

NEW WORLD ORDER

Brett Gideon gets his movie world turned upside down and shaken around — literally

Sometimes profound experiences sneak up on you when you're least expecting them. Onsite with Des Dass in Gulf Harbour to check out his magnificent high-end smart home, I was hoping for some home theatre excitement to make my day, but the downstairs lounge area had only a big plasma hanging on the wall. It seemed that home theatre wasn't high on Des's priority list.

But then we strolled upstairs. Slap me with a mackerel and consider me stunned, there it was: two rows of sumptuous seating and a full set of beautiful hybrid electrostatic speakers showing just how far up Des's priority list home theatre actually is. Anyone who runs the big and distinctive MartinLogan Vantage speakers in each corner of his home theatre along with the rarely seen MartinLogan Stage centre speaker is keen, but the Sunfire electronics nestled behind frosted glass doors show exactly how serious Des is.



HIGH-END HEAVEN

Sunfire isn't well known in New Zealand but its products have a reputation for bulletproof reliability and effortless power. The Sunfire Theatre Grand Amplifier TGA-7400 in Des's rack can shove 400 watts into seven channels at eight Ohms but can quadruple that into two Ohms for a mind-numbing 1600 watts per channel, which is more than eleven kilowatts of available muscle. There's more oomph lurking behind the sofa in the form of two Sunfire True Sub EQ subs, each with 2700 watts. Two subs with nearly six kilowatts between them, plus that monster of an amp, plus 200 watts powering the eight-inch bass module in each of the speakers? I like power as much as the next bloke but this was looking a smidgen over the top.

An ultra-capable Sunfire Theatre Grand Processor 5 runs the action like Hitchcock with a stun gun. Sources are a top-of-the-range Denon DVD-3930 universal player and a Samsung BDP1400 Blu-ray player. The huge hunk of black and silver hanging from the roof is a JVC HD-1 1080p projector — much beloved of *Tone's* home theatre guru Gary Pearce — and the screen is a 100-inch Grandview Elegant. The theatre room is fully integrated with the all-encompassing home automation system, and lighting and blinds are controlled from a single remote, which also has full macro control of the theatre components.

So there's high-end equipment aplenty, but does it merely add up to a great system or is it even better than the sum of its parts? Is it ever. Forget float like a butterfly, sting like a bee; this is more like float like a golden eagle, sting like the mutated radioactive ten-metre-long wasp from a '50s horror movie!

Looking through the components didn't really prepare me for how well sorted the system is. I'm a rabid fan of Steely Dan and I know their music well, but the familiar songs on the *Every Thing Must Go* 5.1 DVD-Audio disc sounded like they'd been put through the wash, fresher and more vibrant than ever with extra speed and razor-sharp impact. The combination of the MartinLogans, the unbelievably quick subs and all that clean power gave the music an almost tactile quality that made me borderline tearful (because it's bloody marvellous music, okay? But also because my humble system doesn't get vaguely close to this sound...).

WILD RIDE

With a sly grin, Des switched to movies and insisted that he had something new to show me, something that would blow my socks right off. I assumed he was talking about a new HDMI cable or a DVD demagnetizer of some sort. I was wrong. But he was right: my socks are long gone.

He teed up the flying Ford Anglia scene from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* on DVD, which seemed like an odd choice. Things started off normally. Then my chair started to move. I thought I was hallucinating. When it started to follow every wild movement of the hurtling blue car and its unlicensed boy racer, I had to laugh out loud and enjoy the ride. No, it wasn't LSD in the coffee. The secret is D-BOX, a technology that creates motion synchronized to on-screen action in movies or games.

D-BOX isn't some simple system activated by bass sounds and the seating doesn't just tilt and pivot. All the motion is encoded frame by frame for each movie by D-BOX artists. With approximately 24 frames per second and 124

programmable movements per frame, the range of movement is huge. This motion code is stored on a DBOX controller, which synchronizes with the movie via a digital output from the player and drives motors on each chair. Des has both the single seaters and the couch hooked up. The chairs can emulate the swooping motion of Ron's lousy driving but they can also shudder, vibrate, slam and shake as if they were being moved by the hand of an angry Norse god. My hundred-plus kilos proved no obstacle at all, and at times the movement was so severe that I was actually holding on [*You big baby girl - Ed*], even though I knew I wasn't going to fall out.

