



Natural selection

The latest in a long line of affordably priced Creek CD players is the Evolution 50CD. **David Price** thinks it chooses itself

And so it goes. The humble Compact Disc player, once a vestigial box with no inputs and a single pair of analogue outputs is increasingly becoming a preamp with a DAC and optical disc transport built in. Gone are the days when it was seen as an end in itself, now it is to all intents and purposes a digital music centre. Creek's new Evolution 50CD silver disc spinner is precisely this, and costing under £1,000, is being positioned to take on the market leader, Audiolab's 8200CD.

Not an easy place to put up your tent, then. The £1,000 CD player market is a tricky one – with some very capable kit from Roksan and

Cyrus set to make life hard. But then Creek has a redoubtable reputation for fine-sounding, affordable CD players – Mike Creek has made a career of doing really nice-sounding products that mere mortals can afford. So the Evo 50CD should be good; the question is how good, and how well does it deliver all the extra functionality that it offers?

To basic CD playing, it adds several digital inputs, a Bluetooth option and source switching allied to a volume control, so you can plug it straight into a power amplifier should you wish. Indeed, the Evo 50CD also offers a degree of operational refinement that Creek hasn't previously been able to give. To

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Creek Evolution 50CD

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
CD player/DAC preamplifier

WEIGHT
5.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 60 x 280mm

FEATURES

- 2x Toslink and 2x coaxial digital inputs
- 1x USB input, 1x aptX Bluetooth input (optional)
- 2x digital outputs
- 1x RCA phono out, 1x balanced XLR out
- Wolfson WM8742 DACs

DISTRIBUTOR
Creek Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01442 260146

WEBSITE
creekaudio.com

wit, you get a swish slot-loading mechanism, backlit control buttons and rather nice OLED display. It comes with a system remote that integrates with other Creek components too. This can also alter display and button brightness levels, as can the front panel menu button.

The machine is very nice to use, just as luxurious in feel as its Audiolab 8200CD rival, which is really saying something. Those backlit buttons are a great feature if you're a bohemian who likes to enjoy his music in relatively low-light conditions.

Although a real ergonomic success, some may wonder why there is no front panel volume control facility on the machine's handsome front panel. Designed to form the centre of a digitally connected system, if you lose the remote control suddenly you've lost one of this machine's most important functions.

As you'd imagine, the back panel is bristling with features like its five digital inputs (two optically isolated Toslinks, one galvanically isolated USB, two transformer isolated coaxial), and two digital outputs plus a Creek RC remote control bus. You'll also like its choice of RCA phono and balanced XLR outputs. You can toggle through the digital inputs on the front panel SRC (source) button.

Under the hood, there's more than the usual attention to detail that

you'd expect to find in a good mid-priced machine such as this. There's a 25W toroidal mains transformer, with three separate secondary voltage windings for analogue and digital circuitry. Low-impedance, specially chosen power supply capacitors and voltage regulators are fitted for the best possible sound, and organic polymer capacitors pop up at key points in the analogue and digital circuitry, along with high-grade WIMA polypropylene capacitors in the output filters. Two Wolfson WM8742 24-bit DACs run in dual differential mode, and Creek says that special low-jitter clocks are fitted. The analogue reconstruction

The Evo 50CD is to all intents and purposes a superb digital music centre

filters in the output of the DAC use high-grade OPA2134 op-amps in each channel, configured in balanced mode. This offers symmetrical filtering and both single-ended and balanced output capability with low impedance high-current output capability. The slot-loading mechanism is an amalgam of ruggedised specialist parts that were chosen specifically for their durability and good sound quality. It gets custom servo control software, to which much effort was devoted to write, says Michael Creek.

Sound quality

The new Evolution 50CD has an interesting sound, one that is very well rounded and enjoyable across the board. Tonally, it's unmistakably a Creek, which means that the bass is a little warmer and more sumptuous than some leaner, meaner rivals – while the midband is a tad smoother and more spacious. But this also means the player is less intense in the upper midband, giving a more laid back sound than some. Where CD is concerned, many will think this to be no bad thing. Overall, it gives it a marginally more 'analogue' feel than immediate rivals such as the Audiolab 8200CD, which comes over as obviously less beguiling to listen to – albeit it no less fun.

