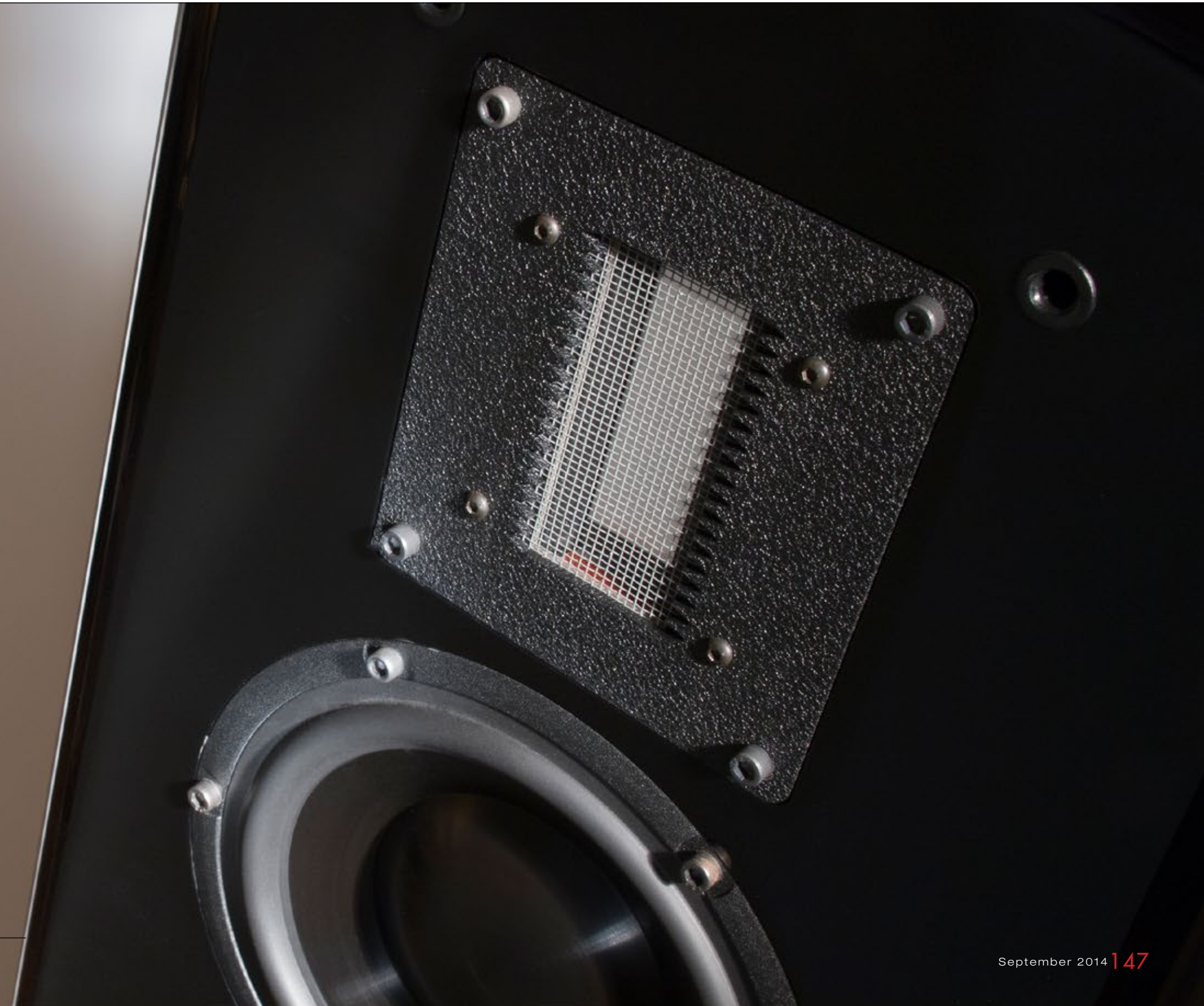


RIBBON PERFECTION

The Alta Audio FRM-2

By Jeff Dorgay

The arrival of the Alta Audio FRM-2 loudspeakers exposed a certain prejudice or bias of mine against ribbon tweeters. But it's a valid one, as I'd never heard a ribbon tweeter that was properly integrated with the rest of the drivers in the system, nor had I ever experienced a ribbon tweeter with a natural high end. My audio pals with a penchant for razor-sharp transients swear by them, but I'd always come away from them fatigued. So I must admit that when I was unpacking these scrumptious speakers, my heart sank just a little bit.



