

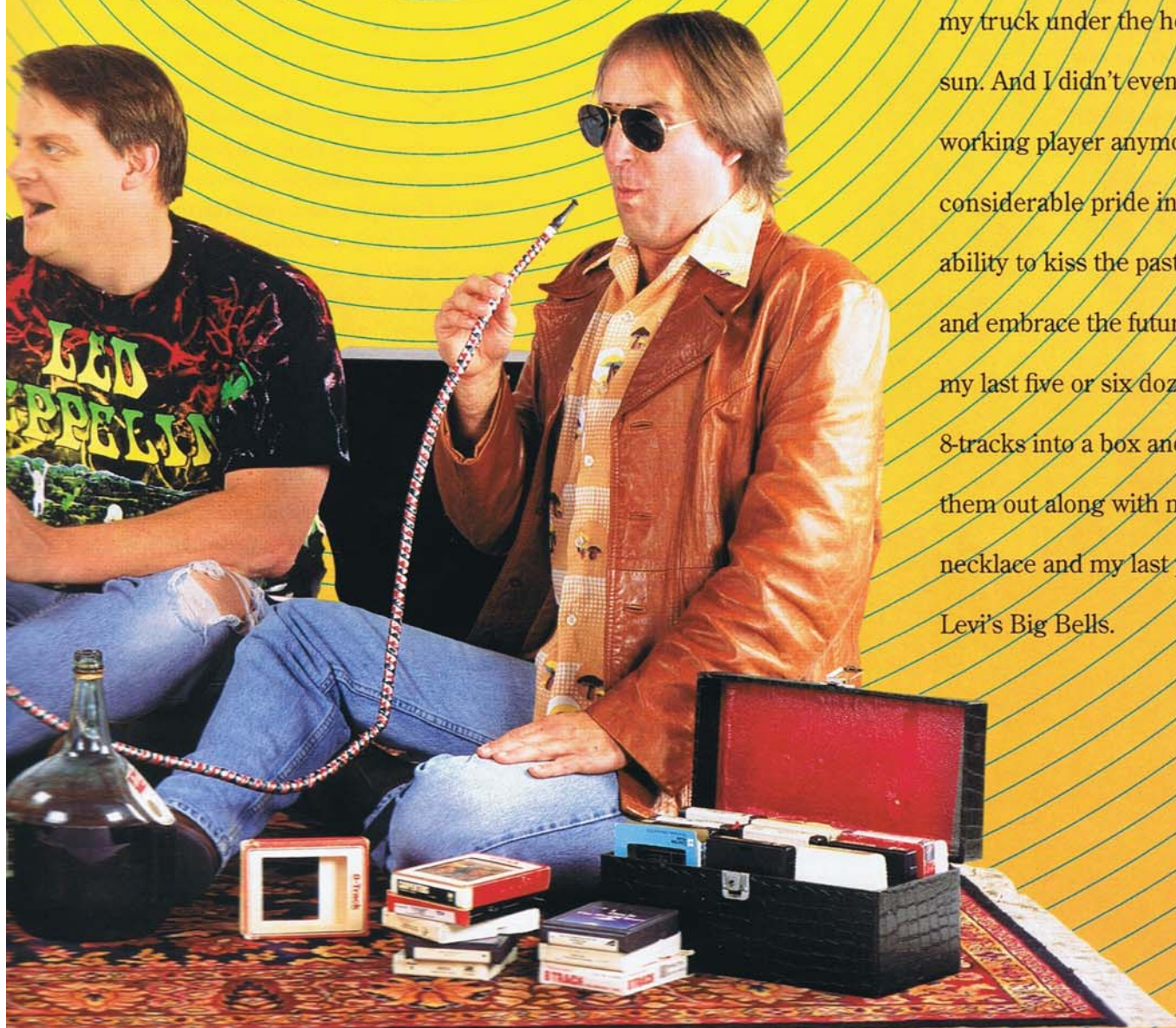
After years of “perfect” digital sound, our testing staff revisits a beloved old format — and the atrocious styles and bad habits that went along with it. Thus, a *Home Theater* exclusive: the first 8-track Face Off since the '70s.

