TechDAS Air Force III

Finally, the entry-level record deck promised by TechDAS is here – with a smaller price, a smaller footprint and all the magic – the remarkable Air Force III has touched down
Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

However crass it seems to open a review of a high-end product with the matter of price – surely the preserve of writing about budget kit, where bargains matter and cost is a real issue – it is inescapable when dealing with TechDAS’s Air Force III. True to its word, the company has halved prices with each new model since the Air Force One [HFN Jun ‘13] so this third in the series sells for (deep sigh of relief) £18,998. This is simply staggering value for a deck delivering 90% of the performance of a sibling that leaves little change from £100,000. It goes even further. Unlike the dearer AF One and AF Two [HFN May ‘15], the AF III – note the change to Roman numerals! – can be fitted with up to four tonearms, whereas the larger decks make do with two. At a time when analogue is enjoying an unforeseen renaissance, and the new breed of high-end turntable user leans toward cartridge collecting or fitting different cartridges to suit various needs, this is a boon not seen since the days of its spiritual ancestors from Micro Seiki.

CUBIST APPEAL
Also true to the TechDAS ethos, the ‘III does everything the larger models do, if to a marginally lesser degree, with cost savings made primarily through the use of different materials and manufacturing techniques. So, despite the reduction in price, you still get the air bearing and vacuum LP hold-down, and the sound is so clearly of the same family that it becomes more a matter of perceived virtues rather than actual performance. And let’s face it: the One is visually dazzling, the Two less so, while the III is purely utilitarian. Then again, a Cubist would probably prefer the III to the curvier One.

Measuring 312x160x360mm (whd) – but not including tonearm bases, which extend outward according to the length of the arm to be fitted – this is clearly a ‘compact’ relative to the ‘One’s footprint of 680x480mm and over twice the weight. This nearly-square main chassis, the platter extending to its edges and therefore being as small as possible without going round like an SME 10 or 15 [HFN Oct ‘15], certain Avids or a Wilson Benesch Circle, is cut and machined from solid aluminium alloy, just like the Air Force One.

Each corner pillar can accept a tonearm base, hence the optional fitting of four tonearms, from 9in to 12in. They address a basic platter of solid aluminium alloy weighing 9kg, but other types will be developed for customers who want upgrades. The unit rests on four feet using what TechDAS calls ‘a pin-point support method with a sufficient howling margin within an appropriate installation environment’. They also lower the centre of gravity, though I have no idea why that is important in a record deck, as opposed to a sports car.

FLOATING ON AIR
If the isolation isn’t sufficient, one of the optional extras will include an insulation table that provides air suspension technology. Currently, the deck comes with a wooden tonearm base drilled for a specified tonearm, while the other options include extra armboards and the Disc Stabiliser, which is so useful and effective that it ought to be a standard item.

But forget all the extras and the unavoidable enticement of upgrade possibilities: the basic Air Force III still manages to provide the two most critically important technologies of the dearer units, which are the bearing that floats the platter on a 30µm layer of air, and the best vacuum hold-down of an LP that I’ve
yet to experience (Luxman or Continuum devotees might argue otherwise).

Why the vacuum hold-down? The goal is to remove further any unwanted vibration at the level of the LP itself while also ironing out any mild warps or ripples in the vinyl. Also notable is that TechDAS has done a great job in ensuring that the outboard air pump is unobtrusive, itself the result of trickle-down technology from the Air Force One. It’s housed in a nicely-finished enclosure and is easily distanced from the main unit [see inset picture, below right].

Its external motor, as with the other TechDAS decks, is completely separate from the main unit, connected only by the belt-to-platter contact. Unlike the larger models, where the motor assembly sits in a niche, here the motor module is simply positioned to the side. (If necessary, it could actually be positioned behind the chassis, as the control panel is mounted in the front of the III, not on the motor unit.) Here, again, this is a ‘baby’ Air Force One or Two, the control section providing the usual choice between speeds of 33.3rpm and 45rpm. It also offers pitch control of ±0.1rpm ‘for those who have a sense of absolute pitch’. Speed accuracy is assured by a high-precision oscillator circuit, which TechDAS says is also found in various high-quality mobile phones.

**LIFELIKE CRISPNESS**

My observations involve four intensive sessions with a number of systems, but the most revealing was via the MartinLogan Neoliths [HFN Jul ‘16] with Constellation electronics. Arms included SME Series V and V-12, SME 3012 and the Graham Phantom, while cartridges included Koetsu’s Jade and the TechDAS TC01Ti [HFN Sep ‘14], through the Audio Research REF 3 phono stage.

