

## TW Acustic Raven AC-3 versus....

TW Acustic Raven AC-3 versus... The Path to Turntable Enlightenment

This table has been a hot topic in a number of places – publications, the net and here on AGon. So, I thought I would share my adventures on the path to turntable “enlightenment”. However, before I proceed I would like to provide a disclaimer. The views expressed here are the views of the author only (me) and are not representative of any of the companies I may mention. I have no affiliation with any of the companies I may mention – including but not limited to TW Acustic, Doshi or ATC. Now that I have that out of the way let’s move on to the meat of this thread.

First, the summary for those that don’t like to read the details (-:

1. Linn LP-12 -no comparison. Like a good college baseball team vs. the Yankees
2. SME-20 - better but still clinical/analytical. Good hi-fi, but not musical. A or AA Baseball.
3. Nottingham Dais - better or the same as the SME-20 - depending on the frequency range - but still not hi-fi. A+ or AA Baseball
4. Raven AC-3. The World Series Champ!! Ah - here is the music. It delivers the last octave of bass with the slam of the kick drum and makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up with vocals with the feeling the artist is in the room with you. And oh let's not forget the highs - where you can hear strings that sing and cymbals so real you forget you are listening to vinyl.

OK – now that you have my summary I will go on with the details for those still interested in reading further.

I started down this path about 6 months ago when I heard a Doshi Alaap pre-amp. Larry Marcus was kind enough to stop by and hook up his Doshi v1 with the integrated phono section to my turntable at the time – a Linn LP12. I had been using an Audio Research Ref 2 with PH-5 phono pre, and was pretty happy. However, the LP-12 just didn’t seem to be able to provide that “last octave” of sound at the top or bottom of the spectrum. Well, when I hooked up the LP-12 to the Doshi my system was brought to a whole new level. The top and bottom octaves were still missing, but the sound stage depth and width were brought to new dimensions. My trusty table of the past 25 years just wasn’t up to the task of presenting music in this new generation of exquisite audio equipment.

Being loyal to my local audio store I called and asked them about which table they would recommend. They unequivocally said the SME tables (which they carry of course). They had an SME-20 in the store, and so I pulled some vinyl from my collection and off I went to a two hour listening session at the store. Now, they had the table hooked up to some mighty fine audio equipment so this wasn’t a big dollar table hooked up to crap components. What my ears told me during that session listening to a 20K+ table was this was not significantly better than my LP-12. Better yes – but worth 20+K, I just couldn’t buy in to that. So the journey continued...

Off I went to research tables on the net and here at AGon. It seemed to me in my research that two companies with tables that folks liked jumped out at me: Nottingham and TW Acoustic. They seemed like well engineered products – but the truth is in the listening.

After doing some research I found some folks who had the Nottingham tables close by. I figured if I was looking at a 20K+ SME I should look at the top Nottingham table – the Dais. So, off I went with vinyl in hand once again for a three hour listening session. The vocals were pretty good. The highs and lows were on par with the SME, but it still felt like I was listening to vinyl – not like I was in a club with the band and artist right there. Don't get me wrong, the Dais was a fine turntable especially with an arm for around 10K. However, it just didn't feel like the table I would be willing to keep for another 20 or 25 years. It just didn't make me forget I was “listening” to music. I longed for those days where I closed my eyes and the music just pulled me in.

So, that left me with the TW Acoustic tables. I devoured the on-line reviews and the comments here on AGon. The difficulty I had was there was no one local with the table. That left me having to call Jeff Catalano at High Water Sound in NYC – the US distributor for TW Acoustic tables. I have been leery of audio dealers for the past several years so I wasn't looking forward to the “full court press” of some NYC sales guy. Boy, was I in for a surprise. Jeff was friendly and forthcoming on his experiences having been a hard core “music junkie” for years (note I did not call him an audiophile (-: ). He exhibited clear experience on a number of amps, pre-amps, speakers, turntables and a variety of other audio equipment that inspired confidence. Now don't think I'm some hick who just fell off the turnip truck. I generally know when someone is bullshitting me and when someone is being forthright. Jeff fell into the later category. He explained the technology, how he and Thomas' had been searching for a musical turntable – not some table that was analytical in presenting the music, but a table that when you put on the vinyl you forget is there till you hear the thunk, thunk, thunk at the end of side 1. A table that let's you hear the kick drum, snare, high hat and cymbals as they sound – not as a “hi-fi” sound. The thump, thump, thump of a bass player slapping the strings, the male and female vocals where you feel they are in the room.

In order to help me decide on the right TW Acoustic table Jeff asked a number of questions. He was interested in what tables I had been listening to – and valued my thoughts and opinions on the LP-12, SME and Nottingham. He then asked about what pre-amp, phono amp, amp and speakers I would be using – and about my budget, what was I looking to spend. Thinking I was getting sucked in to spending a lot more than I had in my budget I told Jeff five to seven K. He said in that range I would be looking at a Raven One. He said for a bit more I could get into a Raven Two. He then explained in detail the differences between the One and the Two and what I was getting for the money. Here was a product that got great reviews in the press, on the net and here in the discussion threads – and it was less than the Nottingham Dais. I could not believe my luck – I had gone from 20K to 10K to 8K. Now, the 8K didn't include an arm, but Jeff said he could get me an arm as well as the table for around 10K (would re-purpose my current cartridge). So, better table, great technical support (Jeff), and it fit in my budget. I told Jeff I would have to think

about it and off I went to the net to do more research.

Two days later I called Jeff back after seeing the AC-3 pictures and reading the great reviews and asked about the sound difference between the Raven One/Two and the AC-3. He was honest and said you get a lot of the same sound in the Raven One or Two as you do with the AC-3 but you just get more detail, a bigger and deeper sound stage, and the AC-3 probably has a little more “nuance” in its’ overall presentation. I figured if I was willing to spend 20K+ originally for the SME that I could stretch and get the AC-3. Now, here was the leap of faith – I bought the AC-3 without ever hearing it. Was Jeff that good of a sales guy – not really (sorry Jeff. BTW, you should take that as a compliment). It was just that if folks were willing to wait 3 to 4 months to get the table I figured I wouldn’t have any problem re-selling the table if I did not like it.

A few months later the table arrives and I put everything together per the instructions that Jeff had sent me in advance. He said if I had any questions to give him a call. I then go to work setting up one of the arms and hooking everything into the Doshi pre-amp (I felt like a little kid on Christmas morning). At this point I sat down to listen and didn’t get up from my seat except to flip over and change the LPs for the next six hours. The next thing I knew it was four in the morning.

This takes me back to where I started. The AC-3 is a phenomenal table. I believe it is the right table for me and where I am in my quest for music. The sound is just, as a Nashville musician friend of mine says, “dead nuts on”. I have sat behind the console in a recording studio running sessions, and at live events, and this is the closest I have ever come to that experience in my life. If you close your eyes, and with the properly engineered LP, you feel as if you have been transported to the original recording session, are in the club, or in the orchestra section of the auditorium - whatever the case may be. The deep upright bass, the brushes on the snare, the pluck of the acoustic guitar strings, the crash of the high hat, the sound of the piano from top to bottom, the full sound of the violin, and the warmth of the vocals is all just right. Have I had more six hour sessions? I am not ashamed to say I have – and I look forward to many, many more with this fine turntable for years to come.

Thank you Jeff, Nick and Larry for helping guide me on the path to audio enlightenment!!

by Darkstar57 on 03-05-09