by Brent Butterworth



BACK ON TRACK

When did you throw out all your 8-track tapes? Mid '80s, right? I remember the day. I'd already switched to cassette, and was contemplating a move to CD. A lot of my 8-tracks had bitten the dust, anyway, victims of deformed rollers, tangled tape, or being left too long in my truck under the hot Texas sun. And I didn't even have a working player anymore. With considerable pride in my ability to kiss the past goodbye and embrace the future, I tossed my last five or six dozen 8-tracks into a box and threw them out along with my ankh necklace and my last pair of Levi's Big Bells.



Back On Track

This stack of state-of-the-art (for 1970) source components will set you back about \$20. From top to bottom, the Lloyd's, the Soundesign 477, the Capehart 8TD2R, the Panasonic RS-805, and the Realistic TR-884.



It's a decision I've come to regret deeply.

You see, the 8-track's more than just another dead format. The 8-track symbolizes a day when you could wear a Quiana shirt with mountains and trees printed all over it to work. A day when a band like Yes could go into the studio with no oversight and make albums that were completely weird (and wonderful) without having to consult the marketing department to see if it was commercially viable to play in odd time signatures this year. A day when music was really important, not just something you throw on in the background while you're working late for the fifth night in a row cranking out another set of spreadsheets.

There's a lot of good technical reasons why the 8-track died: incredible wow and flutter, pathetic high-frequency response, poor dynamic range, very high crosstalk between tracks, and a general tendency for the tapes to self-destruct in ways that made them virtually unsalvageable. But there are also a lot of good sociological reasons why 8-track still commands a devoted following of hardcore fans who refuse to let the format die: It's simple, it's fun, and the software costs as little as a dime, instead of the ripoff \$16 you pay for a CD that costs the record company 80 cents to make.

Yep, the track is back. You can now find stores that carry used 8-tracks right along with their used records and CDs, and there's even a cool magazine, *8-Track Mind*, that's devoted exclusively to the format and its fans. That's why we decided that instead of testing yet another batch of boring, high-tech black boxes, it was time to focus one of *Home Theater* magazine's patented Face Offs on this resurrected format. After all, 8-track's devotees, both new and old, are demanding to know: Which is the best 8-track player you can buy in 1997?

The Participants

To conduct this Face Off, we couldn't just call up the manufacturers and bum test samples off them, because there hasn't been an 8-track player manufactured since the early '80s. And it's not like you'd find a used 8-track deck next to the old Audio Research amps at your local high-end audio store. No, for this Face Off, we had to go to the nation's premier source of 8-track hardware and software: the local flea market. Specifically, the best flea markets the Eastern Seaboard has to offer: the stands along Surf Avenue in Coney Island, and Englishtown, New Jersey's gigantic every-weekend tag sale.

My trip to Coney Island netted me two choice players: a Realistic TR-884 and a Lloyd's that didn't seem to have a model number. I remembered seeing the TR-884 player/recorder in the RadioShack catalog when I was a kid, and wishing I could afford its \$120 price. Man, that thing had *meters* on the front, and I wanted it! Nowadays, when I'm willing to spend nearly \$1,000 on a DAT recorder, I wouldn't even flinch at dropping \$120 on a tape deck. But I scored the TR-884 for a mere \$10—which, as I would later find out, was an egregious ripoff. The Lloyd's was a really simple playback-only unit, but it seemed to me that the best 8-track players should come from defunct companies, so I swapped a five-spot for what would soon become my reference 8-track deck. We usually consider five the minimum for a Face Off, though, so I still had a lot of looking to do.

