

SmartMoney

JULY 2004 | WWW.SMARTMONEY.COM

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL MAGAZINE OF PERSONAL BUSINESS

SmartMoney Award Ryan Malkin

SPECIAL ARTICLE
REPRINT FEATURING
**KLIPSCH
RB-75**

The Sound And the Fury

Cutting-edge technology has trickled down to mass-market speakers. But is it enough to impress Lou Reed?



“I could do this all day, this is my idea of fun,” says legendary rocker Lou Reed. He leans back into the oversize pillows of the couch in his Manhattan office, hands behind his head. Even now, decades since his first album with the Velvet Underground, Reed exudes an aura of cool. “Louder, louder!” he howls, gesturing with his hand to pump it up. After all, we are listening to his “Rock Minuet.” But that’s not the only reason he’s having such a good time; Reed is a sonic perfectionist, obsessed with the sound quality of recorded music. And we’ve gathered five pairs of speakers in his office, a SoHo loft filled with rock memorabilia spanning four decades, to find out which deserves the SMARTMONEY Award. The contenders include five of the biggest names in home audio: Bose, Bowers & Wilkins, Infinity, Klipsch and MartinLogan. Reed knows his music better than anyone, so who better to judge how well a speaker reproduces it?

▶ Americans are spending record amounts on home-theater systems and plasma televisions, but audio tends to get overlooked. In fact, most consumers upgrade their speakers only after they’ve splurged on video. That’s one reason why stand-alone audio speaker sales dropped 5 percent in the past year, while flat-panel TV sales jumped 166 percent. But you wouldn’t pair a gourmet meal with box wine, so why skimp on speakers? Experts agree they’re actually the most important component you’ll buy. “With great speakers and a marginal audio receiver, your audio system will still sound pretty good,” says Jeff Hoover, president of Audio Advisors, a high-end audio retailer in West Palm Beach, Fla. “But not even a great receiver can save you when you’ve got poor speakers.”

Smart Spending

Since they'll differentiate the sound more than any other single component, look to spend roughly half your total audio budget on speakers. Unlike, say, DVD players, which have dropped in price dramatically in recent years, speakers don't follow the same downward curve. Since they're not technically electronics, the cost doesn't depend on silicon chip prices. Plus, makers still have to build the cabinets with high-quality materials. Even so, many high-end makers have begun expanding their technology into cheaper units. Bowers & Wilkins (B&W), for example, is now making its Nautilus technology, once found only in its priciest models, available in the lower-priced 700 series.

But does this trickle-down technology matter where it counts? For our test with Reed, we want to compare the same music in the same room on multiple speakers, so we've hooked up the five pairs to his stereo with a speaker selector, a gadget that allows us to instantly switch back and forth

between models. The speaker sets cost between \$500 and \$2,700 and range in size from 6-inch bookshelf speakers to 4-foot-tall floorstanding units.

"So what's the first one?" asks Reed, clad in jeans and a trim brown leather jacket. We turn up the volume on the **Bose Acoustimass 5 Series III** system (\$500), which includes two tiny speakers—just 6.2-inches high—and a subwoofer. Bose is the No. 1-selling speaker brand in the country, likely due to the company's hundred or so retail stores. But it's certainly not this audiophile's speaker of choice. "No, no!" Reed yells, not even a minute into "Rock Minuet," furiously waving his hands back and forth for us to stop. His complaint? The speakers deliver high- and low-end sound, but no middle. Plus, they display a "harsh high end," and although the subwoofer adds nice bass, "it makes the guitar sound thin." A Bose spokesperson says that the speakers are balanced and designed to reproduce low and mid-to-high frequencies "according to the

artist's original performance." But this artist, for one, disagrees. Still, we give the Bose another shot, this time playing hip-hop artist Mos Def, to test how the speakers handle heavy bass. "Oh no, oh no," Reed groans, sitting up to pet Lola, his Jack Russell terrier, who's curled up on a pillow next to him. "I'd pay money *not* to hear that."

"Next," Reed demands. "Rock Minuet" once again begins to pump, this time through the **B&W 704s** (\$2,200). B&W is the bestselling high-end speaker on the market. The company's press release claims the 704s "redefine the overall level of loudspeaker performance that rational audio consumers can demand." Maybe so, but Reed was never accused of being completely rational. "Whoa, ugly," he shakes his head. "I found that unpleasant, the voice sounds sibilant, it's just not clear." B&W says the problem could be a number of things, from electronics to placement. "Speakers are very subjective, and I'm sorry Mr. Reed didn't care for these," says Chris Browder, B&W's

"I'd pay money not to hear that," gripes Reed when we crank up



Klipsch RB-75

\$1,200; www.klipsch.com

Size: 20x10x12

Power: 150 watts

Best Feature: Great sound at any volume

Worst Feature: '70s-style design

Overall: ★★★★★

Comment: Reed loves the "bottom-end that could blow your head off."

