

Evolution of the species

Proof positive that affordable audio isn't standing still comes from Creek's brand new Evolution 50A integrated amplifier, says **David Price**...

Everything changes, but it stays the same, right? Well mostly, yes. Warp back 30 years and then, as now, you'd find a brace of highly competent amplifiers from the likes of NAD, (Mission) Cyrus and Creek selling for the price of a week in the Algarve. At the time, they stood in sharp contrast to the mainstream integrations from the likes of Sony, Pioneer and Akai, which were festooned with knobs and built like the proverbial outdoor restroom. British amplifiers eschewed the fripperies and fanciness of the Japanese for good old fashioned audio engineering. The value they added was high-quality passive componentry and simple circuit design with the minimum of distractions from the task of getting the signal from one end of the amp to the other. And Creek was king of this sort of thing. Its CAS4140 (the tone control-less 4040) was a lovely listen, and one of the best amps this side of the altogether pricier pre-powers on offer at the time. It had a warm but grippy, detailed and musical sound that offered enormous bang for your buck.

Three full decades later, this new Evolution 50A attempts to provide the same sort of sonic seriousness, but with a whole lot more going on. In the eighties, having things such as alphanumeric displays, remote controls, electronic switching and backlit fascia buttons were barely possible – and even if they were they'd be seen as some sort of tacit admission of audiophile defeat (you'd sold out, just like the Japanese). Nowadays though, it would appear that you can have it all – or can you?

The modest sum of £700 buys you this amplifier – which in monetary terms is not too dissimilar, accounting for the ravages of inflation, to Creek's classic budget amplifiers of yore. And it's more than

'just' an integrated – its modular design means there's a range of three (40, 48, 54dB MM or MC) Creek plug-in Sequel Phono modules that can be fitted to the Evolution 50A. There's also the optional Ambit FM/AM tuner module (£100), and even an optional plug-in infra red sensor (£25) that allows the amplifier to be hid away and yet still be operated via the remote control. Creek says there will be a plug-in DAC board coming fairly soon, too.

The product itself is decently finished for £700, although it lacks the glamour and chi-chi form factor of its Cyrus 6a rival. You get the standard issue Brit-fi black steel

► DETAILS
PRODUCT: Creek Evolution 50A
ORIGIN: UK/China
TYPE: Integrated amplifier
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD): 430 x 60 x 280mm
WEIGHT: 7.5kg
FEATURES:
• Claimed power output: 55W into 8ohms
• Inputs: 4x RCA phono; 1x balanced XLR
• Plug-in Sequel phono stage
• Optional plug-in FM/AM tuner module
• Optional IR sensor for remote operation bass unit
DISTRIBUTOR: Creek Audio Ltd
TELEPHONE: 01442 260146
WEBSITE: creekaudio.com

casework and chunky (black or silver) aluminium fascia. Those backlit buttons are a nice touch and work well, in conjunction with a rather suave OLED (Organic Light Emitting Diode) display, defeatable and with adjustable brightness. Overall, the package works well.

As you'd expect from a marque that takes sound seriously, inside there's a muscular 200W toroidal mains transformer with separate windings for both high and low current analogue, plus digital circuitry. Smaller, parallel power supply smoothing capacitors are used, as opposed to single larger ones – Creek says this helps to produce a very powerful sound from such a relatively small amplifier. Unusually perhaps, the David Gamble Class AB design is all-discrete and uses a high-end bipolar transistor power amplifier circuit featuring a pair of 15A Sanken STD-03 power transistors. This is claimed to produce very high output current and low output impedance.

The preamplifier section is based on a Japan Radio Corp module and offers a choice of unbalanced or balanced inputs – it is very rare to see XLR connections on an integrated amplifier at this modest price – with

multiple RCA input options plus volume, balance and tone controls, and can be bypassed completely should you have a DAC with a digital volume control and be that way inclined. Sadly Creek doesn't make an FM tuner anymore, but should you feel the need, that Ambit radio board effectively turns it into a receiver for just a few pounds more, and Mike Creek claims this is more than just an afterthought. A system remote control also comes supplied.

