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When Bill Dudleston called to enquire about the review on his Focus, I had to tell him that it wasn't done, and that it wouldn't be done for some time due to the loudspeaker survey in the Audioletter. After all, I can cover only so many loudspeakers at one time. The Focus evaluation would have to wait for publication until some time in May or June. Bill then informed me that he was working on a mailing for over 40,000 audio interested persons, and that he was desirous of having something about his new flagship, in his new brochure. "What if I don't like it Bill and put it down?" said I. "What you write goes in, for better or for worse." said he. I thought, boy this guys got guts.



LEGACY AUDIO FOCUS

Does he know that I had just finished reviewing the Green Mountain Audio Imago (\$6,800) which sounded splendid? Of course not, that review had not printed yet and Bill, quite honestly, didn't know what he was facing in terms of competition. I kept mum on the Imago. We agreed that I would try to put something together in a hurry with the understanding that if I wrote the review now, he would print it warts and all, no punches or excerpts pulled. It was also understood that this would be an interim report of sorts, and if something happened to change my opinion of the product prior to press time, the review in the BFS Audioletter might differ from what you see here.

Back to the beginning.

PREGAME ACTIVITIES: Bill had been working on this design for quite awhile before he contacted me regarding an evaluation. I had known of his endeavors regarding a new horn based system that was assembled with dynamics and efficiency in mind. The kind of efficiency and dynamics that would challenge, in terms

of authenticity, a real life auditory experience, all the while being powered by a ten watt tube amp and a passive preamp. All I could do was sit back and see if he could actually accomplish such a feat without creating a fiscal monster.

It took some time for Bill to send the basic promotional drawings of his new speaker. It was not what I had been expecting. The Focus took me by surprise; no horns anywhere, a yellow tweeter and ribbon super-tweeter, kevlar midrange drivers (2 of them in each speaker), and three of the biggest woofers I've seen in a long time in each cabinet. The photo hinted of a speaker that could do it all, from top to bottom, without the need for a subwoofer or high frequency augmenting super-tweeters; everything was there regarding hardware.

I have auditioned what Bill Dudleston has done in the past, and this guy certainly qualifies as one of the top two or three fresh new designers in the industry...maybe the best. In the past, his ideas had always proven sound. But the Focus looked so unorthodox, quite unlike anything in the market anywhere. It had so many drivers to get in each others way. And the woofers (!), so big and obvious with the grills off, which would be a hard sell to audiophiles who believed that all one needs is a 6.5" driver in a box of about 1 cubic foot to get adequate bass. And the speakers were so beautiful - not in an art deco Avalon sort of way, but more like fine furniture. Ever since the monkey box consoles from RCA and Sears in the 1960's, audiophiles have

loathed speakers that appeared to domestic. A real man wants his audio raw and visually industrial - the Focus is not. The thought that my wife might think they were exotic china hutches and tip them over while looking for the doors chilled my blood. As for me, I appreciate the look of fine woodwork when it has such a rich feel; it's majestic.

When Bill said he had a pair ready for evaluation I snapped them up like a beggar snaps up greasy bacon

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at a brunch buffet. I offered to drive the Taurus station wagon the next weekend to Springfield, knowing that once I got them they would instantly be inserted into the reference system and work on the speaker survey would come to a halt. But who cared? I was operating on audio auto-pilot and there were visions of "perfect sound forever" floating in my head - a perfect defense to a homicide charge if I had ever seen one.

THE REAL THING. I've played with the Focus for a couple of months now, and though I have not been able to hook up some of the tube gear that is still on its way, I have had time to try it with several amps and have determined which speaker wires work best. Speaker location was in some ways easy, and in other ways hard. Getting the midrange and highs right took all of two minutes, as this aspect of the Focus' presentation worked wherever the unit was placed. Yes, there were locations that sounded better than others, but the mids and highs never sounded bad or in need of a major change. As time wore on, however, I began to notice that the bass from the Focus was overpowering my room even after placement had been worked out on "The Listening Room" placement program. I needed some help, help that came in the form of Phil Baatz, a BFS reader and Focus owner. After a telephone call from Phil, I came to believe that he was the consummate speaker set-up man. After comparing notes, he suggested that I move the speakers further away from the sidewalls. Now, I already had the speakers about 36" from the sidewalls, but he insisted that bass smooth out once I made the move. He was right! Three inches inward with each loudspeaker smoothed everything out in the bass without thinning out the beauty of the lower midrange. You must understand that once have a

speaker that is truly capable of doing 25 Hz without being 24dB down, your room and speaker placement are as big a factor as is having a speaker with such prodigious output. Owning a thoroughbred loudspeaker means having to care for its needs in a fashion that you are not accustomed to; I guarantee it. My final speaker location was 39" from the sidewalls and 66" from the back wall (my room is 13' by 20'), location in other rooms will depend on the size of the room. Don't hesitate to move the speaker closer to the rear wall if your room is smaller than mine, it will still work (Phil told me so).

