

Destiny calling

Creek's new range – starting with this CD player and integrated amp – is destined for great things

PRODUCT Creek Destiny

TYPE CD player and integrated stereo amplifier

PRICE (Destiny CD) £1,200; (Destiny amplifier) £1,100

KEY FEATURES (Destiny CD) Size (WxHxD): 43x7x31cm

• Weight: 6kg • Single unbalanced analogue output

• Electrical and optical digital outputs • Creek Link

in/out • (Destiny amp) Size (WxHxD): 43x7x31cm

• Weight: 10kg • Two sets of speaker terminals • Six

line-level inputs • Phono optional • Preamp out/power

amp in • Power rating: 100W per channel (8 ohms)

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As audio brands go, Creek is a long-term operator, both in terms of its tenure in the business and as regards the life-span of models. Accordingly, when a new model does appear, we've come to expect that it's properly new. We don't expect a cosmetic

retread, and those new products are well thought-through. And when Creek announces a whole new range, we're keen to take notice.

Destiny is a whole new range. But, with typical modesty, company founder Mike Creek explained that both models are in some ways derived from existing products – and then proceeded to spend some twenty minutes outlining some of the differences and new features. We get the general idea: don't tear up a perfectly good guidebook born of many years' practical experience, but feel free to investigate a few new paths here and there.

There are immediate signs of some very clever thinking here. The fascia, for a start. It's not at all the same as on previous Creek models (the 5350SE amplifier and CD50 Mk2 are apparently the most immediate relatives of

the Destiny twins), but the brushed aluminium appearance and button layout have enough in common to alert the Creek-aware on walking past a shop display. Likewise inside: the CD player is based around a DVD drive, though it won't actually play DVDs. Such drives bring their own problems, including slow loading and mechanical noise and while Creek hasn't entirely fixed the former, it's better than some. Better still, mechanical noise (on the review sample at least) is a harmless unpitched hiss that is inaudible and unintrusive at distances above about half a metre. Thanks to several over-tightened screws, we were unable to get inside this sample for a squint, but we're told it includes discrete transistor output buffers on each channel and a particularly high-stability clock with phase noise (jitter) 20dB lower than





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that of previous Creek CD players. We couldn't verify that as the earlier models were already pushing measurement limits in audio terms, but jitter is certainly as low as we've ever seen.

The amp retains the unique MOSFET output configuration that has served Creek well for several years now, but is more powerful than in previous incarnations. The space savings associated with a move to surface-mounted components have allowed highly sophisticated monitoring circuits to be included, which pass information on idle current, offset and so on to a microprocessor that takes informed decisions on the amp's health.

That microprocessor gives other benefits, too. For instance, relay switching of inputs and outputs is all very well, but if output relays are switched under load, their life and performance can be compromised by internal arcing. Accordingly, Creek switches inputs off a fraction of a second before outputs, and vice versa, so that switching under load is eliminated. Interestingly, Creek retains a traditional mechanical, motorised volume control, believing that overall it offers better performance than electronic attenuators.

As is common these days, the amp has separable preamp and power sections, facilitating upgrading and bi-amping. In basic form it offers six line-level inputs including one

tape loop. One input is upgradeable via an internal plug-in board to accommodate LP sources if required, and other plug-in boards are planned. On the output side, twin sets of WBT terminals are individually switched, and there's even a headphone socket.

Construction of both units is extremely solid, thanks to the use of extruded sides, strong backs and fronts, and thick top and bottom panels, securely screwed down along all four edges. At every stage, Creek has evidently taken care over design and construction, from the mains input (featuring sophisticated filters) to the Schottky diode rectifiers for lowest RF noise pollution. We carried out a thorough technical analysis of both units and failed to spot any worrying signs: distortion is uniformly low, bandwidth flat, noise well suppressed. The CD player suffers, like most, from aliasing with signals of 20kHz and over, but is very well behaved with sub-20kHz signals.

SOUND QUALITY

It's hard to avoid preconceptions when testing products from very familiar brands, but all the same we tried hard not to like these units. More practically, we arranged a very basic blind test against a couple of long-term favourites. Throughout this process, we enjoyed consistently high quality sounds. Indeed, in

common with other class-leading products around the same price that we have come across recently, they pose some potentially embarrassing questions about what exactly qualifies as high end, and why. Embarrassing, that is, for people other than Creek.

By common consent, 'high-end' sound (as distinct from high-end appearance, which tends to involve more imposing bulk than these units offer) takes as a starting point competence in all the basic areas of tonality, side-to-side imaging, 'speed' and so on, and extends into such intangible areas as authority, precision of image depth and myriad little details that contribute to the sense of being there. It's not all that many years ago that achieving the basic competence cost at least the price of these units, but fortunately for us hi-fi consumers progress has been such that competence is the rule rather than the exception, even for half this cost.

We were particularly impressed with the Destiny amplifier. It has an effortless and seamless coverage of the audio band and seemingly well beyond, with bass of considerable heft that also manages the trick of sounding tuneful on potentially troublesome sounds like plucked double bass and timpani. Treble is open and airy and does little or nothing to restrict the natural resonance of high-pitched percussion (nothing shows up congested treble quite like delicate strokes on cymbal or triangle), while midrange is uncoloured and faithful, easily passing the usual tests like familiar voices and saxophone.

Performance goes well beyond those essentials, though. Imaging is remarkably

Q & A

We spoke to Mike Creek, founder and director of Creek Audio, about the new Destiny range and what the future holds for Creek



HFC: Creek Audio tends to be associated with the affordable end of the market. Is Destiny a sign of an upwards shift?