MartinLogan Clarity

\$2,700; www.martinlogan.com

Size:

53x12x10

Power: 200 watts

Best Feature: Detailed sound

Worst Feature:

Handling high volume

Overall: ★★★★★

Comment: Produces a panoramic "wall of sound."



executive vice president. Because of B&W's legacy, we are all disappointed. "They make some of my favorite speakers," Reed says. These, however, are just average and simply not worth the high price tag.

Infinity's Primus 360 speakers are up next. At \$658, these are the least-expensive floorstanding units we're testing, and just \$160 more than the Bose—though to make the test fair, we haven't told Reed the price of any of the units. "Next," he demands within a minute. "The bass is really unclear." Could our choice of music be the culprit? "Bass is bass, and high end is high end. These were just average on both." We do try the 360s again later on another track, but their performance is still just so-so. They're acceptable, with more midrange than the Bose, but the Infinities still don't make the cut.

That leaves two choices remaining, a pair from MartinLogan and one from Klipsch. We listen to the same guitar solo over and over again, switching back and forth

between the two. It's no surprise that the **MartinLogan Clarity** set (\$2,695), the most expensive speakers, is an impressive performer. "These are incredibly detailed," Reed says, gesturing with his hand—louder, louder!—as we play "How Do You Think It Feels" from his new live album, *Animal Serenade*. "They create such a wall of sound." That "wall" is produced by a technology known as electrostatic, where electrons travel up and down the 53-inch speaker face to generate sound across the entire area.

At Reed's request we pop in some Missy Elliott, and he grabs the remote, cranking the volume even higher to see how the speakers handle excessive bass. "That makes the MartinLogans good for movies, classical, jazz, rock..." A loud POP! from the woofer interrupts him midsentence. "Whoa," he falls back into the couch. "The man with the controls ducks down." Clearly, the MartinLogans are good for anything... to a point. "If you keep the

volume under control, it's incredibly beautiful," Reed says, though he wonders if the sound could be a bit warmer.

▶ Still, he keeps returning to the **Klipsch RB-75** bookshelf speakers (\$1,200), with an 8-inch woofer. The Klipsch are less than half the size of the MartinLogans, at just 20.2 inches high. Yet Reed is "astounded" by their sound. "I know this stuff and I know that guitar, and I'm surprised by the details of it." The MartinLogans boast that huge panorama of sound, but incredibly, Reed says, the Klipsch offer the same depth and similar tones, ultimately earning them the SMARTMONEY Award. To seal the victory, we turn the volume to full bore on Outkast's "Hey Ya!" and Reed bobs his head to the beat, enjoying the clarity and the pounding bass. "Those Klipsch are f___ing unbelievable; these things can do anything," he declares. And when he finally learns that they're less than half the price of the MartinLogans, it's settled. "For someone on a budget, it's not even a contest." 📍

the volume on Bose's \$500 speakers.



Bowers & Wilkins 704

\$2,200; www.bwspeakers.com
 Size: 38x9x13
 Power: 150 watts
 Best Feature: Elegant style
 Worst Feature: Price
 Overall: ★★

Comment: An average speaker, but the voice sounded "sibilant" and "not clear."

Infinity Primus 360

\$660; www.infinitysystems.com
 Size: 39x8x13
 Power: 200 watts
 Best Feature: Midrange sound
 Worst Feature: Unclear bass
 Overall: ★★

Comment: Just so-so. "Bass is bass," Reed says, and these didn't deliver it.



Bose Acoustimass 5 Series III

\$500; www.bose.com
 Size: 6x3x4 / 14x19x8 (subwoofer)
 Power: 200 watts
 Best Feature: Tiny size
 Worst Feature: Harsh treble
 Overall: ★

Comment: No midrange sound. Reed said he'd "pay money not to hear" them.

LEGENDARY PRESENCE

With his deft harmonica playing and powerful tenor vocals, Blues Traveler frontman John Popper delivers freewheeling performances full of emotion. His talents, along with the band's jam-style attitude and untouchable bluesy-rock sound, have earned them a Grammy and several multi-platinum albums. Klipsch designed its Reference Series loudspeakers to reproduce the group's dynamic range, control and sharpness with total precision. Experience every jam session just as John intended by visiting your local Klipsch dealer or klipsch.com.

A **LEGEND** IN SOUND

