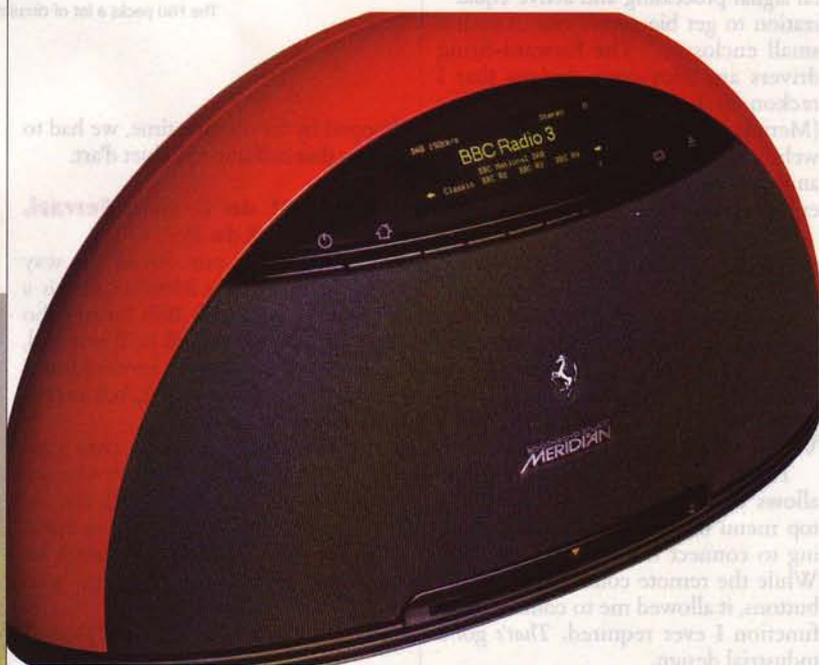


Meridian

F80

Wes Phillips

HOME ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM



Meridian F80 Home Entertainment System

DESCRIPTION Compact home entertainment system with 2.1 speaker system and DVD drive. Drive-units: two 3" alloy-cone full-range units, oval fiber-cone woofer. Amplifier power: 80W. Supported media: CD-RW, DVD+R, DVD+RW, DVD-R, DVD-RW, WMA-CD, MP3-CD, DVD-A/V, CD, CD-DA, CD-R. Tuner bands: AM, FM, DAB. Inputs: 2x 3.5mm analog, optical digital, dock, RS232, "future." Outputs: composite video, S-video, optical digital, 3.5mm headphone. Antennae: 2x F connector and internal (assignable by band).

DIMENSIONS 16" (408mm) W by 9" (230mm) H by 7.3" (185mm) D. Weight: 14.3 lbs (6.5kg)

FINISHES Rosso Corsa (dark red), Modena Giallo (yellow), Argento Nurburgring (bright silver), Nero (black), Bianco Avus (off-white).

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT

REVIEWED F8010002211.

PRICE \$3000. Approximate number of dealers: 127.

MANUFACTURER Meridian Audio Ltd., Latham Road, Huntington, Cambridgeshire PE29 6YE, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)1480-445678. Fax: (44) (0)1480-445686. US: Meridian America Inc., 8055 Troon Circle, Suite C, Austell, GA 30168-7849. Tel: (404) 344-7111. Fax: (404) 346-7111. Web: www.meridian-audio.com.

When I first learned that Meridian had co-badged, with Ferrari, a \$3000 table radio, I was tempted to cynically dismiss it as a marketing gimmick—an attempt by the audio manufacturer to leverage the brand loyalty of the Italian automaker to its own highly developed industrial designs. The problem was, that required that I dismiss everything I knew about Meridian and its singular head designer, Bob Stuart.

Meridian has always stressed its industrial design—in fact, the company's full name, Boothroyd Stuart Meridian, gives top billing to industrial designer Allen Boothroyd—so I should have realized that teaming up with Ferrari was more than an excuse to slap some Rosso Corsa on a few boxes.

Not to mention that you don't usually see Ferrari's *cavallino rampante* on just any chassis. The guys in Modena are pretty picky about putting that horse on winners.

Aerodynamics are for people who can't build engines

Patting the F80's curved red flank, Bob Stuart paused for a minute. "This is what Ferrari contributed to the project. Their materials research division developed this barium-loaded composite material which we could mold into a rigid monocoque chassis with separate chambers for two stereo loudspeakers and a rear-firing .1 subwoofer."

The chassis resembles half of a very large M&M candy—it's half of an oblate spheroid—and comes in candy colors, too: Modena Giallo (yellow), Argento Nurburgring (bright silver), Nero (black), Bianco Avus (off-white), as well as Ferrari's familiar Rosso Corsa crimson. It's affixed to a diecast base that contains the disc transport, amplifiers, and "digital engine": the amplification and DSP equalization.