MC: Destiny widens our price range for amplifiers, but it is exactly the same price as the CD53, and cheaper than the CD53SE we previously made. Creek has tended in the past to value engineer its products more critically than on the Destiny, to achieve the best sound per pound. However, yes, Destiny describes our wish to take the company more up-market.

What have you found to be the key areas to address when developing the new circuits?

My philosophy is always to improve things by evolution, not revolution. A lot of the improvements involve better quality components, cabling and so on. Another important move was to convert much of the amplifier design to SMT (Surface Mount Technology). This improved the PCB layout and allowed much greater flexibility with ground planes and power supply tracks. Separating left and right power supplies and running the low current and logic circuitry from a separate transformer helped a lot, too. The casework has played an important role in improving the image and the Sorbothane feet reduce vibrations that disturb the circuitry.

Amplifiers and CD players are both mature technologies. Is there still any mileage left in improving them?

There is always room for improvement. Of course, the thing is to find out where this improvement can be achieved first and then how to do it within a budget, safely and reliably. We still have a few more tricks up our sleeve.

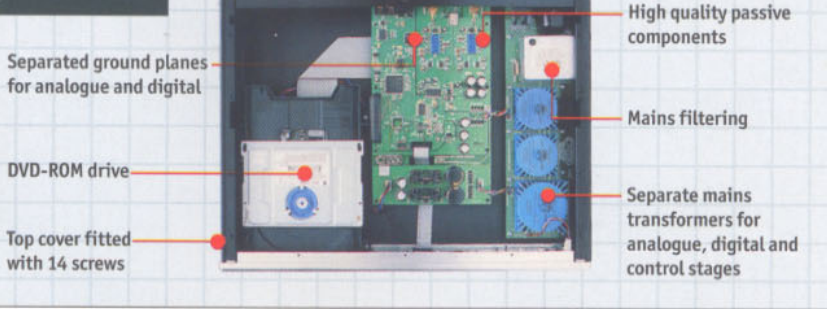
What additions will we see to the Destiny range?

We have already developed a Destiny power amplifier to match the integrated amp, for production in early 2006, and will then add a Destiny radio tuner, based on our long established T50 tuner technology.

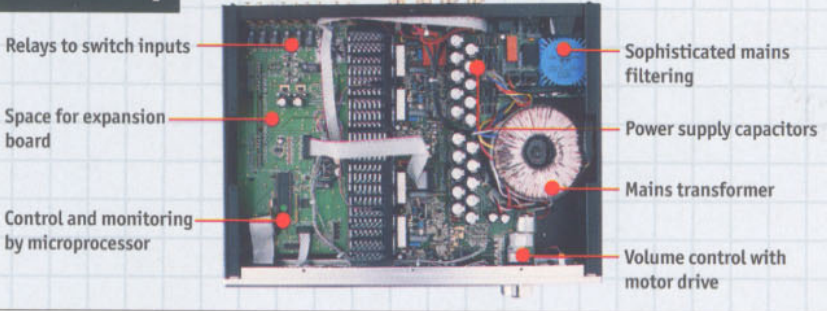
And is it likely to go multichannel?

A multichannel power amplifier was in development a year or so back, but was side tracked to allow us to concentrate on the integrated amp and CD first. We can now start to look at five channels again.

Detail - CD



Detail - amp



assured in both sideways and depth dimensions, with the notably high-end trait of maintaining the position of instruments irrespective of overall dynamics. If you hear the flute in an orchestra at just such a spot when it plays solo, you'll find it exactly there in a big ensemble moment, not a yard or two to the side or back.

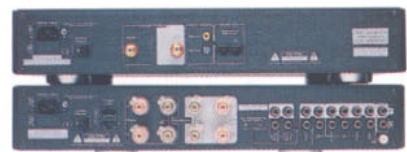
Then there's the vexed question of 'speed' of the sound. Vexed, because it can be apparently enhanced by a touch of distortion. The giveaway of that, though, is invariably a slight thickening of complex textures. By contrast, this amp is particularly clear at all times: but the way it can grab hold of a pair of speakers and control them with real confidence does indeed seem to improve the rhythmic performance of the whole audio chain. The end result is that anything with a danceable beat really does get the feet moving involuntarily.

The CD player is very nearly as assured. We loved its bass and midrange, but had very slight reservations about its treble, which seemed, by high-end standards, just slightly shut in. Overall, the player is both informative and comfortable for long-term listening, but it doesn't quite seem to have the same degree of attainment as the amplifier. There's a trace of congestion on very bright sounds – trumpet,

violins – that is reflected in subtly closed-in images at times of musical stress. Still, we'd be pushed to suggest players that can obviously better it, all round, at the price.

Judged as a pair, these are fine units indeed. We are assured that new Destiny products (including a tuner) are forthcoming, and on this showing we are happy to welcome the range as a whole. Dedicated mixers and matchers may well consider the units individually but we feel, quite simply, that Creek has set out a fair high-end stall here for what in context is a most competitive price. Go get 'em! **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT - DESTINY CD PLAYER

SOUND >> 88%

FEATURES >> 84%

BUILD >> 86%

VALUE >> 88%

CONCLUSION

Highly capable CD player may not be quite the equal of the amplifier in terms of treble openness, but is analytically and musically inviting.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 88%

VERDICT - DESTINY AMPLIFIER

SOUND >> 91%

FEATURES >> 88%

BUILD >> 88%

VALUE >> 92%

CONCLUSION

Adding an impressive array of high-end virtues to the performance we've come to expect from Creek, this amp is a truly great all-rounder.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 91%

