

NATURAL EVOLUTION

Classic hi-fi principles updated for the modern age — no wonder we feel rather at home with Creek's updated stereo system.



Creek Evolution 2
CD player and
integrated amplifier
Price: \$1595/\$1595

You might expect some traditional hi-fi manufacturers to be contemplating retirement after years in the industry enduring the rise of evil MP3s, music compression and the like. Mike Creek must have seen his fair share of two-channel action during stereo's golden years, but he's not about to hang up his soldering iron just yet. And that's good news for audio and music lovers alike.

With true British stiff-upper-lipness, Creek Audio continues to defy the technological odds and deliver what it's always done — really decent two-channel audio kit. It's stuck to its guns over the years, concentrating purely on reproducing stereo music — you won't find a multichannel amplifier or AV processor

among its line-up. Back in 2006 it introduced a new CD player and amplifier, the Evolutions — the entry-level for the Creek brand. Both have now been 'tweaked' to Mk 2 status, and we're here to pop the lids on both new models, find out what Mike Creek's been up to, and have a listen to the new versions of these popular Creek models.

EQUIPMENT

Starting with the source, the Evolution 2 CD spinner looks at first glance just like its predecessor. But there are several significant differences, both internally and externally. The chassis, although it looks identical, has undergone improvements including a 12mm-thick aluminium front panel (finished in either black or brushed silver) and steel casework. Rubber isolation feet have been fitted to help absorb any unwanted vibrations (which don't do tracking/error correction much good). And physically, it's exactly the same size as the matching Evolution 2 amplifier.

The guts have been reworked using a Philips CD12 transport mech (still one of the best around) with a bit of Creek fine tuning such as fine rubber brushes which aid playback

during vibration, plus a silky-smooth drawer movement. Electronically, the Evo 2 CD incorporates a new Philips chipset for CD decoding and servo motor control duties, while digital number-crunching is now performed by a Burr-Brown PCM1796 D/A converter, capable of 24-bit/192kHz decoding.

In between these two electronic components lies a new low-jitter master clock to accurately sync the data between CD decoder and DAC. All of this depends on a clean stable power supply, and here the Evo 2 employs a healthy eight voltage regulators, while keeping the digital and analogue stage supplies completely separate.

Amplifying what the CD player outputs, the Evo 2 integrated has also been much improved over the original model. Creek has concentrated on removing unnecessary processing from within the signal path. In the preamp stage, a gain stage after the volume control has been removed, also to reduce unwanted noise and lower distortion. Capacitors deemed unnecessary have gone, and board topography has been rationalised to shorten signal paths. Much lower distortion and noise is claimed by doubling the amp's open-loop gain.

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What the Evo 2 amp has gained is a separate AV input that directly feeds the power amplifier stages, allowing the Evo 2 to be used to power the main front speakers in conjunction with an AV receiver. And the all-important power supply has been beefed up with a 250VA toroidal transformer.

Vinyl users can have an Evolution phono card (either MM or MC) popped in place instead of the auxiliary line input — the modules will set you back \$175 for the MM version and \$185 for the MC, a small price to pay for a slice of vinyl heaven, we think (though it would be nice to see it fitted as standard). Unfortunately, our review sample came without that addition installed, but knowing Creek's dedicated phono preamps, we'd recommend the option if you're still into spinning vinyl on the odd or regular occasion.

Both CD player and amplifier are solid, well constructed and reassuringly weighty. Some time ago now, Creek outsourced its production to China, but it keeps a watchful eye on production standards and quality. You'd be wholly convinced if the Evos still carried a 'Made in England' sticker.

PERFORMANCE

Hooking up a pair of Quad 11L standmount speakers, we sat down to hear what the fresh Creeks initially threw our way. The original Evos were lauded for sounding rhythmic, well-timed and controlled, and this carries through to these new MkII versions. Add a touch more dynamic punch down low, a smidge more insight and sweetness in the upper mid/treble agenda, and you start to hear just where the changes here are making their mark.

The pair gel together superbly, but that's not to say you can't use either component with

others — both are very system-friendly. The Evo 2 amp is rated at 75W per channel into an 8-ohm load; this figure increases to 110W driving 4-ohm loudspeakers, and promises to deliver ample current.

We certainly had no trouble getting the 6-ohm and averagely-sensitive 86dB Quad speakers to shift some air through their small bass reflex ports. If you fancy a bit more grunt, the Evolution 5350 (reviewed in our Sept/Oct issue) offers up to 200W per channel and a healthy 25+ amps of current — enough to drive quite awkward speaker loads.

The Evo 2 runs a lot cooler than that 5350, and we couldn't get it into thermal overload, no matter how hard we pushed it. Yet it shares the same sonic signature as its more powerful range partner — namely an authoritative grip on whatever style of music is playing, plus an ability to rock when asked.

None of this would be possible if the source wasn't also musically obliging, and the Evo 2 CD player has its own take on the sonic proceedings. It produces an inherently smooth and transparent performance with plenty of insight into the music's detail and low-end information. We loved the way it joined the amp in dishing up the subterranean bass of the Ummah mix of Jamiroquai's *Deeper Underground*. The same went for the more gutsy delivery of Porcupine Tree's *In Absentia* and the Creeks' ability to rock; it sounded full and effortless.

The little Quads are able to pack quite a punch for their size, and with the Creeks in the driving seats the system delivered a very convincing sound no matter what music was on the menu. Although these standmounters don't produce the biggest bass in the business, the electronics' midband and treble perfor-

mance was crisp, and delivered a good sense of soundstage and ambience, easily letting you hear the difference between different acoustics and recordings. A bigger floorstander such as Epos' M16i would fill a larger space and give you more down low. To try this out, we dug out a vintage pair of Infinity Studio Reference monitors — an excellent party speaker — and the Creeks were more than happy to get these 1980s classics pumping out big bass.

CONCLUSION

This Creek pairing really is quite unfussy with the style of music — they have the drive and agility to rock, or can deliver a superb sense of concert hall ambience with classical recordings. This ability is maintained with the intimacy of a smaller ensemble, while the way the Creeks convey a musical performance as an even whole, rather than just music, is very impressive given the price. Spend \$1500 to \$2000 on a decent pair of speakers to match and you'll have a fine-sounding two-channel system. *Nic Tatham* +

VERDICT

Evolution 2 CD player and amplifier

Price: \$1595 / \$1595

- Musically unfussy
- Solid design and construction
- Good value
- Prefer easy-to-drive speaker matching
- No phono stage as standard

EVOLUTION 2 CD PLAYER

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 1Hz-20kHz, ±0.25dB
DAC: 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown Delta-Sigma
OUTPUT LEVEL: 2.0V RMS @ 1kHz, 0dB
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE: 50 ohm, min load 1 ohm
FINISH: silver or black

DIMENSIONS (whd): 430 x 70 x 340mm
WEIGHT: 6.0kg
WARRANTY: Two years

EVOLUTION 2 AMPLIFIER

POWER: 75W/channel into 8 ohms; 110W/channel (4 ohms)
DISTORTION: <0.05% 20Hz-20kHz
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 5Hz-50kHz, -1dB
CHANNEL SEPARATION: >60dB
INPUT SENSITIVITY: 480mV (line level)
FINISH: Silver or black

DIMENSIONS (whd): 430 x 80 x 340mm
WEIGHT: 8.6kg
WARRANTY: Two years

CONTACT: Epox Australia
TEL: 02 9450 0789
WEB: www.epox.com.au