Sound quality

With a claimed output power of just 55W (into 8ohms), this isn't going to burn a Krell-sized hole in your loudspeaker voice coils. But don't let that dissuade you, as amplifier power is only half of the equation in the quest for 'loudness', and these days there are plenty of efficient speakers (90dB sensitivity or more) that will make a big noise with a relatively small number of watts. For the purposes of the review, most listening was with Spendor's excellent D7 (tested on page 66); an easy load for the Creek that went plenty loud enough.

When it had warmed through for a good few days, the new Evolution 50A proved refined way beyond its price tag. Even the excellent £750 Cyrus 6a, recent winner of *Hi-Fi Choice's* mid-price amp group test, struggles in its company, and that's really saying something. Here we have something that is very clean and open – in a way a

good transistor amplifier should be – but which doesn't fall into the trap of being overly analytical or matter-of-fact sounding. It's easy to make a decent transistor amplifier, but hard to make a really decent one – and that's what Creek has done.

For example, Groove Armada's *Whatever, Whenever* showed how it could be both surprisingly transparent, bubbling with detail and finesse, yet also unerringly musical and rhythmic. The amp took control of the track's big, fat bass guitar pattern, giving a really tactile feel to the low frequencies without ever sounding

The Creek Evolution 50A showed its innate musicality, setting up a wide and deep soundstage

overblown or under damped. Further up the frequency band, the Creek served up a full, expansive midband which you could really listen in to – indeed you could unpeel it like an onion, should you so wish. I found myself fixing on to the backing synth string sound, and from that I could delve right down into the electronic backing and rhythms with ease.

One really nice aspect to the Creek's sound was its stability; it didn't sound fazed in the least when called upon to deal with the prog

rock histrionics of Caravan's *Nine Feet Underground*. This is a busy track with lots of guitar noodling, frenetic stick work and a lovely, bouncy bassline – all topped off with an edgy sounding electric organ. The Evo 50A set everything in the recorded acoustic beautifully, each strand of the mix playing along by itself untroubled by whatever was going on beside or opposite.

As well as staying scrupulously in control, it managed to slot everything together in a wonderfully rewarding way. Rhythmically it was really strong – not quite up with the best tube amps, of course – but it really got into the groove and captured the wonderfully loose and floaty feel of this early seventies Canterbury classic.

Tonally you wouldn't call this amplifier bright – it lacks that 'spot-lit' upper midband that afflicts so many similarly priced amplifiers. I recently reviewed Pioneer's impressive A-70, and while I really enjoyed my time with it, there was definitely a sense that it shouldn't be partnered with forward sources and speakers. The Creek seems altogether better balanced, with a wonderfully seamless, all-of-a-piece feel that doesn't have you trying to compensate for its peculiarities; it's the sort of amp you could slot into a bright budget system and still retain your sanity. Not that it's tonally dull – rather it is because this amplifier is genuinely neutral. For example, Linton Kwesi Johnson's *In Dub* is a wonderfully



Q&A

Mike Creek
Creek Audio Limited



DP: What extra functions does the Evo 50A offer over its predecessor?
MC: A balanced input via the preamp or power amp direct, serial bus and remote operation of other Evolution 50 products, plus a software update path. It also has bypassable tone and balance controls, an optional FM/AM radio module and the new display.

Have you paid special attention to any particular part of the circuitry?

This is the first time Creek has used Sanken STD-03 thermal tracking power transistors. They allow the idle current to track very quickly with temperature changes and together with high open loop gain, low output impedance and high-peak output current the amp sounds more powerful than its 50W spec suggests. The amp also uses Creek's favoured low-impedance, multi-capacitor techniques, combined with a high current toroidal mains transformer. The preamp uses a Japan Radio Corp integrated device, which has excellent performance and relatively low cost.

