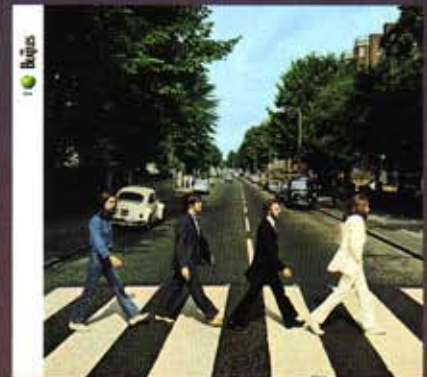


CANADA HiFi

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Dolby Pro Logic IIz and Audyssey DSX Explained and Tested!



The Beatles Album Collection Gets Remastered
We interview members of the remastering team from Abbey Road Studios!



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Audio Physic Scorpio II Loudspeakers

Fatman iTube 452 Integrated Tube Amplifier with ValveDock

PLUS Meet the Manufacturer: TOTEM ACOUSTIC

product review

Fatman iTube 452 Integrated Tube Amplifier with ValveDock



Suave Kajko

You may have heard of a relatively new comer to the audio component business, a little company called Fatman. Since its inception in 2006, Fatman has captured the interest of iPod owners with its high performance, tube-based amplifiers and docks designed specifically for the iPod. And as it turns out, the company isn't that little after all. Fatman is owned by TL Audio, a UK-based company that has been manufacturing professional audio valve products since 1993.

This isn't my first encounter with a Fatman product. I've listened to the company's entry-level iTube ValveDock, one of Fatman's original products, on a number of occasions and was quite impressed with the sound, although we never formally had a chance to review it.

By contrast, in this review I take an in-depth look at the company's flagship iTube 452 integrated tube amplifier, which comes bundled with the ValveDock iPod docking station. The pair retails for \$3499.

The iTube 452 is a two-channel, push-pull amplifier design based on nine valves and four line input stages. The tubes used in the iTube 452 include four 6L6G and five 12AX7. Fatman rates its power output at 45 watts per channel, with a distor-

tion of less than 1 percent and a signal-to-noise ratio that's greater than 86 dB. The iTube 452 is compatible with all iPods with the exception of the Shuffle.

The back panel of the iTube 452 contains three sets of RCA audio inputs, a mini-stereo input, an AC inlet (for a detachable power cord) and speaker terminals to accommodate both 4 and 8 ohm speakers. Also present is a subwoofer output for those who would like to supplement their speakers with a powered subwoofer.

The ValveDock is larger-than-typical iPod dock that offers left and right channel RCA audio outputs which connect to the iTube 452. It also provides composite video and S-video outputs, which can be used to send video from compatible iPods to a display.

From the outside, the iTube 452 amplifier appears to be of reasonably good build quality. Out of the box, it doesn't look particularly attractive with the factory-installed metal cage which covers its tubes. But I removed the cage the moment I set it up and its true beauty was instantly revealed - the rounded lines of the tubes complements the half-moon shape and curved lines of the chassis very well. Those with little kids will probably want to keep the cage on to prevent curious minds from burning their fingers and

protect the tubes from flying plastic toys. Most of the metal chassis is finished in a matte black and topped off with a glossy black plate which houses two low profile, horizontally positioned knobs - one for source selection and one for volume. On top of this plate, the tubes are inset into a smaller brushed gold plate. A small analogue VU meter at the front completes the design.

The ValveDock has a simple, yet most attractive design an iPod dock could wish for, although the glossy black and chrome finish don't exactly match the integrated amp. Its build quality appears to be about the same as the amplifier, although it feels surprisingly light weight given its size. Overall, the pair looked gorgeous sitting on the top shelf of my audio rack.

Supplied with the iTube 452 is a slim plastic remote that has a brushed metal face. At first glance, I thought that the remote can be used to control both the integrated amp and the docked iPod but that's not the case. Only the iPod can be controlled with the remote. Source selection and volume can be changed only with the knobs on the integrated amp. The buttons on the remote are all of the same size and not organized particularly well; they are responsive but unfortunately feel cheap when pressed. Overall I was not impressed with the remote. I would like to have seen a fuller-sized, higher quality remote with a component at this price point. I also found that the horizontal positioning of the source and volume knobs made operating the amplifier a little odd, although I did get used to it during the time the unit spent at my house.