"We've been perfecting DSP since the early '80s," Stuart said, "so we use drivers of our own design, using digital signal processing and active equalization to get big sound out of such a small enclosure." The forward-firing drivers are alloy-cone designs that I reckon to be about 3" in diameter (Meridian doesn't list the specs on its website), and the rear-firing woofer has an oval fiber-filled driver. The amplifier is rated at 80W.

The F80's slot-loaded Meridian optical disc drive "allows you to listen to 24-bit/96kHz files," said Stuart, who was active in promoting hi-rez DVD-Audio files. It also lets you play DVDs, as the F80 has both composite and S-video outputs. As well, the F80 plays CD-DA, CD-R/RW, MP3, WMA, DualDisc, and DVD±R/RW.

The F80's display is easy to read and allows you to display either a DVD's top menu or disc menu without having to connect it to a video monitor. While the remote control has only 15 buttons, it allowed me to control every function I ever required. *That's* good industrial design.

The F80 is packed with inputs, unobtrusively tucked into the lower part of its rear panel. In addition to the composite and S-video output jacks, there's a DIN socket labeled "FOR FUTURE ACCESSORIES," a 3.5mm stereo jack, digital optical in, an optical digital out/headphone jack, and two antenna inputs.

The F80 is billed as "portable," which, at just over 14 lbs, it is—you can pick it up by its molded-in handle and take it somewhere else. It isn't battery-powered or all that easy to schlep, but you could carry it with you if you wanted to. And I nearly forgot—the F80 is a clock radio, too.

It really is striking. I put it on a countertop in our kitchen, where—other than occasionally thinking *Holy crap, that sounded good*—I quickly took it for granted. However, whenever anyone



The F80 packs a lot of circuitry into its cramped interior.

dropped by for the first time, we had to discuss that brilliant-red objet d'art.

If he can't do it with Ferrari, well, he can't do it

Let's get the big one out of the way right up front: *The Meridian F80 is a \$3000 table radio.* Ask Bob Stuart who the F80 is aimed at and he'll respond, "Anyone with a job who loves music."

I've heard him say that, but isn't it just the slightest bit glib?

"Not really. Meridian's core customer continues to be people who are just a little fanatical about hi-fi, and for that customer, we'll gladly sell an 808.2 CD player—or two. But there are a lot of people who like nice things, who

slow to accept it. At first, the F80 really was *just* a radio to me, albeit a very handsome one. First, I came to realize that its AM section sounded uncommonly good, allowing me to enjoy my favorite shows, such as *On the Media* and *Wait...Don't Tell Me!* at their more convenient WNYC-AM broadcast times. In the beginning, I was just happy that the AM tuner was quiet, but I came to realize that it also sounded more than acceptably fine.

The FM tuner, not surprisingly, is far better, which is a bit of a pity when you consider the debased signals most commercial broadcasters transmit these days. Give it a good signal to lock on to and the F80 will shine. I caught

THE MERIDIAN F80 IS NOT JUST A TABLE RADIO. IT MIGHT BE THE BEST TABLE RADIO EVER.

may have even bought an expensive flat-panel video monitor, and when they go to buy speakers or something to listen to music or their DVDs through...well, they either see our very-high-performing but very large boxes or else overpriced clock radios.

"So who would buy the F80? People with eyes, people with ears, people who are tired of settling for 'good enough.' The F80 makes a very satisfying home entertainment center—perhaps too good. A few of our loyal customers have told us they aren't listening to their big Meridian systems since they bought F80s."

Do I buy that argument? Pretty much—but I have to admit that I was

WNYC's broadcast of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* on the winter solstice, and it sounded *huge*. All that sound coming from that little red thing? Mercy!

Win some, lose some, crash some

If I seem to have given the F80's disc drive scant notice, that's because I did, at first. Thinking of it as a table radio will do that for you. One evening, I was attempting to tell my wife how compelling I found *Raising Sand*, by Robert Plant and Alison Krauss (CD, Rounder 9075). Giving up, I ran downstairs, grabbed the disc, and loaded it into the Meridian.

The room turned into a torrid

swamp as Jay Bellerose's big beats rang out and Marc Ribot and T Bone Burnett's reverb'd guitars began twining around one another. The sound wasn't just big—it was enveloping. Immense. Intense. Immediate.

The Meridian F80 is not just a table radio. It might be the best table radio ever.

I took *Raising Sand* into my listening room, where I had the Ayre Acoustics C-5xe universal player, Conrad-Johnson ACT2.2 preamplifier, and Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 power amp driving a pair of Hansen Prince V2 loudspeakers. It sounded good, *real* good. Big, too. There was really no way in which this album didn't sound better than it did on the F80—yet the big rig lacked that frisson of sounding better than it ought to.