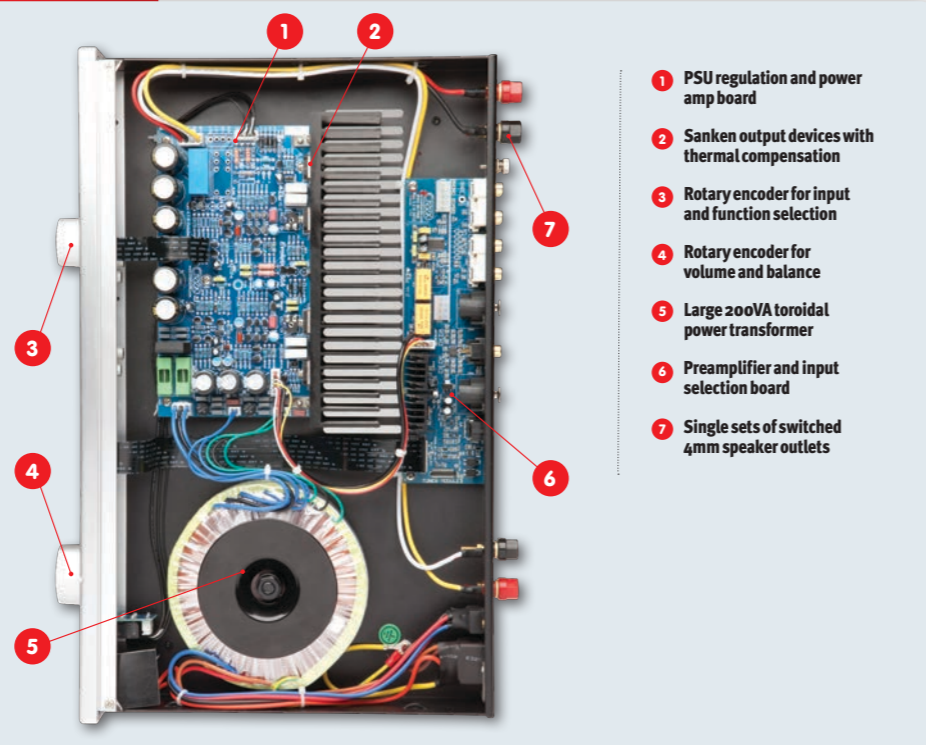
Have you had to make any concessions to convenience?

We have not compromised the performance of this amp in any way to save cost or to add new technology. The tone controls are not an addition; they are a gift from JRC as they are bundled with their excellent volume/preamp chip. In or out of circuit, the distortion remains the same. But there are bound to be subtle changes, due to the additional circuitry, so the user can choose to switch them off completely for the most transparent performance.

Is it a discrete design or MOSFET?

It's a discrete transistor using bi-polar Darlington power transistors, with built-in thermal feedback sensors. Normally, in a Class AB design, a thermal sensor is fitted to the hottest part of the transistor it's trying to control. This can cause a lag in response, meaning the bias may not always be correct. These transistors achieve very good performance and are virtually unburntable.

IN SIGHT



- 1 PSU regulation and power amp board
- 2 Sanken output devices with thermal compensation
- 3 Rotary encoder for input and function selection
- 4 Rotary encoder for volume and balance
- 5 Large 200VA toroidal power transformer
- 6 Preamplifier and input selection board
- 7 Single sets of switched 4mm speaker outlets

ON TEST

As Creek's Evolution line continues to, well, evolve so does its performance. This Evolution 50A will replace the Evolution 2, and although it's rated at a slightly lower 55W/8ohm it still delivers a full 2x64W/8ohm and 2x100W/4ohm with momentary increases to 85W, 155W, 245W and 295W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic, music like conditions. The output impedance is almost a flat 0.04ohm from 20Hz-20kHz so the

amp/speaker system response will not vary significantly with swings in speaker impedance. The native response of the amplifier, however, has a gentle treble roll-off amounting to a mere -0.2dB/20kHz out to -3.8dB/100kHz into 8ohm.

