FOLLOW-UP

BY HERB REICHERT AND ROB SCHRYER

THIS ISSUE: Herb Reichert reviews a new, premium version of the BBC LS3/5a minimonitor from Falcon, and Rob Schryer provides a second take on the Grandinote Shinai integrated amplifier.

FALCON LS3/5A GOLD BADGE LOUDSPEAKER

The BBC-designed LS3/5a monitor loudspeaker has been in continuous BBC-licensed production in various forms since 1975. During those 45 years, its popularity has never abated. I bought my first pair of LS3/5a's as a Badger kit from an ad in the back of *Speaker Builder* magazine. I bought my next pair, used, from a CBS engineer, in 1989; they were rosewood-finished, 15 ohm Rogers that came stock with solid-hardwood rotating wall-mounts.[1] Those now-antique Rogers were my daily-driver loudspeakers from 1989 until I reviewed the 15 ohm Falcon Acoustics version in the July 2015 issue of *Stereophile*.[2] Since then, the Falcon version has been an important tool in my reviewing investigations.

The Falcon LS3/5a's primary virtues include:

- They throw a wall-penetrating, precisely mapped, extraordinarily detailed soundstage.
- They deliver critical levels of timbral accuracy and speech intelligibility.
- Their 12" high sealed boxes are easy to place and adapt well to standmount, desktop, bookshelf, or bureau-top placement.
- The LS3/5a is a true studio monitor design and hence extremely neutral and open-sounding when listened to in the nearfield.
- Despite its low (83dB/2.83V) sensitivity, it is completely happy with low-power class-A amplifiers—especially tubes. (On the backside of my old Rogers it says "Handling Capacity: 25 Watts Speech and Music.")
- It is hand-built in England.

The LS3/5a's shortcomings include:

- It cannot play loud.
- It compresses macrodynamics.
- It can sound grainy.

I've spent almost 40 continuous years using first the kit, then the Rogers, then the Falcon LS3/5a's. Now, a new 5a has entered my world. It is what Falcon calls the "Gold Badge" version ($2995/pair), and I think it might be the best LS3/5a ever produced for general consumption.[3]

In 2019, Falcon Acoustics created a passionately executed facsimile of the BBC's final 1974 LS3/5a prototype. It was released in a limited, 50-pair run, called the "Kingswood Warren Limited Edition," in tribute to the BBC's Kingswood Warren Technical Research Department, where the first BBC monitors were born. Famously, all 50 pairs sold in eight days at $8000/pair.

According to an email I received from Falcon's chief of everything Jerry Bloomfield, "The Kingswood Warrens featured re-engineered BBC R&D Department inductors, special polycarbonate-film capacitors remanufactured by Falcon, and ultralow-inductance resistors, all in very limited quantities dictated by the availability of rare original materials retained or acquired by Falcon." Bloomfield said that surprise at the Kingswood Warren's reception was surpassed only by the shock of its improved sound. "We then decided we would try and see how far we could incorporate the Kingswood Warren sonic experience into our regular production LS3/5a.

"Historically, the transformers used from the early production LS3/5a's onwards were made smaller than the BBC prototypes to save money. We deliberately reversed that. So, the Gold Badge BBC LS3/5a crossovers have enhanced-size BBC Specification Transformer–style inductors compared to previous versions. This gives lower distortion, improved saturation levels, and additional bass enhancement."

My experiences in amplifier design taught me that replacing a physically smaller (higher-resistance) choke or inductor with a larger (lower-resistance) one of the same inductance will lower noise and improve low-level dynamics.

"We then looked at the capacitors," Bloomfield continued. "Polycarbon-

It was flat-out liquid, spacious, and beguiling.

1 See John Atkinson's reviews of both the original Rogers LS3/5a's at stereophile.com/content/bbc-ls35a-loudspeaker-1989-rogers-version. JA's review of the late-1980s revision can be accessed via the "1989 Follow-Up" link that follows the review.

2 See stereophile.com/content/falcon-acoustics-ls35a-loudspeaker.

3 Falcon Acoustics, Mallories, Pound Lane, Stanton St. John, Oxfordshire OX33 1HF, England. Tel: (44) 0 1865 358001. Web: falconacoustics.co.uk. US distributor: MoFi Distribution, 1811 W. Bryn Mawr Ave., Chicago, IL 60660. Tel: (312) 841-4087. Web: mofidistribution.com.

ate film has not been made for over 30 years. We were lucky to find what we had for the Kingswood Warrens, so we developed new Falcon capacitors using graded polypropylene film with a very similar sonic signature to the polycarbonate film capacitors used in the Kingswood Warren Limited Edition instead of the polyester film normally used."

