



Unlike with our recent economy, inflation in the world of home theater surround sound has been spinning out of control lately—5.1 is no longer enough to be on the cutting edge. We need 6.1, 7.1, or even the nine

surround channels featured on the Yamaha RX-V1. The problem is that, until now, getting those extra channels has meant spending big bucks.

In a way pioneered by companies like NAD and Rotel, Outlaw Audio does their design work in North America

(in their case, New Hampshire), then the receiver is built in an Asian factory to save money. To help pass the savings on to the consumer, Outlaw eliminates the middlemen by only selling direct via the Internet. The resulting equipment is in tune with

# The New Kid in Town

by Michael Trei

Outlaw's 1050

6.1-channel

surround

receiver offers

higher-end performance

at a mass-market price.



### Inside Cheap Thrills:

- Outlaw Audio 1050 6.1-Channel Surround Receiver
- Edge Audio 502D Series System III Speaker System



## Outlaw Audio 1050 6.1-Channel Surround Receiver

Western tastes and expectancies, yet it has the affordability of mass-produced Asian gear. Sure, there are plenty of surround receivers for a lot less than the Outlaw 1050's \$600, but there aren't any with 6.1-channel processing and anything close to this level of quality. Granted, you do lose the

that the 1050 is going to sell to a more-sophisticated buyer who can see past its rather plain public face and appreciate its hidden value.

Buying brand-name products costs money. That's why Coca-Cola sells for more than the generic store-brand cola. After all, somebody has to pay for all of those fancy TV commercials. To achieve similar savings, Outlaw

has opted to use a rear-surround decoder with algorithms developed by Zoran rather than the certified THX Surround EX equivalent. By using a single center rear speaker, they also save the cost of putting in the two rear-surround-channel amps required by the

THX setup. Outlaw says that you can connect two rear speakers to the one channel, but I'd be careful to make sure that the impedance doesn't drop too low if you do this. I went with a single rear speaker.

If you're the kind of person with rack upon rack of equipment, pay attention. While the 1050 has enough connections for almost everybody, some might find it a bit limiting. There are two stereo audio inputs, plus an audio-only tape loop and a 5.1 audio input for DVD-Audio. A/V inputs are limited to four with one loop out, and only three of those A/V inputs have S-video capability. Digital inputs are limited to three: two optical and one coaxial. Useful extras include a 12-volt

trigger out, an IR repeater out, and a full set of preamp outputs so that you can upgrade to higher power down the road.

Because Outlaw decided an onscreen display was an unnecessary extravagance, the 1050 is easiest to set up from the front panel. Assigning each digital connection to an input is easy enough, then it's pretty straightforward to adjust delay and level for each channel. I found the test signal for the subwoofer to be next to useless, so I used the signal included on the *Avia* setup disc. The subwoofer crossover has six frequency settings ranging from 60 hertz to 200 Hz, an unusual luxury at this

### HIGHLIGHTS

- "6.1-channel" surround sound for only \$599
- Smooth, confident sound
- The money went where it really counts

price but useful, given that many people who shop in this price range are likely to be using some pretty small speakers. It took me awhile to figure out that I had to put the receiver in 6.1-channel mode before I could adjust the rear-surround level, and the rear-surround delay appears to be linked to the surround left and right. Outlaw calls the Zoran-based rear-surround matrix 6.1, which is a bit unfair because it suggests that the rear-surround channel is discrete. I guess 6.1 was easier than coming up with a new name like "Superrearosurround." DTS-ES decoding seems noticeably absent, but using an external DTS decoder



- A.** Outlaw has kept the 1050's appearance simple to reduce costs, but the 36-pound unit has excellent build quality.
- B.** Some people might find the back panel limiting, but at least there's a 5.1 input for DVD-Audio.

ability to check it out personally before buying, but Outlaw does have a 30-day, no-questions-asked return policy, so you only stand to lose the shipping fees.