And speaking of scrumptious, to someone who spent his formative years in an auto-body shop, and later as a photographer around some of the world's finest automobiles, the finish of the FRM-2s almost defies definition. The finish on the review samples exceeds that of anything I've seen on a Bentley or Aston Martin, and the new Mercedes S-Class sitting in the driveway looks pathetic in comparison. The same goes for the audio world: let's just say the FRM-2s have the finest finish I've seen applied to a set of loudspeakers. And I know that takes a lot of hand work to get right.

While our test samples arrived in a Spinal Tap-like "how much more black can these be?" finish, Alta's head designer Michael Levy has told us nearly any automotive color can be accommodated.

However, a pretty box is meaningless without sound to match, and I'd buy a pair of FRM-2s if they looked like Bluemenstein Thrashers. Fortunately for \$13,000 a pair you get great looks *and* great sound. These little speakers have destroyed all of my preconceived notions as to what a modest sized speaker is capable of.

Keith Jarrett's *At the Blue Note* has a wonderful sense of ambiance, with just enough of the audience mixed in to feel dimensional, and is accompanied by a cast of phenomenal musicians. I'm instantly struck at how completely natural his piano sounds, as well as the cymbals – they just float in the air perfectly, without the slightest hint of sibilance or being goosed for effect. As wonderful as the instruments come through, the telltale sign is Jarrett's trademark groaning.

As much as I love Jarrett's work, this is always aggravating, yet through the FRM-2s, it creeps in gently and then is quickly gone, almost like a whisper. I've never experienced this effect in any speaker before.

Charlie Haden's double bass work on the Jarrett album sends me in the opposite direction, digging out Shellac's *At Action Park* to sample the machine-gun bass line in "Crow." Again, the speed of the FRM-2s six-inch bass driver, utilizing Alta's XTL bass tuning system along with a highly inert cabinet offers up serious bass grunt and definition. As the rest of the staff trickled in to audition these speakers, they all offered up the same descriptions without being prodded by yours truly. Four staff members all remarked, "these sound like great electrostats, but with bass!" And I would add great dynamics, too.

Plumbing the depths of these speakers' LF capabilities lead me to the last Simian Mobile Disco album, *Unpatterns*. Cranking up the Devialet 120 used for most of the review had me looking around for the subwoofer and the supermodels. I felt like I was at Fashion Week with the powerful, grinding bass coming out of these relatively small speakers, REL subwoofer (review next issue) unplugged from the AC mains. The FRM-2s move major air.

More than just bass

Another fun test track here at *TONEAudio* is Dead Can Dance's "Yulunga (Spirit Dance)" from the recently remastered SACDs. The opening is ominous and creepy, with an incredibly wide soundfield. *(continued)*





This track features a great balance of real and electronic sounds that don't necessarily reveal everything about tone and timbre, but a great pair of speakers will disappear completely, rendering a wealth of spatial cues. Check and double check.

Devo's debut, *Q: Are We Not Men?*
A: We Are Devo! produced by Brian Eno, does the same thing, yet in a wackier way. Mark Mothersbaugh's trippy vocals float all over the room, with ethereal synth effects and overprocessed guitar everywhere. Not a single natural sound here, yet the speed of the FRM-2s presents this classic in a truly psychedelic way. Big, big, fun on tap. Go straight to "Shrivel Up."

