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PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **544**

September 2026

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DREAM MACHINE



TechDAS' superlative Air Force IV belt-drive turntable





DETAILS

PRODUCT
TechDAS Air Force IV/Reed 1H
ORIGIN
Japan
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable with electronic speed control/arm
WEIGHT
34.4kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
421 x 168 x 368mm
FEATURES
• 33/45rpm
• One-piece 8.7kg precision platter
• Can accommodate up to three tonearms
• Vacuum LP hold-down system
DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds
WEBSITE
techdas.jp
absolutesounds.com

Air apparent

This latest TechDAS turntable sees all the core technologies of its premium models, including an air bearing and vacuum LP hold-down, engineered into a compact chassis

Two essential features define all TechDAS turntables: an air bearing beneath the heavy platter and vacuum hold-down of the LP. From the inboard-motor entry-level Air Force V to the king's ransom Air Force Zero, all possess those two operational niceties, while the Japanese manufacturer's top two models add air suspension for the entire chassis. The latter is less important if your floor is solid or your equipment stands rigid, but the air bearing and vacuum hold-down are the deal breakers. And the new Air Force IV at the sharp end of £20,000 may be the best deal of all.

At first, the Air Force IV looks like a post-Ozempic Air Force III Premium,

thanks to its smaller form factor and lighter chassis colour. As the IV brings the motor inboard, enabling precise belt tension, the footprint itself is reduced to a more reasonable 421 x 168 x 368mm (WxHxD). Meanwhile, the total weight is slashed from the Air Force III Premium's 55kg (the gunmetal platter accounts for a whopping great 29kg of this) to 34.3kg, of which 8.7kg is the solid one-piece aluminium platter. Chassis materials differ, too. The III Premium is made of polished, black anodised precision-machined aluminium alloy (A5056), while the IV is silver anodised solid aluminium alloy (A5052).

The PSU/vacuum pump, however, is separate – using pneumatic tubes to feed air into the 'bearing' in order to

create the suction for the hold-down. Air floods out across the surface of a fixed polished glass disc under the platter, lifting it a few microns to reduce the load on the physical bearing. However, you should never attempt to turn the platter without the air being pumped, for fear of scratching the glass surface. The PSU/pump weighs 9kg, but is very quiet thanks to a sprung suspension.

While arguably being the prettier of the two, the IV will still be instantly recognisable to those familiar with the Air Force V or III. At the front is the control panel for selecting speed, adjusting pitch and turning the suction on and off. It also has a display to indicate speed, speed lock and other operations such as standby.

At the front right and two rear corners of the chassis are mounts for individual armboards. The positioning of the motor precludes adding a fourth arm to the front left – but surely a trio of arms should be enough? The Air Force IV will accept 9in and 12in variations, and comes supplied with one armboard cut to suit the customer's choice.

Arguably, the repositioned four-pole AC synchronous motor is the IV's biggest update. Instead of sitting entirely outboard, it resides in a niche under a neat cover that's integrated into the chassis.

At no point does it sound like the IV is losing anything to the beefier III

Under this easily removable cover are fittings that allow the user to adjust the initial tensioning of the 4mm double-side polished polyester fabric flat belt – the deck itself fine-tuning the final tension. The promise here is, of course, improved speed stability.

Our test sample comes fitted with the new Reed 1H tonearm (£3,100). A first for Reed it's an armtube made of carbon fibre, the company opting for the material after finding a way to give it: "acoustic properties close to ones that normally are typical for the wood". Reed uses soft wood inside to damp the carbon fibre tube, which it feels sounds better than carbon fibre



The outboard PSU deals with power, pump and speed control, and is connected to the deck by pneumatic hoses

on its own. Whatever the logic – and much space is devoted to its technical specs on Reed's website – this is a great-sounding arm.

The 1H is less fussy or complex than more expensive Reed models, and is available in a choice of three lengths (9.5in, 10.5in or 12in) and Black or White finishes.

The arm has a 'cardanic' bearing system, with the vertical axis using thrust rotation bearings and the horizontal axis on thrust pivot bearings, as per Reed's previous 3P. The 1H provides azimuth adjustment, a user replaceable headshell and VTA adjustment also similar to that of the aforementioned 3P model.

Sound quality

Sometimes, it takes only a few seconds to recognise when you're in

the presence of greatness. Even with a knackered old LP, the Air Force IV exhibits a quietness and confidence, as well as Sherlockian analytical powers, to establish itself as a future classic. The record in question is a tormented, abused copy of Johnny Rivers' *Meanwhile Back At The Whisky À Go Go*, which – despite more grit and scratches than is healthy – still sounds so real and vibrant that it evinces not just respect for the deck, but also for the artist.

This is a singer who has rock 'n' roll flowing through his veins and the live performances of rock standards like *Susie Q* and an early cover of The Beatles' *I'll Cry Instead* are delivered with such impact that the surface noise all but disappears like tinnitus in a hurricane. There is something about the playback that enables you





to listen through the detritus. In addition to the sounds of the venue, Rivers' distinctive vocals, with his mix of textures and a hint of nasality, are perfectly reproduced throughout.