Push some well-recorded rock music such as REM's excellent *Welcome to the Occupation* into the slot-loading drive and you'll be greeted by a very nice noise. Overall, the sound is well balanced with the slightest warmth in the upper bass, which gives things a pleasing body. More valuable, though, is the fluidity of the bass guitar work, which modulates up and down with an ease that you don't expect from digital. It integrates beautifully into the music and underpins Peter Buck's ringing Rickenbacker guitars further up. Michael Stipe's vocals sound

highly impassioned as if he's really pushing himself, and the 50CD captures the urgency brilliantly without ever sounding raucous. It picks through the wall of multi-tracked guitars with ease, placing them in a wide soundstage and giving them space. The drum and cymbal work is also excellent, with a light, airy top end that's decently smooth.

This essential musicality isn't lost when you move to electronic music

You'll need to spend upwards of 10 times the Creek's cost to get an improvement

either, showing the player is basically very well balanced. Yello's *Of Course I'm Lying* is a deep, brooding song done on soft, smooth analogue synthesisers and the Creek captures their timbre nicely, showing its skill at conveying subtle, low-level details. Tonally it's smooth with that big fat bass showing itself off again, as does its nice airy upper midband; Billy Mackenzie's backing vocals are wonderfully carried, sounding eerily pure and natural. It's also good at rhythms, but here you begin to notice it doesn't have the Rottweiler instincts of its closest rival, the Audiolab 8200CD, which seems to drill down into the interplay between the snare and hi-hat with more energy and commitment, making the Evo 50CD sound just a little laid back by comparison. Dynamically the Creek is very good and it captures the accenting on peaks slightly better.

Moving to the digital inputs, and via USB it proves a fine partner to a MacBook Pro running Audirvana Plus. It's worth noting that – in its current version – the Evo 50CD only offers decoding at up to 24/96 using this input, rather than the 192kHz

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Creek remote control bus
- 2 Coaxial digital output
- 3 Balanced XLR outputs
- 4 Galvanically isolated USB input
- 5 Analogue outputs
- 6 Optically isolated Toslink inputs

Q&A

Mike Creek
MD Creek Audio



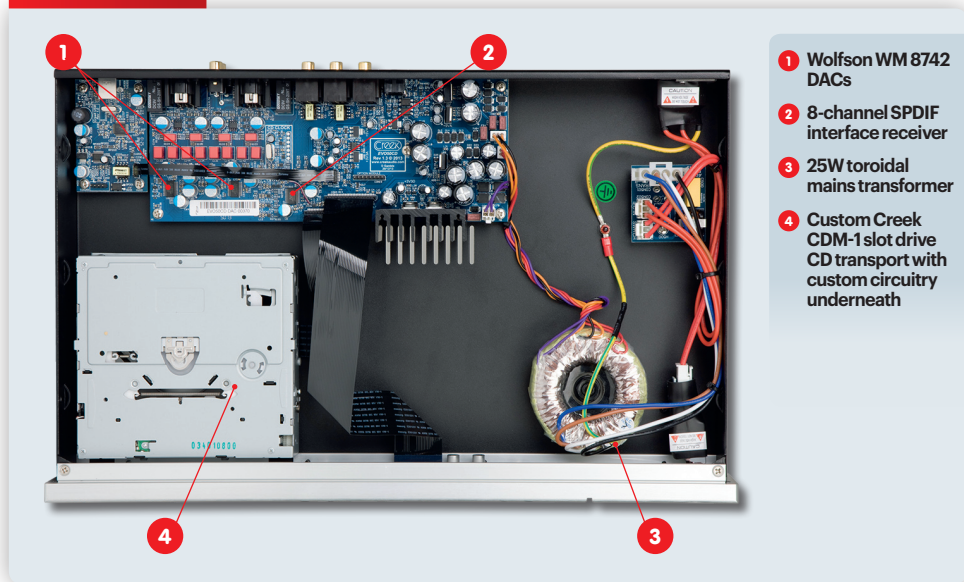
DP: What design hurdles did you face making the new Evo 50CD?

