

The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource
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Checking it Out

The Klipsch s4 and My Search for Audio Monitoring Nirvana



By Dana Puopolo

[October 2011] Dana Puopolo presents another in his series of reviews of various audio related products.

I have always been a fan of listening to music with headphones.

I still remember the first time I listened to stereo headphones: It was 1962, I was seven and over at my friend's house. They had just bought a new console stereo that had a headphone jack and his older sister bought these Radio Shack branded Koss headphones. I slipped them on my head and was hooked!

THE SEARCH

This started a lifelong obsession to find the best sounding headphones.

I went through the Koss Pro 4AA stage – and thought I had achieved headphone nirvana that day. Later I bought my Stax Lambda Nova headphones at Tweeter on closeout. They came with a switch box that connected between your power amp and speakers. Of course, I opened the unit and bypassed the 30 Ohm resistors in series with the step up transformers-after all my 60 Watt per channel Rotel amp was rated to put out 120 Watts into 2 Ohms. That nirvana died the day one channel of the Stax did – with a smell of burnt plastic no less. Yes, I cooked my Stax headphones by playing them too loud.

Since then I have tried all kinds of headphones and while I have found some that satisfied me, such as the Grados, nothing achieved audio nirvana. Until now.

GETTING CLOSE

I always believed that in-ear monitors (IEMs) had potential, but found all the ones I could afford always lacking something. It might be bass, or clarity or low distortion, but it was always something. Some sounded just awful.

Quite by accident, I found a pair of Altec buds I could live with – especially since they had a microphone and worked with my cell phone. Then I saw an ad for Klipsch s2 IEMs on sale at my local Hi-Fi emporium for 20 dollars.

I bought a pair and found them most satisfying. Their limitations were sins of omission – the last tiny piece of inner detail seemed to be missing, and they sounded a bit "compressed" at loud volumes. Nonetheless, they sounded very good. That caused me to begin wondering about Klipsch's more expensive IEMs.

AUDIO NIRVANA

I began researching and found one particular model – the s4 In-Ear Enhanced Bass Noise-Isolating Headphones – had hundreds of satisfied users/reviewers on both Amazon and Newegg. Unfortunately, they cost almost $100, which was a bit too expensive for my tastes at the time as my wife was in-between jobs. Besides, what if I did not like them? I continued to use my Altecs and S2s.

Then one day quite by accident I discovered a Chinese store at focalprice.com. They had the Klipsch s4 IEMs for only $25! I immediately bit, and waited with expectation for the three weeks it took for them to arrive from China.



Finally they came. I picked them up at the post office, plugged them into my phone and played the title cut of Aja by Steely Dan.

Simply put: I was blown away!

This was a 192 kbps MP3, yet I was hearing things in the song that I had never heard before – even with my Stax playing the Aja vinyl with a moving coil cartridge. One song ran into another, until I realized that I had been listening to music in my office for well over an hour.

The reviews about these headphones were right.

IT GETS BETTER

Many of the reviews said that these IEMs need a few days of break in for both the sound to improve and the fit to become more comfortable. Again, they were right; the s4s began to sound better and better every day.

The fit and comfort also improved. I have had them several weeks now and am still as impressed as I was the first time I heard them. Now I see that focalprice has the premium model, the s4i (with a microphone), on sale for $26. This is another must buy for me.

If you buy any headphones this year, buy these. They simply do everything right: Great bass, incredibly clean mids and highs, amazing separation, very low distortion – even when playing at high volumes and you can wear them for hours. They even are comfortable when I lay in bed wearing them; I find no "pillow discomfort" as is so common with other IEMs.

You can find the s4 series most everywhere for between $50 and $90. But again, you will likely find that focalprice.com has the best price on them by far.

Now I just have to build a headphone amplifier that does them justice.

Highly recommended.

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Return to The BDR Menu