But to deal with the 600lb gorilla in the room right away, to dispense with paranoia: no, this doesn’t blow away a One or a Two. The more you spend, the greater the control over the lower registers and the more ‘solid’ the sound. Also to be gained by the dearer models are lower noise floors for added dynamic contrast, but I hasten to add, with my italics, *the gains are so subtle that they reinforce the Law of Diminishing Returns*. This is not to say that you will not hear the differences, because you will, especially through a massive system with plenty of wooferage, but, as I said above, the main gains for the added (and huge) outlay will pay more for better looks and psychological reinforcement.

That said, the case made for the AF III is persuasive, just because you get so much for so little in relative terms. (And I stress ‘relative’ – I mean in comparison with the dearer TechDASs, not with the national average wage.) Using Mobile Fidelity’s magnificent 45rpm edition of Bob Dylan’s *Blonde On Blonde* [MFSL 3-45009], the cheesy percussion and tambourine had a

**THE NEXT STEP**

TechDAS doesn’t seem to take a break. The big news at Munich’s High End 2016 was the launch of the even costlier Air Force One Premium, which elevates the company’s already-unassailable flagship further into dream territory. And Nishikawa-san has always hinted at his ultimate statement offering, his final design, which is tentatively called Air Force Zero. While awaiting Zero-hour, the near-future holds much for enthusiasts. The ‘ill is certain to benefit from upgrade options that will narrow the gap between it and the Two, starting with the already-available Disc Stabiliser. The two most important add-ons will be the forthcoming isolation platform, which will allow its suspension to emulate more closely those of the One and Two, and the new platters.

There’s just no edginess: strings were as sweet as maple syrup’
crispness and air-moving aspect that made them sound more lifelike than ‘paperly’, as they can tend to do.

It was the salvo of brass, though, that fed the Mardi Gras feel right into the room, especially when using the TechDAS TC01TI in the 12in SME. The ‘blaaat!’ sound makes you sit up and take notice, the wheezing harmonica and that rattling tambourine combining for a drunken party feel.

**CLARITY AND SPACE**

Equally convincing was the spread of the instruments, with the party noise (hoots and whistling) placed far behind them. Damn, I knew the pressing was exceptional, but this was another level of authenticity and immediacy.

OK, so the AF III can do ‘scrappy’ with a righteous mix of abandon and precision, but how about the ordered and deliberate? ‘Rock The Boat’ by The Hues Corporation from ‘Freedom For The Stallion’ [RCA APL 1-0323 LP], too, has brass galore, plus those lush strings. The top end of the TechDAS is so precise that the punch of the brass cuts the air with an authority that will challenge your tweeters, and yet there’s no unwanted edginess – those strings were as sweet as maple syrup.

Where the AF III stamps its authority is in its coherence, so the layers of brass, vocals and strings, as well as rolling bass, enjoy their own clarity and space, nothing shouting at the listener or overshadowing the rest.

This sense of balance proved invaluable in a completely different context, dealing with the furious guitar work of Johnny Winter on the nearly-forgotten pre-CBS masterpiece, *The Progressive Blues Experiment* [Liberty LP-12431]. The glorious twang on ‘Bad Luck And Trouble’ from Winter’s bottleneck playing on a National steel-standard is conveyed with that inimitable metallic edge and its teeth-gritting rattle. With the boogie of ‘Mean Town Blues’, the descending bass lines, the snare-heavy drumming and Winter’s nasal growl, the AF III managed to offer the clarity and transparency of a high-end open window, without stripping away any of the in-your-face attitude needed to get the message across.

The kick-drum staccato behind the guitar break is just dry enough and certainly dynamic enough to counter the lightning-fast guitar pouring out of the right channel. Full marks to Red Turner for sustaining the percussion throughout!

I didn’t need to hear this treasure of an LP on the Air Force III to be reminded that Winter was one of the finest blues guitarists ever, but the fluidity of the TechDAS matched the liquid technique that made him an all-around magician. With his leads going from crystal clarity to rolling raunch, the AF III had its work cut out. It won.

**HI-FI NEWS VERDICT**

‘Phenomenal’ is the only way I can describe the Air Force III. Yes, it has a handful of serious, lust-inducing rivals in its price category to consider, especially from SME and Clearaudio, each with its own sonic and aesthetic charms. I suspect that the ‘III will win a devoted following for its multi-arm potential, but the sound, too, is going to prove irresistible for those who want but cannot afford a One or Two.

**Sound Quality:** 88%

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**Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm**

33.34rpm (+0.033%)

**Time to audible stabilisation**

1.2sec

**Peak Wow/Flutter**

0.02% / 0.04%

**Rumble**

-68.6dB (with vacuum hold down)

**Hum & Noise**

Unweighted, rel 5cm/sec

-55.4dB

**Power Consumption**

41W (26W pump on; 6W standby)

**Dimensions**

312x160x360mm / 27kg

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