I used two pairs of speakers to evaluate the iTube 452: my reference Totem Rainmaker bookshelves and the Audio Physic Scorpio II floorstanding speakers (also reviewed in this issue). My sources

were an ARCAM DiVA CD73 CD player, my new Classé Audio CDP-102 CD player and of course an iPod player, a first generation 2 GB nano.

I used the iTube 452 amplifier to provide back ground music for a couple of weeks after it arrived so that it would burn in properly. During my first listening session, the characteristics of its sound were very clear: it produced crisp highs, a terrific, clean and natural midrange and an extended, tight low end. Its overall sound had a combination of richness and warmth that one can only expect from a respectable tube-based design amplifier.

Songs from Radiohead's "Ok Computer" and "In Rainbows" albums played with a fluid musical bass that reached surprising depths and was always coherent. Thom Yorke's vocals sounded brilliantly natural, with every nuance of his whiny voice was revealed. Frequencies from the mid-high to the extreme highs were sparkling, yet never overly bright. Certain songs from

ed excellent. This 45 watt per channel amplifier provided ample power with lots of headroom, even with the harder, louder songs like "Even Flow" and "Alive". Sometimes, I wonder how my neighbours feel about me testing audio equipment. This was one of those moments.

Then, as I was performing one of my numerous listening tests, FedEx surprised me at the door with a package that contained a collection of the newly re-mastered Beatles CDs, which will be available in stores by the time you read this. The timing couldn't have been better! I immediately opened "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and popped it in the Classé Audio CD player. What I heard was a marvelous rendition of one of the greatest bands of all time. The lively presentation of the first song, the title track, instantly lifted my spirit on the gloomy afternoon. The iTube 452 delivered a rich, multi-layered sound that was happily received by my ears. The dynam-

ics of the sound were just amazing. The amplifier's rhythmic sound promoted me to listen to the Beatles with the volume turned right up. The iTube 452 sounded very enjoyable even at the highest volume levels -

instead of the undesirable distortion that you'd get from a solid state amplifier, the even-order distortion in this case made the music sound even sweeter. Every Beatles fan should update their collection with these fantastic re-masters.

Satisfied with the performance of the iTube 452 amplifier when listening to CD-based sources, I devoted my attention to the ValveDock iPod docking station as the source. My iPod was loaded with compressed and uncompressed songs, ranging across most music genres. It wasn't a surprise that the uncompressed tracks sounded full-bodied and played with nearly the same richness as CDs - after all, these are the same qualities that I remember when using the iTube

ValveDock some time ago. Compressed MP3s, especially those below 192 kbps, clearly suffered from a lower frequency range and less detail. However the iTube 452 did manage to do something very well with poor quality songs - the warmth of its sound helped to smooth out the harshness and edginess that is often exhibited by compressed music. Overall, the audio performance from the ValveDock was very good.

I did however experience some operational quirks. When selecting songs using the remote, sometimes the system locked up and wouldn't allow me to continue selecting songs or access the iPod's menu, yet the volume, bass and treble buttons still worked. I was still able to change songs and access menus using the docked iPod, so this was not an issue with the player itself but rather with the docking station. Each time, removing the iPod from the dock and putting it back on fixed the problem. As mentioned above, I wasn't very happy with the remote either - it feels flimsy and cheap.

It's been a while since I've enjoyed myself this much when auditioning an amplifier. The Fatman iTube 452 amplifier is more than capable of pumping sheer excitement into the music it's playing. Its rich, warm characteristics made virtually every type of music shine. Sure it does not have the same kind of precision or bass output as a high performance solid state amplifier, but those who enjoy the sound of tubes should certainly take a look at the iTube 452. At \$3499, for the amplifier and the docking station, consider the docking station as just an add-on that will allow you to also play your iPod - the amplifier is clearly the major component of this price.



these albums created tremendously large soundstages that significantly enhanced my listening experience. Listening to these albums on a good audio system with eyes closed can literally give you a musical high - and yes, I certainly felt it this time! This was particularly true when I had the iTube 452 connected to the Audio Physic Scorpio II floorstanding speakers which I was testing at the same time.

Moving on, I reached for the Pearl Jam's recently re-mastered "Ten" album. The ringing of instruments such as acoustic guitars and cymbals on this album sounded precisely as one would expect from real instruments and faded into the background with a natural decay. Guitars with distortion and other effects applied sound-

quick info

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