MC: The main one was to resolve the clocking issues for multiple sample rates and sources. The first priority was to clock the CD circuitry from a dedicated discrete master clock and use an I2S audio interface to the servo mechanism with local reclocking of the data right next to the DACs and master clock. Sharing this capability with the needs of receiving multiple different digital sources created many technical issues, which are not immediately apparent. Multiple, galvanically isolated S/PDIF inputs and outputs, with a separate clock recovery system based upon a Wolfson WM8805, provide excellent performance from all sources. A galvanically isolated asynchronous USB input, supporting multiple sample rates and optional Bluetooth capability, all served in a small and relatively inexpensive form, complete the package. It makes designing amplifiers trivial by comparison!

Why did you use Wolfson DACs?

Although Creek has previously used both Crystal Semiconductor and Burr-Brown DAC chips before, we developed a prototype DAC using a lower-cost Wolfson part and were all impressed with the way it sounded during development. Wolfson is a British brand, developed in Scotland, so we felt that if the results were positive, we should try to use local technology. It is important to use a device with a low noise floor, with high dynamic range and low distortion. The Wolfson WM8742 used in the Evo 50CD is capable of extremely high performance and low distortion when deployed correctly. We found the major measured and sonic improvements were associated with running separate left and right DACs and the differential aspect just added a cherry on the cake.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Wolfson WM 8742 DACs
- 2 8-channel SPDIF interface receiver
- 3 25W toroidal mains transformer
- 4 Custom Creek CDM-1 slot drive CD transport with custom circuitry underneath

sampling frequency that's possible (any higher sampling frequencies will be downsampled to 96 or 88.2). This doesn't seem to adversely affect the sound, though, and The Scorpions' *China White* at 24/96 is as powerful and punchy as I hoped, with wonderful texture to the raucous, cranked-up electric guitars. Indeed, the soundstage is suitably vast, the speakers seemingly disappear into the room as I am assaulted by those power chords, making for a visceral sound. At the same time, those stinging cymbal crashes and wailing vocals never quite step over the breach into harshness, while still making a real impression. I can hear the typical Wolfson DAC sound – a big but slightly loose bass allied to a spacious midband that extends up to a well-lit treble that gives cymbals a satisfyingly metallic feel – and it certainly works well here.

The Eroica Quartet's reading of Mendelssohn's *Octet Op.20* at 24/96 is a delight, the fine DAC section is well able to convey the delicacy of string tone. It's with this sort of music that hi-res digital really comes into its own; suddenly CD doesn't seem fit for purpose any more. Here, the Evolution 50CD serves up a spacious recorded acoustic with satisfying depth, convincing scale and a fine sense of the feel of the concert hall. The music flows in an enjoyable and tuneful way, giving an immersive listening experience. Again, it doesn't quite have the searching, forensic low-level detailing of the Audiolab, but it sounds no worse for it – indeed tonally it is sweeter and more palatable with the 8200CD sounding a little sandpaper. In absolute terms,

there's a slight diffuseness to the sound and a lack of true three-dimensional image projection, but you'll need to spend many times the Creek's cost on an exotic high-end DAC to get a dramatic improvement. Yes, this talented new machine really is rather good.

Conclusion

Creek's avowed intention with the Evolution 50CD is to produce an excellent all-round package – one that manages to combine real operational flexibility with convenience and top-notch sound. And overall it has succeeded – sonically this new machine is excellent, proving a great long-term listen. It's also highly flexible and is rather nice to use too – thanks to the sleek slot-loading CD drive, backlit buttons and fine OLED display. As such, if you're looking for an excellent do-it-all digital device, this is an absolutely essential audition. It makes a great case for the continued existence of Compact Disc players, no less! ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The Creek's closest rival is the Audiolab 8200CD (£800), and it looks swisher than the Creek. Sonically the Creek is a little warmer and more sumptuous; bass is a tad warmer and fruitier and it has a more supple, rhythmic feel. This translates up to the midband, which is fractionally more laid back, but no less enjoyable. The Audiolab sounds more intense; everything comes at you with more force and ultimately better dynamics and detail. It does sound slightly more processed, though, partly down to its dry tonality and the fact that the Creek is more mellifluous. Both are excellent at the price, and are well worth comparing in your system.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Slot-loading mech and backlit buttons; sweet, musical sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No fascia mounted volume controls
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent sounding, highly versatile silver disc spinner
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL

