

Outlaw Audio 1050 6.1-Channel Audio-Video Receiver



There is no handbook for becoming an audio-video outlaw. But any renegade start-up that sells products direct-to-customer from an Internet website, eschewing the brick-and-mortar sales tradition, is bound to risk the ire of a posse of distributors and retailers. But the good news, as the saying goes, is that with fewer palms to grease, substantial savings should be passed along to the consumer. This should sound familiar. This distribution model mirrors successful dot.com'ers like Amazon and computer manufacturers like Dell. Outlaw Audio is just such a company. Formed two years ago by a partnership of AV product designers, engineers, and marketers, Outlaw now produces the Model 750, a five-channel power amplifier with a soon-to-follow pair of home-theater controllers, including a special high-end unit. The subject of this review is Outlaw's \$600 1050 AV receiver complete with a circuit to extract the Surround Back channel in THX Surround EX-encoded sources, and six channels of amplification. If its performance and quality are any indication of things to come, these Outlaws should have a long and storied career.

The Outlaw Model 1050 outputs 70 continuous watts in stereo mode and 65 continuous watts with three channels driven (specified into 8

ohms). It provides both auto-sensing Dolby Digital 5.1-channel decoding and DTS, and can decode THX Surround EX, the format in which a center-rear channel (Surround Back) is matrix-encoded into the existing left and right surround channels, then extracted on playback. (See "What You Should Know About...AV Receivers" in Issue 34 for a full explanation.) It will not, however, decode

**Outlaw (n.);
one that is
unconventional
or rebellious...
*Merriam-Webster***

DTS' six-channel variant, DTS-ES. Various surround soundfields are also included for stereo signals: the ever-popular Jazz, Hall, and Natural modes, which captivated my attention for roughly 73 seconds. "Phantom" splits the center channel between left and right, primarily for music-only material in circumstances where the center channel is mismatched with the left and right loudspeakers. "3 Stereo" downmixes surround information into the left and right channel in systems that lack surround speakers. While

this unit is fully featured for its price range (\$600), consumers with more upscale requirements—component video switching or 96-192kHz/24-bit digital-to-analog conversion capability—should look elsewhere. Outlaw's soon-to-be-released processors will no doubt address these needs.

Calibration via remote or front panel is a snap with the provided test tones. The crossover frequency between the subwoofer and main speakers can be set at one of six frequencies (60, 80, 100, 120, 150Hz), flexibility found on only a few high-end receivers and controllers. This feature allows for precise sub/sat matching with a wide variety of loudspeakers. There are delay modes between 0mS and 5mS for the center channel and 0mS and 15mS for the surround channels. A "night" mode reduces the dynamic range for wee-hour listening. There is no analog bypass, but Outlaw suggests that purists run their two-channel sources from "analog-out" to the right/left 5.1-channel discrete inputs, bypassing all digital circuitry and putting only the preamp stages and volume control in the signal path. And so I did.

Purist Sound in Two Channels

The sonic character of the 1050 is well suited to the company it will, by and large, keep. That is, the Outlaw has a personality that doesn't go to extremes. It emphasizes a clean mid-range with a lightly rolled top and bottom, which will mate comfortably with the literally dozens of small 5.1-channel loudspeaker systems on the market. And the manufacturers of such systems—Definitive Technology,

PSB, Tannoy, and Atlantic Technology, to name a few—will also be more than happy to sell you an additional surround speaker to reproduce the Surround-Back channel.

The sound of the Outlaw was on the darker side of neutral to a small degree—a good place to be, given the tendency to brightness for palm-sized and compact speakers in the appropriate price range. Bass extension was leaner than the many dedicated stereo amplifiers I confront in my two-channel duties, but then most AVRs are designed to be matched with powered subwoofers. This is a mildly subtractive amplifier, in the best sense of the word. It didn't impart gross colorations nor did it editorialize or sensationalize particular frequency bands to appeal to any one listening bias.

The Outlaw performed equally well with both male and female vocals, but it especially conveyed Holly Cole's throaty sensuality [*Temptation*; Alert 81026] and only seemed slightly less airy dealing with a true mezzo-soprano like Audra McDonald on "Lay Down Your Head" [*How Glory Goes*; Nonesuch 75980-2]. This capability is key to good dialog articulation in home theater.

For dynamics and soundstaging, I pressed the *Gladiator* soundtrack into service [Zimmer/Gerrard; Decca 289-467-094-2] and found the soundstage impressively wide, though shallow. Imaging was somewhat imprecise and sometimes a bit unfocussed on the dynamic peaks from Track 3, "The Battle." The boundaries of individual instruments smeared ever so slightly, an effect that showed up in comparison to the pricier Onkyo Integra 7.1 or Denon 3801 AVRs I had on hand. Nevertheless, the overall sound was smooth and cohesive, mercifully non-aggressive, and forgiving.

The dynamic soundtrack from *The Thin Red Line* [Zimmer; BMG09026-63382-2] has long moments of soothing calm torn with short bursts of explosive orchestration. The huge drum thwacks that begin Track 6 were clean and fright-

eningly forceful and dynamic. But on Track 7, the 1050 showed a restricted ability to depict layering of images deep into the soundstage. The bass viols, flute, and harp became less defined, congealing into one another. The overall delineation of orchestral sections was less than precise.

The fine sandpaper texture of the tenor sax from "On The Beach" [Illinois Jacquet, *Birthday Party*; Groove Note 1003-2] was smoothed over a touch. A top-notch stereo integrated amp like the Plinius 8150 will convey this texture. And it will more cleanly define individual piano notes of the sixteenth or thirty-second variety, whereas the Outlaw imparts a softer, almost laid-back presentation. On "Misty" [Clark Terry, *One on One*; Chesky JD198], Billy Taylor's piano was a shade softer and darker in the treble. His arpeggios lacked the

full attack and harmonic sustain. Whereas the Outlaw muted trumpet dynamics a touch on both these tracks, the Plinius blasts them forward and upward with seemingly endless reserves. A bigger amp will also flesh out saxophones and big brass as well. Soundstaging on "On the Beach" was wide but not particularly deep. The solo guitar in the right channel and the piano accompaniment in the left seemed to skirt the edges of the outside of the speakers. But there was an ephemeral quality to the imaging. The central images of the drums and acoustic bass seemed slightly awash in one another and a wing-nut shy of being securely bolted down. Overall and nitpicks aside, though, the performance was more than satisfactory. I was surprised at the ease and musicality with which the Outlaw performed in two-channel mode.

Build Quality

One thing is certain, if the competition was hoping for a shoddy "kit" -quality offering from Outlaw, they will be disappointed at the care and good sense that went into this unit. Build quality is a cut above what one might normally expect in this price range. Beneath the stamped steel case is a chassis so tidy and well thought out that even the most fastidious will nod in admiration. Dolby Digital and DTS decoding are performed by a Zoran chip. This chip also incorporates a custom Zoran algorithm for extracting the Surround Back channel from the Surround Left and Surround Right channels. The power supply and hefty transformer are thoroughly isolated from the output stages. Large, deep aluminum heatsinks stretch nearly the entire width behind the front panel. Even the tuner's antenna connections and circuitry are sequestered at the end of the chassis, as far from the transformer as possible. In this the Outlaws have evidently been doing a lot more than merely observing the high end.

The front and back panels are cleanly laid out; they invite rather than intimidate user interaction. Buttons are good sized and well spaced, grouped in a logical configuration; surround parameters, radio tuning function, speaker calibration, and tone controls can be easily recalled for position. The bright, large display depicts the speaker configuration that is currently active and includes a center-rear icon.

A Neatness Award also goes to the back panel for its generous negotiating room for cabling. There are six pairs of gold-plated binding posts appropriate to the unit's six-channel status. All six channels appear on preamp-out jacks, and the unit sports a 5.1-channel discrete analog input for connecting multichannel SACD and DVD-Audio players when they become available. An impedance selector, switchable between 4 and 8 ohms, allows for the option of driving two Surround Back speakers in parallel or in series. Video inputs include three S-Video and four composite; monitor output is via S-Video or composite. A single coaxial and two TosLink optical inputs provide digital-audio connection. For audio, there are five inputs and a pair of tape loops. Finally on/off power is via a rocker switch that sends the Outlaw into standby mode.

The blue back-lit remote control also conveys the same logic by placing commonly used functions in intuitive positions; the mute button directly above the volume and the calibration test tones directly below the volume.

—NG

More Speakers, Please!

If pure stereo revealed some modest limitations, the Outlaw 1050 had little trouble negotiating multichannel. It found a friendly ally in the Krix KDX loudspeaker system with Seismic 3 subwoofer (review to come) and could easily drive these dynamic performers from Australia to ear splitting levels. Maintaining the Aussie theme, I worked out the system with the brilliantly remastered DTS soundtrack for the Australian film *Romper Stomper*. This troubling film (banned in a number of countries at its initial 1992 release) about a skinhead gang in Melbourne is notable for the subliminal nature of the post-production mix. There is a constant influx of industrial and factory noises, even animal shrieks dubbed onto conventional sound cues (listen for a cat's scream when the electric hair clipper is turned on), adding layer upon layer of sound behind and around the action. It's as if a great, gasping machine had swallowed the gang's solidarity. Indeed, this ambient machine starts to recede as the gang splinters apart later in the film. The Outlaw was able to unravel these low-level transients with ease, and to position them specifically in space. What it may have lacked in dimensionality in two-channel performance it dramatically restored on 5.1-channel sources. Surround information was carefully balanced with the front channels to send much of this information well beyond the edges of the left and right speaker.

Dialog intelligibility was consistent, with the slightly laid-back treble that was noted earlier. This reinforces the easygoing character that defines the Outlaw. On the hyper nature of many soundtracks, it's an intelligent spectral balance. And on excellent soundtracks such as *Elizabeth* or *Shakespeare in Love*, it softens them only to a subtle degree without subtracting from articulation.

I've yet to hear a demonstration of Surround EX that fully justifies its existence artistically. Yet I have to concede that with the right attitude, the additional surround channel really is kind of fun.¹ *Toy Story 2* won me over in the blink of an eye with its opening sequence of Buzz Lightyear careening through the heavens to battle the evil Zurg. The strong sense of direct sound arriving from behind was at first a bit distracting, but after awhile it added color and excitement to the experience. In an artificial world like *Toy Story 2*, this new dimension can be used effectively, but I believe care needs to be exercised in more naturalistic film settings. There, direct cues from the rear trigger an instinctive response to turn in the direction of the sound, distracting the viewer's attention from the image on the screen. The use of Surround EX in *The Perfect Storm* created a strong restraint in the application of this tool. It added or completed the ocean soundfield behind me but did so without drawing attention to itself. The white-capped waves whipped up during the storm's peak moved smoothly in a continuous field between the LCRs, demonstrating the Outlaw's seamlessness as well as the fine timbre-match of the Krix loudspeakers. Only during the rescue helicopter flyovers did I get the obvious sensation of the center-rear channel kicking in. But there it was appropriate.

Conclusion: "I fought the law and the Outlaw won."

The Outlaw 1050 rides the high trail outside the bounds of convention and practice. Not everyone will be comfortable buying from the manufacturer over the Internet. If you get acid reflux at the thought of being unable to physically visit a retailer, the Outlaw way of life is probably not for you. But Outlaw does provide an 800 number where someone will answer questions during business hours. And

SPECS

Stereo Mode, continuous average power, 70 watts per channel 20Hz to 20kHz @ <0.05% THD both channels driven into 8 ohms
Six channel surround mode, output power 65 watts per channel, 20Hz to 20kHz, three channels driven @ <0.05% THD into 8 ohms
Dimensions: 17.2" x 6.1" x 14.3"
Weight: 36.3 pounds

INPUT SPECS

Two Optical digital inputs/one coaxial digital input
Three S-Video inputs (with one S-Video output from any of the three S inputs)
Four Composite Video inputs (DVD, Video 1,2,3 where Video 1 includes rec/play loop)
Six Audio Inputs (DVD, CD, Aux, Video 1,2,3 (Video 1 is a play/rec loop))

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Video: Sony 32" XBR400
Front End: Digital-Thule Spirit CD100,
Sony DVP-9000ES, Onkyo DV-S525 DVD players
AV Receivers: Integra DTR 7.1, Denon 3801 7.1
Integrated amplifier: Plinius 8150, Thule Spirit IA100, VTL-IA85
Preamp: Placette Volume control
Amplifier: Rotel RB-1090, VTL-ST85
Speakers: ATC-SCM20-SL, Audio Physic Tempo III, Krix KDX 5.1 with Seismic 3 subwoofer, Revel Performa F30
Accessories: Kimber Kable BiFocal XL, Wireworld Equinox III, Nordost Blue Heaven speaker cable; CPCC, Wireworld, Audio Magic power cords; Poly Crystal Rack; AudioPrism Quiet Lines

for those with a bit more of the pioneer spirit, the Outlaw is brilliantly conceived, with performance and construction quality that will be difficult to top in its price range. Clearly, Outlaw Audio is offering the consumer real value. I enjoyed every moment I spent with the 1050. 

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

OUTLAW AUDIO INC.
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North Carolina 03824
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www.outlawaudio.com
Source: Manufacturer Loan
Warranty: two years
Price: \$599

¹ In my small-room home-theater set-up, I've installed a pair of Gallo Nucleus Micros for the rear channels on omnimount swivel wall brackets, and this works quite effectively. The installation was simple, requiring wiring them up in parallel or sequentially and flipping the switch on the back panel of the Outlaw to 4 ohms.