HT publisher Terry Carroll, upon hearing of my quest, recommended the Englishtown flea market, and the more he remembered the 8-track adventures of his teenage days, the more he demanded to come along, braving sub-40-degree temperatures to get there at 6 a.m. for the best pickin's. Englishtown yielded two more great decks, a Soundesign 477 player and a Capehart 8TD2R player/recorder. If you're the type who's still drawn to lava lamps and Hendrix posters, these players will definitely be the winners for you. Both feature really cheezy '70s high-tech style track indicators, the Soundesign placing its indicator numbers behind a cool grid, the Capehart using segmented LED-look indicators (they're not really LEDs, either, just little lights behind a cutout). And I got these fine players for cheaper than you could buy a flimsy plastic cassette player in Chinatown: \$2 for the Soundesign, \$5 for the Capehart.

I also scored some very necessary accessories. I found this really cool leatherette 8-track carryall that stores 24 tapes, and picked the thing up half-full for \$10. The cargo included an 8-track head cleaner, three Herb Alpert's, Bachman-Turner Overdrive's *Greatest Hits*, two Black Sabbaths (*Black Sabbath* and *Paranoid*), and, best of all, a Captain and Tennille tape that was still in the cellophane. That's not quite the score you'd think, though—who'd want to unwrap

the thing in the first place? Two booths down, I found another major stash of old 8-tracks at six for a buck, including tape one of *Yessongs* and Electric Light Orchestra's awesome *Out of the Blue*.

As Terry and I were lugging all this junk back to my truck in a rush to escape the cold and get our butts into a diner for some pancakes, we stumbled upon a real find I couldn't pass up: a pair of Panasonic Thrusters speakers. Panasonic used to package the Thrusters along with their all-in-one turntable/8-track/radio systems, and they were my dream speaker back when it was a major deal for me just to save up for a plastic portable 8-track player. Not only did Thrusters have the most suggestive name in the history of the speaker business, they also had a *passive radiator*, a high-tech device Panasonic's ads claimed gave you truly astounding bass. I decided that to conduct a fair test of 8-track players, we should listen to them over authentic period speakers, so for \$15, I included the Thrusters in our haul.

I still needed one more player to make a Face Off, though, and a friend from Dallas came through with a great one: a Panasonic RS-805 player/recorder. I once bought a pristine, still-in-the-original-box RS-805 from a homeless guy in New York, and gave it to a friend of mine who was an 8-track diehard. Of course, I soon wished I'd kept it. So I was really happy to get the RS-805, especially given that it was faced with a really hip backlit green level meter.



Sixty dollars worth of software for a buck-fifty? No wonder 8-track is back! But you'll want to score some better transducers than the Thrusters (below) to play those cartridges on.



Back On Track

The Testing Procedure

After a cursory listen to a couple of the players and tapes I'd rounded up, we decided we were totally unprepared to evaluate them. The sound we heard had so little in common with what we've become used

to that we figured we'd have to get in the right frame of mind for this Face Off. And that meant recreating the environment these players were designed for.

The Thrusters were definitely a good start, and we decided to take it further by reassembling a typical '70s listening room, complete with a Persian rug and a giant waterpipe.

Now, it's been quite some time since any of

us have done a bong hit, and we wanted to make sure our listening skills were sharp. So we decided to load our hookah with tobacco from my favorite cigar, JR's Ultimate President Double Maduro.

We also effected true period dress. For me, that meant a shredded pair of Levi's (unfortunately, I couldn't find Big Bells), big hiking boots (I grew up in Colorado), and a rock-band T; for Al, denim head to toe with some groovy Frye boots. Robert and Brian's getups were a little scarier, though. Brian showed up in a serious "candy man" outfit, complete with leather jacket, 100-percent polyester mushroom-print shirt, and Beatle boots. Robert still had his lavender suede boots, but couldn't find the cape he used to wear when club-hopping, so he had to settle for a tie-dyed union suit.

Brian also surprised us by showing up with the most classic 8-track player of all time: the Panasonic Plunger portable, which uses its T-shaped carrying handle as the track-change button. The Plunger was available in bold red, blue, or yellow, and was *the* hip portable

music system back in the days before boomboxes and Walkmans were invented. Despite its paltry three-inch speaker, we immediately declared the Plunger the winner of this Face Off, and Robert took to hauling it around with him because it worked so well visually with his outfit.