This is also the first Creek amp to feature balanced inputs and, in a fully balanced system, the A-wtd S/N ratio amounts to 89dB (re. odBW), hum and noise just -80dBV (0.1mV). Right up

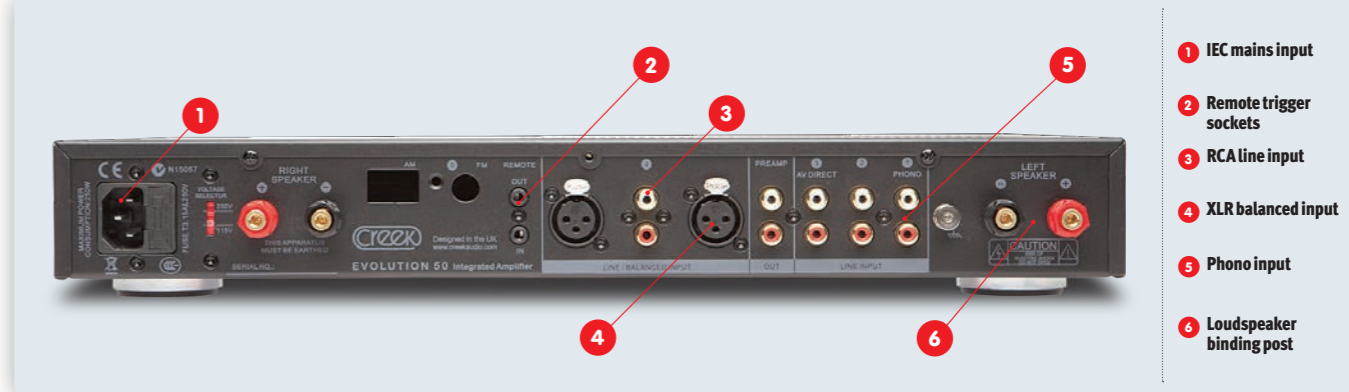
until clipping, the 50A's distortion is very consistent from 0.003 at 1W to 0.002% at the rated 50W through bass and midrange, though there's almost inevitably an increase at high frequencies, reaching 0.035% at 20kHz/10W. Thanks to the digitally governed volume control, channel balance is a tight ±0.01dB at 1W output (re. 500mV in) while stereo separation is 170dB through the midrange and 60dB at 20kHz. PM

bouncy bit of early eighties reggae but wins no prizes in the smoothness stakes – Des 'O Connor wouldn't like it – but the Creek makes the most of it without dwelling on the recording's brightness. Conversely, cue up *Solsbury Hill* from Peter Gabriel and that fairly muddy sounding seventies rock masterpiece doesn't hide its light under a bushel, the Creek being just searching enough to really pull the recording out.

Such delicacy of touch and lack of intrinsic colouration is a rare thing to have in an amplifier of this price, and takes you beyond

the position where you're always making excuses. It was happy as Larry driving the £3,500 Sendor speakers and took a step up and tried even harder when stuck on the end of an £7,000 dCS Debussy DAC. Yet feed it the balanced output from a £600 Audiolab M-DAC a pair of £400 Acoustic Energy 301 speakers and it's almost as much fun. Likewise, this amp's innate balance makes it a joy with a wide range of music; there's no sense of its failings flattering one type of programme material over another. From Mozart to Morrissey, it's game.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 IEC mains input
- 2 Remote trigger sockets
- 3 RCA line input
- 4 XLR balanced input
- 5 Phono input
- 6 Loudspeaker binding post

