

Fell Audio Disc CD player

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Are there, in fact, degrees of counter-intuitiveness? Bear with me, because I am quite sure this is a valid question. I'd suggest that in the current climate it's counter-intuitive to launch a brand new hi-fi company. It's more counter-intuitive (counter-intuitiver?) to make one of the first two products your new hi-fi company launches a compact disc player. And it's even more counter-intuitive (counter-intuitivest?) to build this product in the United Kingdom, uncertainty surrounding the Donald Trumpi's "Will he? Won't he?" trade tariffs notwithstanding.

And yet here we are. Fell Audio - for this is the company that's the cause of all these questions - is a new UK hi-fi company with the backing of venerated British audio retailer Peter Tyson. There are echoes of the way Cambridge Audio emerged from the Richer Sounds empire back in the day - Fell Audio has been developing the products it's brought to market (this 'Disc' compact disc player and the similarly adventurously named 'Amp' integrated amplifier) for three years, and in that time has been party to Peter Tyson's unrivalled knowledge of both the hi-fi market and hi-fi customers. And while not enough audio companies indulge in comparative testing, it seems Fell Audio has spent its time doing little else.

Fell edge

Designing and constructing its products in the UK has, by the company's own account, given Fell Audio an edge where overall quality, sustainability and reparability are concerned. A five-year warranty and a generous repair window are certainly indicative of confidence.

And anyway, let's be honest: no one imagined the compact disc would rise, even a little, from the ashes created by the advent of music streaming. No one anticipated the format being championed by Generation Z, let alone Generation Alpha. No one thought releasing new material on CD would become as important to record companies as releasing it on vinyl. And yet, yet again, here we are. Maybe Fell Audio has simply read the room correctly.

On the outside, the Disc is quite carefully and almost playfully reminiscent of iconic British hi-fi components from back in the day - I can't be the only one who's clocked the Disc and been immediately reminded of the A&R A60 amplifier they have in the loft, even in the silver finish of my review sample (black is also available, naturally). At 75 x 440 x 300mm (HxWxD) it's a standard width but gratifyingly low-rise, and the standard of build and finish is pretty impressive in the context of the asking price. >>





Fell Audio has also included both digital coaxial and digital outputs in case you want to use your Disc purely as a transport.



» Slot-loading

The fascia is the sort of combination of black with green illumination that is evocative of the look Naim Audio has only recently decided to abandon. A slot-loading mechanism capable of handling CD, CD-R and CD-RW discs sits above a row of capacitive touch-controls dealing with the obvious playback controls, and to the right of here is a green-on-green dot-matrix display. The display is above three more capacitive areas, allowing you the ability to repeat one track or the whole lot, to randomise playback, and to exercise control over the information on the display or switch it off altogether. A big power on/off button on the right completes the line-up.

(These functions are duplicated on the supplied remote control handset, although this item is perhaps the only evidence that Fell Audio has built the Disc to arrive at a specific price-point. If there's a more humdrum and inexpensive-feeling handset available anywhere else in hi-fi-land I've yet to hold it.)

Around the back there's a chunky kettle-lead connection for mains power and a pair of stereo RCA analogue outputs. Fell Audio has also included both digital coaxial and digital optical outputs in case you want to use your Disc purely as a transport. This, of course, assumes your system features a DAC more capable than the ESS Sabre ES9018K2M that's fitted here.

Chunky

This more-than-adequate DAC chipset is joined under the bonnet by a chunky toroidal transformer. Just as with the ESS DAC, the specification of a power supply of this type is a statement of Fell Audio intent - few are the comparably priced CD players that have such capable digital-to-analogue conversion circuitry, and fewer still forgo switched-mode power supplies in favour of something more efficient (and expensive).

I can't deny feeling a little frisson of both excitement and nostalgia when I dig out a selection of compact discs

from the archive in order to put the Fell Audio Disc through its paces - it's been a while since I had a CD-only listening session. As well as connecting the Disc to its Amp partner driving a pair of ELAC BS305 stand-mounters, I also use it as a source in the permanent system of Naim Uniti Star and Bowers & Wilkins 705 S3 Signature on FS-700 stands. And while it works gratifyingly well in an appropriate system, it also stands up strong in what is frankly an utterly inappropriate system too.

Fell horses

When playing CDs as varied as Patti Smith's *Horses* [Arista], *India* by Gal Costa [Mr Bongo], Mary Lattimore's *Goodbye, Hotel Arkada* [Ghostly] and *This Could Be Texas* by English Teacher [Island], the Disc proves even-handed and non-judgemental. It's not the most demonstrative listen you ever experienced, but its willingness to get out of the way of a recording goes a long way towards making up for its slight lack of assertiveness.

It's really only at the top of the frequency range that the Disc's mild hesitancy could be described as in any way problematic. Treble reproduction is open and has decent substance, but there's not an awful lot of bite or crunch to, say, the upper register of Mary Lattimore's harp. It's hard to interpret 'politeness' as a negative in most walks of life, I'll admit, but it's possible the Disc is more couth than is absolutely ideal.

After that, though, the news is all good. The midrange is similarly open, but where the treble is understated this area of the frequency range communicates in quite forthright fashion - the amount of fine detail it can extract makes a voice characterful and direct. At the bottom end there's respectable punch and a quite gratifying amount of variation where tone and texture are concerned. And the Disc's even, undemonstrative tonal balance makes recordings sound coherent and unified from the top of the frequency range to the bottom.



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» Carefully defined

It can create a fairly large and quite carefully defined soundstage, this player - given the right content to work with sounds quite spacious and organised. Some CD spinners can make the Patti Smith recording sound congested, but that's certainly not the case here - there's no hint of the closed-in about the way the Fell Audio operates. This isn't at the expense of intimacy or immediacy, either - there's a positivity to the way it describes a stage that combines with the space it creates in the most gratifying way.

There's a fair amount of well-supervised energy to the Disc's sound too, a decent facility with dynamics that makes the upticks in volume or intensity in a recording fairly obvious without being in any way startling. Where the broad 'quiet/loud/VERY LOUD' variations English Teacher constantly indulge in are concerned, they're more than alluded to without being made absolutely explicit. 'Politeness' again, and once again it's no bad thing in the context of the product and its likely partnering equipment.

Up the ante

The control of low-frequency information, especially at the moment of attack, makes for a coherent account of rhythms and tempos, and if you up the ante a little with a listen to *Snap My Finger* by Kaytranada featuring PinkPantheress [RCA] there's authentic momentum to the presentation. If it's really dancefloor drive and thrust you're

after you may find the Fell Audio Disc rather too easy-going, but for the rest of us the ability to at least gesture towards the more corporeal aspects of music-making will be sufficient.

Ultimately, Fell Audio has done the right thing with the Disc no matter how outlandish an idea it might seem on paper. Compact disc players as capable as this seldom cost as little as this - and now your choice of sub-£500 machines is enhanced quite considerably. If you didn't fully understand why you were keeping hold of your legacy collection of CDs, well, now you know. +

Technical specifications

Disc types: CD; CD-R; CR-RW

Outputs: Stereo RCA; digital optical; digital coaxial

DAC: ESS Sabre ES9108K2M.

Frequency response: 10Hz – 20kHz

Harmonic distortion (1kHz): 0.005%

Signal to noise ratio: 98dB

Output impedance: 47ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 75 x 440 x 300mm

Weight: 4.6kg

Price: £499

Manufacturer Fell Audio

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