The Test

Without any real '70s electronics on hand (they all sucked, anyway), we decided to use a simple, all-analog rig to drive the Thrusters: a Rotel RSP-980 preamp/processor and Chiro amps. Robert took one look at the Thrusters and decided that we should go for maximum fidelity by using a *stack* of Chiros to either bi- or triamp the speakers. Well, it didn't work, because when I disassembled one of the Thrusters, I found that my dream speaker was really one of the worst speakers I'd ever seen. The passive radiator's little more than a 10-cent piece of flimsy plastic, and the driver complement turned out to be a single 6-inch

full-range with a smaller magnet than I've seen on a lot of tweeters! A brief audition of the Thrusters quickly showed us that appearances were definitely not deceiving here; most of the 27-inch TVs we've tested come with better speakers than this. No highs, no bass, and what was left sounded so dirty and indistinct that we wished the Thrusters had no midrange, either. I'm sure the amazingly chintzy 20-gauge wires that came permanently attached to the Thrusters didn't help much, nor did the fact that one of them had been spliced three times. The only delight we got out of the Thrusters was when we used the Chiro C-300's awesome power to shred the drivers to ribbons once we finished the test.

The interconnect cables posed yet another problem, because the Soundesign and Capehart players came with their own, permanently wired into their back panels. We feel this is an idea that consumer electronics should bring back *right now*—we'd all save a lot of money on interconnects, and we'd never be distracted from our music and



Providing 80 minutes of lubricated polyester pleasure, the 8-track is the medium of choice for discriminating recordists of music's Golden Age.



Back On Track

movies because we're fretting about whether Monsters or AudioQuests are a better match for our systems.

We soon discovered that a Face Off of 20-year-old components demands a completely new set of parameters by which you judge the products: namely, whether or not they work at all.

The Panasonic RS-805 gave us problems right away, because while its right channel played fine, its left channel put out only a strange hum. What's even weirder, when we tried to compensate by raising the left-channel volume control on the front panel, the hum modulated to higher frequencies, giving us a very spacey sound. This was actually a beneficial effect, because we were able to use the control to "play along" with Jimmy Page's theremin solo in Led Zepelin's "Whole Lotta Love." But after we tired of making weird sounds, we had to scratch the Panasonic.

And we soon had to do the same with the Capehart 8TD2R. It worked fine for a short while, especially when we put it into fast forward, where its tape transport noise leaked into the output so that the Thrusters emitted a sound rather like that of a revved Honda CB750. But it didn't last—the player soon stopped emitting any musical sound at all, even though it still performed the Honda effect quite well.

We ended up with the Lloyd's, the Realistic, and the Soundesign, which turned out to be the hottest power trio since Rush's glory days. We all knew which tape we'd start our Face Off with: Brian's copy of KISS's *Destroyer*. I gotta tell you, it was quite a feeling holding this tape in my hand. Think about it: KISS is the best rock band ever, and *Destroyer* is easily their best album. Since 8-track is the best format of all time, that meant that I was holding the *single best piece of audio soft-*

ware ever created! As I would have said when I was 15, "Wow."

We experienced a few fleeting moments of glory as "Detroit Rock City" and "Shout It Out Loud" screamed through the speakers. But the flame that burns brightest burns briefest, and this one flickered out

Top 10 Reasons Why You Should Switch Back to 8-Track

10. A player and 10 tapes could cost you less than a single CD.
9. No jewel boxes.
8. "Brittle, chalky highs" no problem, because there are no highs.
7. Loud "ka-chunk" track-changing noise wakes you up if you fall asleep listening.
6. Players available built into convenient, all-in-one unit with receiver and turntable.
5. Crosstalk lets those with hectic schedules listen to two tunes at once.
4. No guilt about using cheap interconnects.
3. Female aficionados are often super-cool retro chicks who wear white go-go boots.
2. People will happily give you dozens of old tapes for free.

And the number-one reason why you should switch back:

1. No Kenny G albums available on 8-track.

as soon as the track ended. You may remember that 8-track cartridges used a tape that ran in a continuous loop, and that the loop was spliced at the end of the track by a piece of metal foil tape, which also served to trigger the track-change mechanism inside the player. Well, as soon as *Destroyer's* metal foil piece hit the Soundesign's capstan, the splice came loose, and the tape was history. Bummer.

