

audio



The Neoteric Listener... the GT40 USB DAC/Phonostage from Furutech by Dean Seislove

It's in there, somewhere. Uncelebrated, half-hidden in the ever expanding vastness of your albums, discs, music files and other recording ephemera, sits an obscure piece of vinyl that nobody's ever heard (nor wants to hear, probably). Still, for you, that album is your music collection, given the memories and experiences it represents. But setting up the turntable is kind of a hassle, and there's all that fantastic new vinyl still to be played...

The Twisters. That'd be my record. Recorded by a great cover band who had a few decent originals, but who never went on to anything bigger than a brief cameo in a briefer movie, Zapped (Scott Baio's finest hour). Still, their first album—a six song EP, actually, on Rhino Records, no less!—is one of the few remaining survivors of the great vinyl purge of my collection in 2005. Badly recorded and scratchy, it's the final testament to three solid years of watching this band perform in crumbling beach dives and grimy L.A. punk clubs during the late seventies. It's not like it's Charles Foster Kane's Rosebud or anything, but there's a reason why I've kept this EP safe from errant soccer balls and crazy girlfriends' exacto knives for over thirty years: I like it, and it can't be replaced. Which is why the Furutech GT40 USB DAC with Phono Stage is such a noteworthy new product.



What? Another DAC? Another USB DAC, to boot? Listen, I can relate, and I'm probably just like you, waiting for the cost of these things to come down to a nickel while expecting the playback resolution of 24/96 to improve to: expanding universe/infinity. Of course, while I wait sour-faced and arms crossed for the perfect moment to buy and escape being Betamax'd, I do realize that, at nearly fifty, I have a lot more music in my collection than years to listen it all, so time to get cracking. Still, there are cheaper and smaller DACs out there than the GT-40, so why should I plunk down the \$525?

Well, for starters, as a standalone DAC, the GT-40 offers a very smooth, open sound, an approach that seems fairly calculated (given the features of this product) to appeal to those who enjoy a more "analog" sonic picture. I employed the GT-40 in a variety of combinations: Cary SLI 80 or Arcam A-80 integrated, Zu Soul Superfly or Nola Contender loudspeakers (and occasionally the Nola Boxers on hand), GT2 USB cable, Zu Mission speaker cable, Harmonic Technology MAGIC Link Two or Stereolab Reference I-700 RX interconnects, and MIT Z Powerbar or connected to a wall socket. Every switch made a difference, naturally, but the overall sound of the GT-40 remained fairly constant: free of any digital harshness, slightly warmer midband and bass than most DACs I've auditioned, and a good all-rounder at all of the usual audio checkpoints. Judged against my devilsound DAC 2.1, the GT-40 trumped it in every respect, saving sharp detail retrieval. Even here, it was often hard to tell if it was an absence of details or just the GT-40's refusal to accent the edges of music. It's not like I was shouting, "Hey, what happened to the maracas!" but the fact remains that exacting focus is not one of the GT-40's strong suits. What is discernible, however, is the spacious, open, highly musical presentation of digital files. This little unit does a fine job with both 44.1 and 96 kHz digital files, and, more importantly, it's a sound of sufficient loveliness to appeal to a wide audience. If you've ever witnessed one of those awkward scenes where some audio aficionado is giving the "No, it doesn't sound bad, it's good, and here's why" lecture, then you'll appreciate the value of the GT-40's easy on the ears sound. This even approach to tonal balance, resolution, and soundstage is reminiscent of the Furutech GT2 USB cable I reviewed earlier in PFO, and it's nice to see this design philosophy work so well in a DAC.

But, again, there are lots of DACs, and there's some pretty stiff competition out there that may not sound as pretty, but costs less. Yes, it works as a fine headphone amp, but there are plenty of those, too. No, the real value of the GT-40 is that it also offers an analog to digital capability to help change your vinyl buddies into one and zeros that can be played on your computer, phone, mp3 player, or i-everything. Yes, all this works splendidly if you have a connoisseur's record collection and spiffy analog rig...but if you don't, you probably know someone who does! Due to a series of rash decisions, this became my only option, so, armed with chutzpah, a few choice vinyl selections, and, of course, my Twisters EP, I importuned fellow PFO scribe Danny Kaey to help me test the GT-40's ADC merits.



Danny's full system can be viewed in the "Meet the Writers" section of this magazine, but suffice it to say, his Brinkmann La Grange turntable/Zu Audio DL-103 MC phono cartridge connected to the GT-40, then to the Stello Ai500 integrated (via Kubala-Sosna Emotion interconnects) and played through his Zu Definition loudspeakers provided as nice a way to record my vinyl as I could imagine. Purely as a phono amp, Danny thought the Furutech sounded competent, but not nearly as involving as his Brinkmann Fein phono stage. Still, both of us agreed that the GT-40 sounded just, ahem, fine for something that cost 1/6 the price of the Brinkmann and, besides, we weren't here to only listen, we were here to do some serious recording.

Which means you need to download some third-party recording software, so I picked Audacity because it's supposed to be easy to use (and it's free!), and off we went. Literally. I made a couple of bonehead mistakes before I was able to get everything playing and recording all at the same time, but eventually, voila! We had Twisters. Danny wasn't impressed, ("Wow, that's, uh, a really, um, loud recording"—"That's because it rocks!") but who cares? I had my out-of-print EP entombed in my hard drive, just waiting to be sprung on unsuspecting party guests, CES show rooms, and class reunions. Oh, sure, I was also able to digitalize such wonderful recordings as Cannonball Adderly's superlative "Somethin' Else," Wagner's "Wotan's Farewell to Bruenhilda" and "St. James Infirmary" by Louis Armstrong. But how could these music landmarks hope to compare to the Twisters' cover of the old Dr. Feelgood song, "Going Back Home"? To say nothing of the infectious crowd pleasing original, "Vampire Bat" (which, in retrospect, sounds more than vaguely reminiscent of a mix between the Paragon's "Tide is High" and Bob Marley's "Stir it Up")? Now that's an audio file! But putting vinyl under glass is no fun if it sounds squashed and lifeless; fortunately, that's not at all the case with the GT-40.

Back at home, listening to Satchmo's incomparable rendition of "I Ain't Got Nobody," it's amazing how much of the analog feel is retained in the 16 bit (don't ask) 96kHz recording. The size and depth of the soundstage has remained, and so has much of the tonal character of Armstrong's trumpet, Mort Herbert's standup bass, and, thankfully, the wonderfully woody clarinet of Peanuts Hucko. Pops and cracks are there, too, and the illusion of spinning vinyl still emanates throughout the house. No, it doesn't sound exactly like a great analog set up, but there's enough sound remaining to give a darn good impression.

For anyone looking for a really nice sounding DAC, the Furutech GT-40 should be given serious consideration. The high quality parts and specs are outlined on the Furutech website, and I can say that the workmanship and solidity of my review model is excellent. Really simple to use as well, which is always a plus. If you also would like a DAC that doubles as a headphone amp, then the Furutech will do the job with aplomb. But for those of you who would like to have both these things, plus the ability to transport your vinyl (radio broadcasts, too!) into the handy convenience of the digital domain without having to compromise much of the sound quality, well, there really is only one choice. Recommended.

ADL GT40 USB DAC with Phono Stage

<http://www.positive-feedback.com/Issue55/gt40.htm>