The first thing that struck me as I set up the 1050 was its weight. At over 36 pounds, this receiver feels more like one of those \$2K to \$4K flagship models than a \$600 cheapie. Outlaw has carefully put the money where it really counts, giving us a big, hefty power supply, discrete bipolar output stages, and good-quality binding posts. What we don't get is the window dressing used by other manufacturers, such as fancy displays, exotic milled faceplates, and circuits bristling with bells and whistles. This means



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**C. Mike liked the remote's design and the hip blue backlighting.**

into the 5.1 input and activating the Outlaw's 6.1 processing will supposedly work. Naturally, the 1050 also offers Dolby Digital 5.1, DTS 5.1, Dolby Pro Logic, and a few of the usual DSP suspects like hall, stadium, and jazz.

The remote is a design I haven't seen before, and I really like this one. Although it doesn't have any macros, timers, or learning capability, it is preprogrammed and can control up to seven devices. The really cool thing is that all of the buttons light up in a very hip blue color the moment you push any button, making it easy to use in the dark.

I was a bit skeptical about whether the Outlaw's 65 watts per channel would be enough to drive my big Snell speakers, but my fears were mostly unfounded. The sound was far more robust and dynamic than I ever would've

expected, and there was none of the brightness that I have often come to expect from something this affordable. Bass was tuneful and extended very deep, even without the subwoofer, but it lacked the vicelike grip of better separate amplifiers. Even when driving the tougher load presented by the Linn AV5140 speakers, I never had to make apologies for the Outlaw, and it would only poop out if I worked it really hard with something like the helicopter crash in *The Matrix*.

On the great-sounding *Fight Club* DVD, I found the surround envelopment to be very natural and revealing, conveying the changes in ambience from scene to scene with a fine sense of contrast. I was eager to see if the Zoran decoding chip was on par with genuine Dolby Surround EX, so I tried my usual test—the scene in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* where Dr. Evil's assassin fires a bazooka at Austin and Robin Swallows. Although the sound certainly started in the center rear, it then flew straight to the front center with very little involvement from the side surround speakers along the way. With a receiver like the Onkyo TX-DS989 that I reviewed in the October 2000 issue, the transition is much smoother and more progressive. Of course, the Outlaw is only about one-seventh of the Onkyo's price, so it's hardly a fair comparison.

Two-channel music also fared well, and the sound on Keith Richards' *Main Offender* was lively and vibrant, if perhaps lacking some of the midrange transparency of the very best separates. Generally, errors of omission like this are far easier to live with than errors that introduce problems like brightness or boominess. The tuner sounded good but was a bit lacking in sensitivity. I live in a valley with a huge hill between my apartment and the Empire State Building. With my roof antenna, reception was good without problems from multipath, but I could hardly receive anything when using an indoor antenna.

Although many people are promoting the 1050 because of its inclusion of "6.1-channel" capability, don't be misled into thinking that it's a one-trick pony. Even if you were to ignore that sixth speaker output and use it strictly



**HT Labs Measures: Outlaw 1050 6.1-Channel Surround Receiver**  
This graph shows that the 1050's left channel, from CD input to speaker output with two channels driving 8-ohm loads, reaches 0.1% distortion at 59.2 watts and 1% distortion at 81.2 watts. Into 4 ohms, the amplifier reaches 0.1% distortion at 99.8 watts and 1% distortion at 126.1 watts. An error occurred while measuring the analog frequency response, so we will print that spec at a later time. THD+N from the amplifier was less than 0.066% at 1 kilohertz when driving 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load.

From the Dolby Digital input to the loudspeaker output, the left, center, and surround channels are all flat,  $\pm 0.89$  decibels from 20 hertz to 20 kHz. From the Dolby Digital input to the line-level output, the LFE channel is  $+0.27$  dB at 20 Hz when referenced to the level at 40 Hz and reaches the upper 3-dB down point at 116 Hz and the upper 6-dB down point at 119 Hz.—AJ

**1050 6.1-Channel Surround Receiver \$599**

Outlaw Audio  
(800) 392-1393  
www.outlawaudio.com  
Dealer Locator Code OUT

as a 5.1-channel surround receiver, the 1050 still offers remarkable value. This product really represents the dividing line between mass-market gear that sounds just ordinary and high-end equipment that sounds extraordinary. **F**

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