Back in the day, polycarbonate-film capacitors were esteemed for a relaxed, organic sound that many people, including me, really liked. Today, high-quality polypropylene film delivers a quieter, suppler transparency than less expensive, more commonly used polyester film. (If you crunch cellophane into a ball, you will have a rough idea of the sound polyester caps impart.) Bloomfield says, "Falcon's new polypropylene capacitors give cleaner, more defined sonics. There's an additional precision, which I describe as being able to hear the spaces between notes.

"We've also used ultralow-inductance resistors and a new, Falcon-designed multilayer FL6/23 printed circuit board, which gives us improved tracking and sonics.

"All these improvements combine together to give us the Falcon Gold Badge LS3/5a crossover, which has now been granted Registered Design Status (by the BBC).

"It's also using 100% UK/EU sourced parts."

I asked Jerry who makes the shiny speaker-wire binding posts. He said they were an exclusive in-house design, from Falcon.

Okay folks, here is the really good news: Falcon's new, and I think *improved* sounding, "Gold Badge" edition costs the same $2995/pair as the "classic" Falcon LS3/5a I've been using for more than five years. And wait, there's even better news: The price of the *classic* Falcon 5a is now only $1995/pair, making it the least expensive BBC-licensed LS3/5a available in (and only in) the United States. This reduction in price is possible because the "classic" has become a MoFi-badged LS3/5a, made for MoFi in England by Falcon, and it comes only in an exclusive Black Ash finish. Falcon Acoustics' new Gold Badge version may still be ordered in a variety of natural-wood finishes.

Listening with a First Watt F8

I placed the LS3/5a's about 65" apart and exactly 13" from the front wall. In that position, vocal and instrumental tones are locked in, and the speaker boxes disappear completely from my eyes-closed awareness.

I began my auditions by putting the Gold Badge Falcons in my system (driven by the 25Wpc, $4000 First Watt F8 stereo amplifier) and forgetting about them. For four weeks. I forgot about them—except that all the while I was thinking, "Why would I ever want another amp or speakers?" After four weeks, I remembered them again.

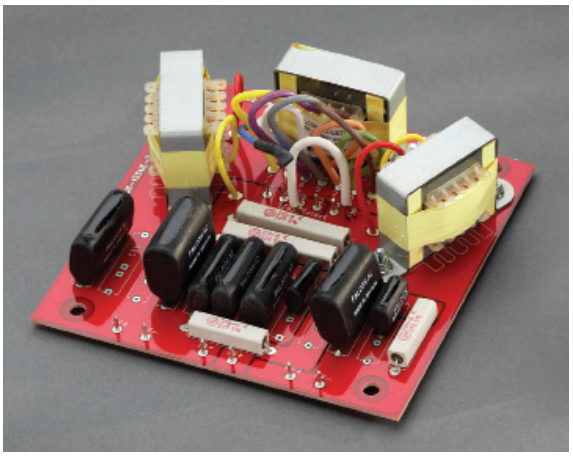
This is a perfect Herb system. It was flat-out liquid, spacious, and beguiling. Mezzo-soprano Clare Wilkinson's voice on "I Will Give My Love an Apple" from *Ballads Within a Dream* (24/96 FLAC Harmonium Mundi/Qobuz) offers the perfect high-tone/low-tone counterpoint to Hille Perl's viola da gamba playing. The sound with the First Watt F8 powering the Gold Badges was pure, exquisitely detailed, and bathed in shimmering light.

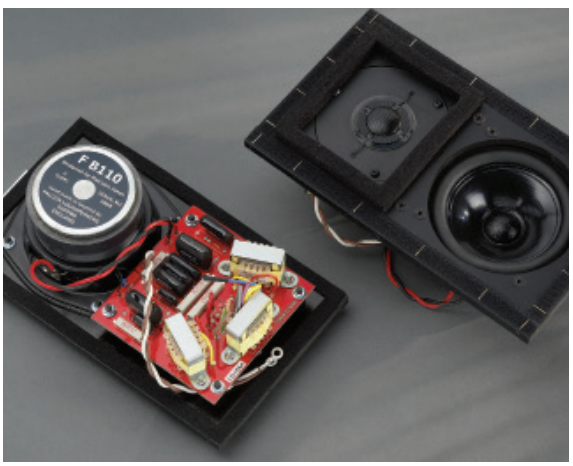
Falcon's Gold Badge LS3/5a can deliver enjoyable, well-sorted renditions of all types of music, but intimate vocal, solo piano, and chamber-instru-

ment fare is the reason people like me are lifelong 5a devotees. It is the reason devotees devote so much time to finding the most compatible amplifier, one that brings out all of the essence of tone the 5a's are capable of. The new First Watt F8 amplifier delivered said essence of tone, through intricate waves of nuanced detail and subtle microdynamics. The F8 might be one of those "just right" amplifiers devotees crave.