The Meridian is one of the few audio products I've had that actually made me a bit giddy. It seemed almost too good to be true—but it really *was* that good.

Years ago, when I lived in Oregon, I spent one Tequila-fueled evening on the coast with a professional photographer and two models. We wound up dancing on the beach by moonlight to "Judy in Disguise (with Glasses)," by John Fred and His Playboy Band—a song that had never particularly moved me. As the song ended, we plunged into the surf because we just couldn't dance any more. After our swim, as we tried to make our way back to the tide line, I caught my friend's eye. "What did we ever do to deserve this?"

"You don't deserve it," he replied, "but you got it anyway."

The Meridian F80 reminds me of that night—maybe I don't deserve a table radio this good, but I got to listen to it anyway.

On December 15, 2007, I had the opportunity to hear Neil Young's Chrome Dreams II tour at the United Palace of Prayer, at 175th and Broadway. Neil flat-out rocked that night, playing close to three hours. And thanks to Young's active taping underground, I had a two-CDR copy of the concert within the week—recorded with Schoeps Mk.Vs, yet.

I spent an afternoon cooking jambalaya, listening to live Neil Young, and it was like being given a ticket to my adolescence again. Not the Neil part—I have to admit to not getting him back then—I mean the visceral connection to the music that I

remember from cruising around in my Plymouth Valiant. I've had better cars, I've had better car stereos—hell, I've had *way* better hi-fis—but I've seldom had as intense a connection with the music as I did from the heady mixture of being a teenager away from grownups, listening to music that was *mine*. Somehow, the F80 helped me have that same kind of bond with the music.

Through my big rig, Neil Young's United Palace of Prayer concert was a little too reverberant. Through the F80, it took me *there*.

He let it soak in for a few minutes, then said, dreamily, "He sounds... so..."

"Big!" my wife and I chorused with him. It was true. Haden was as big as life and he was right there. Nine minutes later, we could speak again—but for those moments, all we wanted in the world was to listen.

My accountant tells me you can't sell a Ferrari that isn't red

The Meridian F80 is a very handsome table radio. I loved it in Ferrari's classic red livery, but the chrome yellow is an

I USUALLY ENDED UP LISTENING TO THE MERIDIAN, NOT OUT OF SOME OVERLY DEVELOPED SENSE OF DUTY, BUT BECAUSE I LIKED IT.

Am I making too much of the F80's ability to take this old fogey into his second (third?) teenagehood? Perhaps, but on the evening before I flew out to Las Vegas for the 2008 Consumer Electronics Show, my neighbor Jeff Wong dropped by to say so long. We sat down at the kitchen table with small glasses of Bulleit bourbon and yakked about many things. I'd burned Jeff copies of the demo discs I was taking to Vegas, so we played them while we talked.

Charlie Haden's "Silence," from *In Montreal*, his live duet album with Egberto Gismonti (CD, ECM 1746), began playing. Gismonti played a few quiet piano chords, then Haden's distinct double bass rang out. Jeff stopped talking for an instant and closed his eyes. "That *has* to be Charlie Haden," he said. "Nobody else sounds like that."

eye-opener, and the black and silver are really nice, too. If you're Apple's Jonathan Ive, you'll go for the white.

But at \$3000, I guess the F80 is expensive for a table radio. I have a Linn Classik in my kitchen, which, without speakers, is over \$2000. I thought the F80 was a better radio, and it also plays hi-rez DVDs, which makes it more versatile, too. As Bob Stuart suggested, the F80 would make a nice companion to a high-resolution monitor.

But where the F80 really glowed for me was as a sort of hearth. I'd settle in for some morning news and a cuppa coffee. I'd catch some great music at noon, while I was reheating leftovers and relaxing at lunch. And I'd groove to my music in the evening, waiting for my wife to get off work. True, I could have done any of that at/with other radios I have (including a very fine reproduction of a classic magic-eye tuner), or with/at any one of several other systems in my house. However, I usually ended up listening to the Meridian, not out of some overly developed sense of duty, but because I *liked* it.

Ultimately, the only reason to own a \$3000 anything is that it makes you happy. Every day at my house, the Meridian F80 easily passed that test. Looking at it made me happy. Listening to it put me in paradise.

Will it do the same for you? It wouldn't be the first time Rosso Corsa belonged in the winner's circle. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ANALOG SOURCE R601PW Classic

Mono FM tabletop radio.

DIGITAL SOURCE Ayre C-5xe universal player.

PREAMPLIFIER Conrad-Johnson ACT2.2.

POWER AMPLIFIER Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300.

CD RECEIVER Linn Classik.

LOUDSPEAKERS Mirage Incognita HDT-WM1 (in-wall), Hansen Prince V2.

—Wes Phillips