We hoped to continue on an only slightly lower aesthetic level with BTO's *Greatest Hits*, but we experienced the same problem. Too bad, because for a

minute or two there, we were pretty amazed by what this old format could do. This tape was in great shape, and as it turned out, the Soundesign was the best player of the bunch. The sound was really pretty good, with tight and deep bass, really smooth and satisfying

Some delicacies, like this rare *Liberace Show*, are best appreciated from a distance (above). Where else can you swoon to the strains of "Polly-Wolly-Doodle" and "Animal Crackers in My Soup" back to back, but on Shirley Temple's cellophane-sealed gem (below)? Brian insisted he couldn't make a proper evaluation unless he replicated the exact speaker placement he used back in the '70s (right).



Back On Track

midrange, and a decent amount of highs. It was like listening to a really good cassette deck. But alas, the pleasure lasted only for the length of "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet," then the tape followed *Destroyer* into the grave.

Next, we tried *Black Sabbath*, which was somewhat more successful—even visiting contributing editor Terry Landry, a serious rock 'n' roll hater,

was kind of digging "Iron Man," while the rest of us hummed the tune's riff in true Beavis and Butt-head "dah dah dah dat dah, dah-dah-dah-dah-dat dat dah dat dah" style. But for some reason, the tape went into some serious wow and flutter (about 79 percent, in my estimation), sounding as if someone were pressing his thumb on the capstan repeatedly. It fared no better on the other players.

Finally, with David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, we found a tape that was in good enough shape to test with. Here's where the Soundesign 477 started to shine, and where we started to remember just how much fun 8-tracks really were. The sound was definitely retro, very low in high-frequency detail (even when we tried using better speakers), but very, very ballsy. After a listen to "Rebel, Rebel," it became clear that we really were listening to a completely different sound back then, one that technically sucked, but that had the indefinable, unmeasurable quality we call "soul." And once we got tired of a certain tape, we were amazed to find that it takes only about two seconds to change them. Just yank out the old one and slam in the new one; no waiting for some stupid drawer to open or for a tape mecha-

nism to unwind itself from your tape. In the short-attention-span '90s, this attribute's even more important than it was back in the '70s.

The Soundesign had just one problem: Its tape-head alignment was off. Thus, we sometimes heard two songs at once, as the deck's misaligned tape heads overlapped two tracks. As with most 8-track players, there's a screw underneath that lets you adjust this, but we took the easy (and historically accurate) way out—we shoved matchbooks between the tape and the player's tape slot to force it into proper alignment.

The Realistic TR-884 sounded much like the Soundesign, but somewhat more recessed in the highs. But the Realistic records, too, so for those who want to make their own 8-tracks, it's the one. That's why Al chose it to take home and install in his system. (I've got a pristine Captain and Tennille tape that'd be perfect for him to record over, too.) The Lloyd's sounded a lot more tame, almost like a typical British speaker—the highs were very muted, the bass pretty mushy, and the mids very laid back. But because of its Spartan design (a single track-changer button, and that's *IT!*) and slim size, I couldn't resist it. And I'm sure that in true '70s tradition, I can dial out those tonal balance problems with an equalizer.

This Face Off easily ranks as the biggest hi-fi fun we've had in years, and all for less than I'd usually spend on a lunchtime visit to the Times Square Virgin Megastore. Yeah, you could spend the money on a set of interconnects or cone feet or something that would actually improve your system's sound, but if you consider that the purpose of an A/V system's to entertain you, there's no more cost-effective way to blow 25 bucks than to score yourself an 8-track player. So what are you waiting for? Go hit the flea market! And if you happen to find a copy of Deep Purple's *Machine Head*, drop me a letter and we'll do a deal. 📧



Al struggles to shove the matchbooks in just right to get the Soundesign back in alignment, while Brent demonstrates the mark of a truly great 8-track player: hard-wired interconnects!