As for the quality of the bass: Extraordinary. The Focus doesn't use the three 12" woofers to create big bloated bass. It uses them to make fast bass. With three large drivers, you can move a tremendous amount of air with a minimum of effort. Even during thunderous crescendos where the doors literally shake on the hinges, the three twelves are barely moving - never, never pistoning wildly back and forth causing distortion in the higher frequencies. This is state-of-the-art bass reproduction for a speaker anywhere near the \$4,400 charged RTRD. As far as I'm concerned, the only way to move more air in a linear fashion is to go to the \$50,000+ Cello Stradivarius created by Mark Levinson.

But, believe it or not, the true strength of the Focus is not its bass. It's the dynamic range and clarity. This speaker has a sense of midrange quality that rivals that of the old Quad ESL. **I am aware of no loudspeaker at any price (save the Cello) that can move as much air in the midrange while retaining the incredible feeling of seeing back through to the musical source. It's a stunning experience, and once you hear it you'll never forget it.** It doesn't come across as edgy and somewhat unsettling like the big Apogee; it doesn't come across as large, but somewhat slow like the Duntech Sovereign; and it has highs that I perceive as superior to those of the Thiel CS-5 or the Avalon Ascent. Similar to the NEAR-50M, the Focus gives the feeling of utter transparency, like listening to a microphone direct. Unlike the NEAR, the Focus can shift the foundation of your house with the dynamic range of its transparency.

Imaging? While the Focus is a large speaker by anyone's standard, **its ability to create a soundstage is quite formidable.** While not quite being at the level of proficiency attained by the Green Mountain Audio Imago in this regard, the Focus is extremely coherent and without the foreshortening, narrowing, and frequency dependent performance that plagues many other loudspeakers. Right now, I consider

the clarity of the Focus to be a great asset in its staging capabilities, the silence between the sounds being uncontaminated and without grain; **I've never heard anything like it.** Where the Imago gains a

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slight advantage is in its exact placement of 3-D images upon a natural stage. The Imago is a monster in this regard and I know of no competitor to it, but it gives up dynamics and clarity to the Focus to get that incredible imaging - you choose your priorities and then you live with them. Still, the Focus puts a number of minimonitors to shame concerning the solidity of its stage and I would put it somewhere on a par with the Wilson Audio Tiny Tot and the Avalons.

High frequencies with the Focus are handled by a dome tweeter and a super-tweeter. They are excellent, and I believe that no speaker, regardless of price, using a metal dome tweeter can do justice to the music in the fashion that the Focus does. In this regard, the Imago and the Focus are dead ringers. Both use a soft-dome tweeter and both use a metal ribbon super-tweeter. A visual inspection of both reveals that the Focus uses a super-tweeter of higher build quality and ruggedness, though I could not attach a direct sonic superiority to it. Only continued listening can help discern if there is an audible difference between the two, which means that both manufacturers will have to give BFS long term loans of their equipment. Needless to say, I could live with and do love the highs from both of these speakers.

What really helps the Focus to stand above its rivals is its efficiency...98 dB to be exact. There is no amplifier of credible build quality that cannot drive this loudspeaker to ear shattering output levels. In this way, the Focus mirrors, or at least approximates the performance of the great horns of the past, but without the colorations associated with horn resonances. The 85 wpc Allegro Cantata was a power packed dynamo with the Focus, refusing to clip even when shaking the neighbor's house. These two products certainly represent the potential for creating a synergistic relationship whose whole seems greater than the individual parts. The thought of firing up two Cantatas in mono for 340 wpc is exciting and most likely and exercise in hedonistic power lust, but, if I get a second Cantata

you can bet your bippy that this house will rock. (With the Focus I've already unleashed Jimmy Page on Led Zep II)

After an eight week burn-in the Parasound HCA-2200 was hooked up and it made fantastic music with the Focus, delivering effortless sound on a wide stage. Inserting the Parasound and connecting it to the bi-wire terminals on the back of the speaker was a snap due to the 2200's two sets of speaker posts per channel. Surprisingly, the Focus with its ultra high efficiency could absorb and utilize the power of one of audio's most powerful and natural sounding amps. This is a fine combination of products that combines speed with clarity, crystalline highs with tight powerful bass, and a midrange that's fast like an electrostat.

The Focus strips away and reveals the sins of an amplifier in a way that has been a revelation to me, proving itself to be a reviewer's tool of the highest order. The Focus has allowed me to assess the true merit of all kinds of audio equipment used with it to the point where I can confidently say that no reviewer has a cleaner and overall more accurate window through which to view the performance of the equipment in front of him or her.

As of this time I have not yet had a long-term audition of the Focus with a quality tube power amp, but I suspect that they would work extremely well in spite of the rather low impedance load of the Focus (4 ohms).

THE END. The Focus strikes me as a wonderful loudspeaker that has no competition at its price point. It is significantly more accurate, especially in the lower midrange, than the RTRD Signature II, which was the company's flagship just a few years ago...Progress marches on. I have heard a number of impressive loudspeakers over the years that I could live with indefinitely, the Imago to be specific, yet I have never met a loudspeaker that fulfills the definition of "complete" as totally as the Focus has. I think Bill made the right decision in wanting this review right out of the box.

