.

It paired easily with all my devices. The sound was quite acceptable. Not as dynamic, spacious, and extended on top as other, larger, more expensive Bluetooth receivers, perhaps—but I think a lot of us have had quite enough of “serious” listening, and “serious” writers, for that matter. Plug it in and enjoy.

I love the simplicity and elegance of this thing. But La Rosita's *Album* New sounds worlds better—for many more times the price.

OUTLAW AUDIO BTR-100 BLUETOOTH RECEIVER

This one's tiny, too—2.5" square by 0.8" thin. It comes with power cord and wall wart and a single miniplug analog audio output. Again, there's no room for a digital out. The price



is \$39.99. Outlaw Audio doesn't hold you up! And it has aptX—at one-third the price of the Focal, with comparable sound quality. (The Focal did seem to offer slightly more spacious, more extended sound. Cleaner, clearer, crisper transients. More air.)

If you want to try Bluetooth, don't agonize—just buy one. If you don't use it with your main system, you can do as I do: connect it to your table radio (if it has an auxiliary input). This was fine with my Tivoli Model Two radio in the kitchen, where I listen to Radio Swiss Jazz as I cook dinner for Marina and me. If you want to use this in your main system, you can use the supplied miniplug-to-twin-RCA interconnect.

There are Bluetooth receivers even cheaper than the Outlaw, but few of them include aptX, and those that work on batteries are a flat-out pain in the ass. The Outlaw beats the cheaper ones I've heard hands down . . . or hands up. This one's a steal. The guys at Outlaw are straight shooters. Now I'd better stop, before I shoot myself in the foot. ■

CONTACTS

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Web: www.larosita.fr

US distributor: Fidelis AV

60 Amherst Street (Route 101A)
Nashua, NH 03063
Tel: (603) 880-4434
Fax: (603) 880-4433
Web: www.fidelisav.com

US distributor: Audioarts

210 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010
Tel: (212) 260-2939
Web: <http://audioarts.co>

Focal

BP 374-108, rue de l'Avenir
42353 La Talaudière Cedex, France
Tel: (33) 4-77-43-57-00
Web: www.focal.com

US distributor: Audio Plus Services

156 Lawrence Paquette Industrial Drive
Champlain, NY 12919
Tel: (800) 663-9352, (450) 585-0098
Fax: (866) 656-0686
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