My chief long-term criticism of the standard Falcon LS3/5a is its very slight tendency toward dryness in the bass and graininess in the crossover region. The new Gold Badge Falcons were the opposite of that. They presented music in a conspicuously grainless and unabashedly liquid manner. The first thing I noticed was how music flowed extra-easily and extra-quietly out of the Gold Badge boxes. The sound seemed more relaxed and less restrained than the classic version.

A big part of my long-standing affection for Harbeth's P3ESRs is how they are never dry—they are always rich and full between 75Hz and 400Hz. I go to them for their consistent warmth, especially on male vocals. The Harbeths are a speaker I use for pleasure listening, while the classic Falcon LS3/5a's have more of a studio monitor personality. The Gold Badge Falcons with the First Watt F8 gave me the best of both worlds.





Above: "Gold Badge" crossover with larger, "transformer-style" inductors and Falcon's own polypropylene film capacitors mounted on a new, multilayer PCB. Below: Falcon's B110 drivers with 5" coated-Bextrene cones, with crossovers.

With the Parasound A 21+

After a few weeks, I replaced the First Watt F8 with the 300Wpc (8 ohms) Parasound A 21+ stereo amplifier. The first thing I noticed was how dramatically the depth of soundstages increased. Significant amounts of microdetailed, dark space were added to the back of every recording. With the A 21+, my mind's eye was constantly examining the rear shadows of the soundstage. Singers and double-bass got taller. String plucks had more pluck. Pianos had stronger hammers hitting tighter strings.

The BBC's LS3/5a speakers are famous for their uncanny ability to show listeners what's going on at the outside edges of an orchestral soundstage, showing instruments and musicians in proper relative scale, and putting string quartets right there in the room in front of their owners. The Gold Badge Falcons driven by the Parasound A 21+ took those famous qualities to a level I had not experienced previously. It was quite impressive.

The only attribute the Parasound A 21+ lacked—what it didn't do that old-school LS3/5a aficionados crave—is midrange magic. Most LS3/5a devotees enjoy the vividness and sensuality of tubes with their BBC monitors. The A 21+ played too dry for that taste. It emphasized microdetail and dynamic structure in a way that recovered information but neglected to bring live air and luminosity with it.

With the tubed Line Magnetic LM-518IA

One dark night, I was dreaming to Dakh Daughters' self-released album, *If* (16/44.1 FLAC Tidal), when I decided on a whim to switch from the classic Falcons to the Gold Badge Falcons. With the original 5a, I was engaged and delighted by how taut, full, and pitch-perfect the Line Magnetic LM-518 IA's tubes were making the bass sound. Just before the changeover, I had paused the *If* album on its title track. When the song resumed playing—now through the new Gold Badge models—the bass seemed denser, deeper, darker, less opaque, less grainy, and pluckier, with sounds emerging from a more silent background. The difference was not huge, but it was impossible to not notice how the space around bass notes seemed markedly airier and more transparent.

I stick with the 22Wpc Line Magnetic LM-518IA because it delivers the most vivid, unmangled, articulate high frequencies of any amplifier I have owned since the 25Wpc Audio Note (Japan) Ongaku—which cost $90,000, used General Electric 211 tubes, and made my old Rogers LS3/5a's sound spider-web-LSD-filigree mesmerizing. It *was* the exact perfect amplifier. For five years, the Line Magnetic's 845 triodes have performed a similar but less psychedelic function with the classic Falcon 5a. Now, because the new Gold Badge version sounds more pure, grainless, and full, some of that audio-on-acid effect is back in my listening room.

Finally, I realized: No matter which amp I was using, every time I put the new Falcon LS3/5a Gold Badges in the system, I did not want to take them out. I did not want to lose their beautifully balanced, let-out-my-breath, forget-about-audio just-rightness.

So now ...

The $1995 black ash–only, silver-badged MoFi LS3/5a is, in all ways except finish, the same as the $2995/pair speaker I've enjoyed for the last five years. The comes-in-many-wood-finishes Falcon Acoustics Gold Badge LS3/5a is the even-better $2995 speaker I never dreamed I'd experience. Can you dig that?—**Herb Reichert**