One sign of an excellent amplifier is how agnostic it is to the music it is asked to play. The Creek didn't care one jot about whether it was drilling out classic heavy rock, and mooching along to the seductive strains of Donald Byrd's *Streetlady*. This is a beautiful slice of early 1970s rare groove/jazz funk, released on Blue Note records (that says it all). The Evolution 50A showed its innate musicality, setting up a wide and deep soundstage (just as you'd expect from a classic analogue recording) and locating all the instruments within, with a high level of precision. It was controlled alright, but not controlling, and allowed the music to breathe a natural and organic way. This is a great strength of the Cyrus

other amplifiers costing up to twice its price, it is mortal like the rest of us. In absolute terms, the Evolution 50A lacks some bass heft; low frequencies are decently strong and nicely taut, but there's no sense that any sort of iron fist is in action. At high levels and on crescendos, when things get really complex and there's a lot of things being asked of the amplifier's power transistors and supply, you begin to hear its fallibility. Genesis' *The Squonk* impressed with its vivid low-level detailing, but when Phil Collins got going with his pan rolls and vocal contortions, you could sometimes catch the Evolution 50A blinking. Nothing nasty or dramatic mind you, just a subtle loosening and lightening of bass, reminding one

HOW IT COMPARES

IN THE RED corner is the £800 Pioneer A70 – a typically Japanese design, it is festooned with knobs and buttons, most useful of which is the USB digital input. It's so solid that a Challenger tank would drive around rather than over it, and the finish is better than some 100 grand sports cars. Sonically it's big and strong with lots of power. While the Evo 50A can't compete with all this, ultimately it is a more satisfying listen. Tonally it is more neutral, it has more finesse and subtle low-level detailing, and strings rhythms together in a more organic, believable way.

In the blue corner is the £750 Cyrus 6a, which sits on the opposite extreme. By comparison, the Creek is much more powerful and physical sounding, the 6a offering less grunt and an obviously weaker bass. It's also just a little more diffuse across the midband, lacking the incision and transparency of the Creek. But the Cyrus is more musical in the way it goes about things; every song seems to have a fraction more rhythmic urgency. There's not much in it, and the extra bass power the Creek has often more than compensates. Ultimately, though, either of these two offerings will have your toes tapping!

In the everyday scheme of things, however, these aren't seriously going to put you off the Creek, as its general quality of sound is so high for a sub-£1,000 amplifier. Moreover, it hides its tracks brilliantly, so even when you're pushing it a little too hard, asking a touch too much from it, it displays grace under pressure. Pretty much any sort of music you play comes out in a satisfyingly rhythmic way, with oodles of detail and surprising finesse.

Conclusion

One of the very best sounding amplifiers on sale at or near its price, the Creek Evolution 50A also offers analogue radio and (later) DAC options, plus the full smash of facilities from tone controls to a rather handy push-on mute function from the volume control. Build is decent, finish is fine and that OLED display is nice to have, too. Indeed, it seems like Creek has methodically gone round and engineered out anything that reviewers like me might object to. Sonically superb, impressively specified and decently screwed together, there's nothing not to like here. As such, it should be right at the top of your audition list. That's progress for you! ●

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6a, but the Creek proved just as capable and offered up a little extra detail and a brighter, more airy soundstage to boot.

Why then would you ever need to spend more than its £700 asking price if it's so blameless in the great scheme of amplifier things? Well, of course it's not a universal panacea and while it will trouble a number of

that's it's only a 50 watter after all. Likewise, transparent as the Evolution 50A is considering its modest retail price, it can't quite project the magnificent recorded acoustics that you get from some top-notch classical recordings.

An Esoteric SACD of Mozart's fantastic *Piano Concerto No.20* (Curzon, English Chamber Orchestra) was an arresting listen, the Creek showing immaculate breeding by remaining so subtle and composed, but there was a slightly diffuse feel to the placement of individual instruments, and a sense of muddle right at the back of the concert hall – there was less atmosphere to the proceedings than you'd expect from a truly top-flight amplifier. This recording in particular is one of the best I've heard, so it's a tough test for any amp, let alone one as modestly priced as the Creek.

The OLED display and backlight buttons make this a beauty



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OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Detailed, musical sound; reasonably powerful; flexible; well made

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at all given the price

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The class of the affordable integrated amplifier field, this new Creek deserves to succeed

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★