Much like one of Todd Rundgren's Utopia albums, the *Little Village* album reveals highly layered vocals with three

guys that sound very similar. John Hiatt, Nick Lowe and Ry Cooder all have a very similar phrasing and tone that can blend together on a speaker lacking in resolution, yet through the FRM-2s, these three voices all have a distinct sound.

No matter what the program material, the FRM-2s never cross that line that every other ribbon driver based system I've experienced crosses. These speakers have an intoxicating ability to render inner detail, with plenty of transient attack, yet have a relaxed quality like a pair of soft dome tweeters. It's very close to magic. This is one of those rare speakers that has me agonizing between exploring new music and wanting to revisit so many favorites, just to see what treasure would be revealed through this new lens.

Easily integrated

With a rated sensitivity of 87.5 dB @ 2.83 volts @ one meter, you'd think the Altas need a ton of power to work their magic, but again, the preconceived notion is wrong. Even the 35 watt per channel Van Alstine Ultravalve amplifier provides highly pleasing results in a smaller room, and while bone crushing volume isn't achievable, they play loud enough on all but really heavy rock records to be engaging.

The first half of this review was conducted in my new home listening room that only measures 11 x 14 feet, with modest GIK room treatments. Bass traps in the corner, a few diffusor panels behind the listening chair and one 242 panel at each first reflection point. The FRM-2s proved easy to set up, and even with the speakers placed somewhat randomly in the room, threw an excellent three dimensional image. Utilizing the supplied stands (an extra \$5,000 expense) put the tweeters right at ear level, and even with a slight toe-in, proved excellent in this small room. Because these speakers are capable of such solid low frequency response, they can be placed a bit farther out in a small room than one might do with something like a KEF LS-50.

Again, the benefit is getting the punctilious imaging of a small monitor with the bass response of a full-range speaker. An even bigger surprise was how well this performance translated into a large room. For those just tuning in to *TONE*, my main listening room is 16 x 25 feet, with a pitched roof and a nice blend of absorption and diffusion, removing the slap echo without being dead and overdamped. (continued)



Powering the FRM-2s with the prodigious Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks was an eye opener. Much like putting the pedal down in a base model Porsche Boxster and then climbing into a 911 Carrera S, there's just more oomph there. The speakers still had great LF traction, and upon spinning the Stereophile test disc, there was indeed solid output at 30hz, though it did drop off sharply after that. No shame at all for a speaker like this.

Should you have more clean power at your disposal, these mighty little speakers will not disappoint you. Running through some heavier rock records, I was constantly surprised at how far I could push them without breakup or collapse. AC/DC, Van Halen and the White Stripes were all highly satisfying.

The FRM-2 is the perfect speaker for someone wanting state-of-the-art performance without having to deal with a pair of massive, floor-standing loudspeakers. Even in the context of a six-figure system, the Alta Audio speakers are never the weak link in the chain. It is as easy to hear the subtle differences between ARC, Burmester and Robert Koda preamplifiers as it is between phono cartridges and cables. These speakers could be an incredible reviewing tool. Hint, hint to Santa Claus: I'd love a pair of these under the Christmas tree.

In a word, awesome

The Alta Audio FRM-2s shatter every preconceived notion I've ever had about ribbon tweeters and associated issues. Having had the pleasure of listening to some fantastic speakers from Dynaudio, Focal and Sonus Faber – all in the \$12,000 to \$20,000 price range – the FRM-2 is easily at the head of the class. And one of the most musically engaging speakers I've heard at any price.

Considering the performance that these speakers have turned in, I can't even imagine what Alta Audio designer Michael Levy has in store for us with his new flagship speaker. I can't wait to find out. ●



The Alta Audio FRM-2 Speakers

\$13,000/pair

Low Profile stands, \$2,000/pair

OnyxBlack stands, \$5,000/pair

MANUFACTURER

Alta Audio

CONTACT

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference
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Amplification

Pass Labs Xs 300
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Devialet 120

Cable

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