Toying with a worn-out LP is hardly an ideal way to assess a piece of equipment, but it does educe the belief that a fine system can work wonders with a less-than-wonderful recording, or in this case an LP in not-so-pristine condition. With the sonic spectacular that is Hall & Oates' *H2O*, a mint original, things are rather different... The bottom end

heard on *Maneater* calls into question what is alleged to be the logical sonic sacrifice of the Air Force IV versus the Air Force III. Surely the overall mass of the III, the vastly heavier platter, will lead to greater impact and weight? Well, no actually. At no point does it sound like the IV is losing anything to the beefier III.

While the vocals are proof that the superb retrieval of Johnny Rivers' singing is no fluke, the LP isn't that rich down below and hardly challenges the IV's bass capabilities. *H2O*, on the other hand, is a funkfest

The inner and outer 'rings' of the platter have soft rubber seals that maintain the vacuum hold-down

that's characteristic of Eighties blue-eyed soul and get a delicious taste of the IV's canny balancing of the bottom octaves with clean, sweet upper registers. But how does it fit into the TechDAS hierarchy? Digging out a notorious bass-buster, Rockin' Jimmy & The Brothers Of The Night's *By The Light Of The Moon* soon puts it to the test.

This 1980 album has a number of tracks with percussion so massive that they recall Sheffield Lab's *Drum Record*, only with vocals and other instruments. The impact is such that



HOLD IT DOWN!

A recent conversation with Dan D'Agostino, who worked on turntables prior to founding Krell Industries, and latterly D'Agostino Master Audio Systems, provided TechDAS users with handy moral support: Dan, too, uses an Air Force III Premium. "I don't see how anyone can argue with the superiority of vacuum hold-down", he said, "no matter how heavy a weight or how tight a clamp, nothing will secure an LP to the platter like vacuum hold-down ensuring the vinyl will not send vibrations back to the stylus".

Like so many other converts to vacuum hold-down, Dan was first introduced to the technology via John Bicht's Versa Dynamics turntable of 1986,

which has gone on to become a serious collector's item. Dan said it 'blew away' the then-champion, the hugely expensive Goldmund Reference, and at a fifth of its price. But Versa wasn't the first: Luxman debuted vacuum hold-down in 1980 with the PD-555, inspired by its use on professional record-cutting lathes.

A flagship model, it was followed by the more accessible PD-300 a year later. Direct precursors to the TechDAS models, however, are Micro-Seiki's SX-8000 II, SX-555FW, RX1500 and BL-99V.

The link? TechDAS founder Nishikawa-san was a designer at Micro-Seiki, which also introduced an air bearing in the SX-555FW.

we have to go back and forth between the two decks, and even then the Air Force III only has the edge to a degree that would demand it being partnered with the kind of wide-bandwidth system able to plumb the depths.

The weight of the Air Force IV is so convincing that it becomes an academic issue, or one of bias. Instead, we swerve to focus on other areas where the IV proves itself to be an alternative to the III for different reasons. One area that manifests itself enough to establish the IV as having its own skill set is heard via the mono edition of Tom Rush's *The Circle Game*. While it's common knowledge that the III is capable of delivering gloriously wide and deep mono, we certainly aren't expecting the IV to throw out the sort of front-to-back depth that exceeds it further still.

Okay, so it's one rather specific detail and hardly as crucial to one's listening pleasure as, say, transient attack, but on *No Regrets* we are able to hear layering that narrows the gap between mono and stereo in terms of satisfying soundstage recreation. The IV fills the space so deftly that mono versus stereo ceases to be an issue.

Two other areas are so close as to cause bewilderment – transient attack and retrieval of low-level details. As for the latter, the Air Force IV is so quiet and clean that we are able to hear effects on The Kinks' *Celluloid Heroes* from *Everybody's In Show Biz* that we've never encountered before. But it's the speed and recovery of the transients on the aforementioned Hall & Oates classic *H2O* that really create the notion of the IV having a slightly different 'voice' to the III.

It's certainly not quite as night-and-day as, say, comparing tubes with transistors, but careful, intense and even frustrating listening allow a differentiation between the two, the vast cost disparity notwithstanding. That in itself makes all of this moot. To tell which is which, we turn to The J Geils Band and *Did You No Wrong* from the *Ladies Invited* LP, which features each of the band members displaying virtuoso talents on guitar, harmonica, drums and assorted keyboards. Both turntables allow the listener to zoom in on each or simply sit back and savour the experience. Where the two differ from one another is when it comes to presentation. The Air Force III is more revealing and analytical, with the kind of grip and command that places great demands on the rest of the system. And the Air Force IV? It's almost forgiving or warmer, as if the two turntables are playing 'good cop, bad cop'. They are not mutually exclusive.

The IV performs so deftly that in testing mono versus stereo isn't really an issue

They beg that overused analogy of a Porsche Cayman vs a 911: while the price keeps them apart, performance lets you know they're siblings.

Conclusion

Sometimes a product is just too good, amplifying the law of diminishing returns. Heard side-by-side with the dearer Air Force III Premium, it's a real challenge to identify any sonic deficits in the TechDAS Air Force IV. With only the loss of a fourth tonearm option and the use of a lighter platter and chassis, it reduces not just the footprint but the price of entry to the upper reaches of the range. This is a dream machine ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★☆

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: All the company assets at a lower price

DISLIKE: It lacks a fourth tonearm option

WESAY: A dream machine worth hunting down for an audition