I was never really into Peter Jackson's *King Kong* but the t-rex fight scene had me hooked. It was fiercely intense, with every on-screen impact and punch crashing through the seat at a level that was at times brutal. While Kong and his playmates were falling through the vines, I was actually cringing at the thought of the landing to come. Even quieter, more atmospheric scenes are enhanced by the system, with Kong's menacing growls vibrating up the spine in a most convincing way. ▶





Next up was the getaway scene from the beginning of *The Transporter* on DVD and some *Spider-Man 3* on Blu-ray. Cue a double dose of holding on, more exhilaration and even more maniacal laughter on my part.

Effectively, the movie experience just got shunted into a brand new realm, making everything else seem tame by comparison. D-BOX is amazing fun, nerve racking and truly, madly, deeply involving to a degree that you have to feel to believe. It literally does change the nature of action movies and the way they impact the viewer – the faint of heart need not apply.

Image and audio quality hasn't got a word in thus far but rest assured that it is as good as you would imagine, given the stature of the system. Contrast is marvellous, with the deep blacks only the best projectors and panels are capable of. Motion is, of course, smooth as velvet. The surround field and general impact of effects, music and speech are tight and controlled, and between the subs and the D-BOX the bass is out of this world.

TWO CHANNELS ONLY

Moving back into music playback, we explored the two-channel capabilities of the system. It's as good in stereo as it is in multi-channel, turning in a masterful performance with Des's collection of enhanced resolution XRCD discs, which he reckons are at least as good as SACD or DVD-Audio. The first XRCD we tried was *Portrait of Bill Evans*, with performers like Bob James on 'Nardis' and Herbie Hancock doing 'Gotta Rhythm'. The instruments – especially piano – were exquisite, with the performers seemingly in the very room. The attack of each note was

as tight and sharp as only the fastest drivers can make it – and there's nothing as quick as an electrostatic panel. Integration between the Vantage panels and their bass modules was superb, presenting a balanced and cohesive whole with dynamics many speakers at this price point would give their left tweeter to possess.

At my insistence we popped on more Steely Dan. Yet again the sound was extremely balanced with everything needed to make beautiful music: fiery dynamics, a tight and decently low bottom end, a transparent midrange and treble to die for. Imaging was excellent, the soundstage tall and wide with performers located in their own piece of three-dimensional real estate. The all-important emotional connection was there in full force and it would be very hard to find this system dry or analytical, despite the layers of detail being exposed as if by x-ray.

In short, it was quite compulsive. Indeed, that's the word that does justice to this system in its entirety: compulsive. I would be even more of a hermit than I currently am if I had this setup.

Could I live with Des's system? Absolutely. In two-channel, multi-channel or movie mode, it's sublime. Can I live without D-BOX? Absolutely not. D-BOX has changed the way I think about home theatre; it's officially right at the top of my priority list. **BRETT GIDEON**

D-BOX
www.intellisys.co.nz
Sunfire
www.atlanticaudio.co.nz
MartinLogan
www.oceania-audio.co.nz

D-BOX

D-BOX carries a rough price of \$5000 per seat or around \$10,000 per sofa. That may sound like a pile of money but its all relative, and D-BOX will add more to your home theatre experience than a receiver or projector upgrade. The only hassle is that you can't buy just one seat because the family will fight tooth and nail for it. It can be installed on existing seating, supplied already fitted to D-BOX's own seating or even set up on a permanent platform with the motors and electronics hidden under the floor.

The full database of D-BOX motion coded movies comes with every D-BOX system (around 800 titles and counting) and the latest updates are automatically downloaded from the net. Content from Fox is coded on release, and as D-BOX becomes more popular, more movies will be released with the code preloaded on the movie disc.

XRCD

XRCD (eXtended Resolution Compact Disc) is JVC's mastering and manufacturing technology aimed at creating higher fidelity audio discs that conform to the redbook standard, which means they will play on any CD player.

JVC has refined the way original recordings are transferred to CD to reduce any loss of quality and to use only the best mastering techniques. XRCDs tend to cost more than typical CDs, but unlike SACD or DVD-A they don't lock buyers into having to use universal or dedicated players. ■