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• **VINTAGE REVIEW** Crimson Elektrik 1200 pre/power • **READERS’ CLASSIFIEDS** Hi-Fi bargains galore

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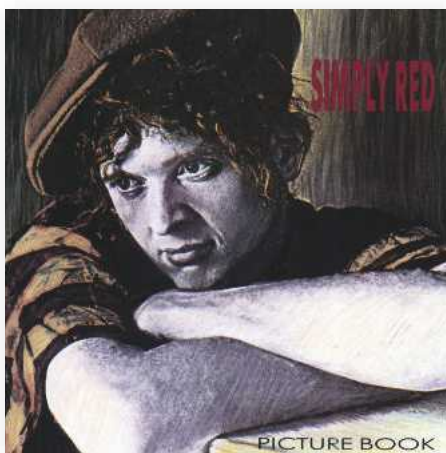
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JBL 4309

JBL is promising us 'great things from a small package' as it continues its theme of mixing pro heritage aesthetics with modern acoustic technology. Is the 4309 a blast?
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

The verdict was in almost before I started listening to the prosaically named JBL 4309 speakers, yours for £1799 a pair in a choice of natural or black walnut satin wood veneers and with blue or black grilles over their mid/bass drivers. A visitor took one look at the speakers' horn-loaded tweeter and twin front-venting bass ports, and – before even a note had been played – opined that, 'They look like proper little rock-boxes'.

Not that the 4309s are huge. Far from it, but even at a mere 42cm tall they have all the promise of larger JBL designs like the hefty 4349

[*HFN* Mar '21] and 4429 [*HFN* Feb '17] monitors, which pack 12in mid/bass drivers, and have the same 'rescued from a studio sometime in the 1970s' vibe

about them. JBL is doing well at tapping into the retro movement, drawing on its back catalogue to create models such as the L82 and L100 Classic [*HFN* May '19], complete with their ever-so-'70s Quadrex foam grilles in a choice of black, blue and orange. But who can blame the company for ploughing the nostalgic furrow? After all, it does set the brand's offerings apart from the swathes of lookalike competition.

BELT AND BRACES

Relatively small the 4309 may be, but that doesn't stop it being substantially built: the cabinet has 18mm-thick walls with heavy H-shaped bracing, contributing not only to a real feeling of solidity, but also an all-up weight of just under 11kg per speaker. The design of the cabinet may be conventional – it's a rectangular box, with square corners and none of the shaping of sidewalls or radiusing of corners found elsewhere in the speaker market – but it feels beautifully built, and impeccably finished.

The rear panel is entirely clean [see p61], apart from the cut-out for the bi-wire terminals, but it's worth noting that the veneer is also applied here, whereas some

designs might go for simple paint on what will, after all, be a hidden part of the speaker. It all adds to the feeling of quality apparent in these speakers – 'small but perfectly formed' just about sums it up.

HIGH DEFINITION

Mind you, there's plenty to make the 4309s stand out, not least that striking horn-loaded tweeter assembly, which uses JBL's 2410H-2 25mm compression driver,

'trickled down' from the D2 series drivers made by the Pro division. It uses an annular Teonex diaphragm of V-shaped section for lightness and stiffness, promising

high-power handling while pushing the driver break-up modes out-of-band.

This driver is mounted into JBL's 'High-Definition Imaging' horn, which is calculated to deliver a predictable response on- and off-axis. Furthermore, between the horn and the mid/bass section is an 'Ultra High Frequency tonal adjuster', allowing ± 1 dB

RIGHT: Modelled on JBL's larger 4349 [*HFN* Mar '21], the 4309 features a 25mm 2410H-2 compression driver mounted into an HDI horn. A high treble trim control is included [see Lab Report, p61]

tweaks to the high treble. JBL points out that as the 4309s can take several weeks to break in, any final 'UHF' adjustments should be suitably delayed.

In practice, it's the mid/bass driver that's most likely to show changes over this initial period. This is a 165mm unit with a pulp cone and built into a cast chassis, with a 'motor' combining a long-throw voice coil, symmetrical field magnets, a flux stabilisation ring and copper shorting

'They reveal detail in the dense retro-tinged mixes'





LEFT: Removing the snug-fitting grille reveals JBL's 165mm pulp-coned bass unit, reflex-loaded via two front-facing ports. The braced cabinet may be small but the walls are 18mm thick

of my usual Naim Supernait 3 amplifier, I stepped up – in power output terms, at least – to Rotel's prodigious RA-1592MkII integrated [see p54], and then went to the other extreme with a modest 10W 'desktop amplifier'. Yes, that's way below the 25W minimum JBL suggests for these speakers, but I was delighted if not surprised to hear just how well the 4309 worked with minimum gas.

True, I wouldn't choose this set-up to play Metallica at 'realistic' levels in larger spaces, but for most 'normal' listening, and in the smaller rooms for which the 4309 has been designed, the effect was highly persuasive. Indeed, if these speakers were even more compact, they'd have all the makings of a desktop hero.

LOOKS DECEIVE

Back to the heavier amplification, and the JBL speakers worked remarkably well with the big Rotel amplifier, delivering a sound with much greater scale and insight than one might expect from these relatively compact enclosures. Playing the Barenboim/Staatskapelle Berlin recording of Elgar's *The Dream Of Gerontius* [Decca 4831585], the little speakers are as adept with the weight and scale of the orchestra as with the delicate detail of Catherine Wyn-Rogers' voice gliding over the choir in the dramatic conclusion of the piece.

Yes, bigger speakers will no doubt give even more substance to the musical forces, but it's impressive just how well the 4309s present them, sounding refined and controlled, yet open and airy. They do much the same with the precise, relaxed jazz of the Gidon Nunes Vaz Quartet on →

ring. Tuned via those two front-venting flared ports, looking especially dramatic against the blue baffle finish of the review speakers, it betrays its studio heritage by sharing with the tweeter a design built to take plenty of punishment. A relatively high 87dB sensitivity and 4ohm impedance is quoted [see PM's Lab Report, p61], but it's also one designed to play hard if needed.

ROCK ON

Except that view doesn't really convey the whole story. Yes, the 4309s can charge hard when required, and definitely have that 'rock monitor' look, but they belie their styling by sounding neither raucous nor old-fashioned. In fact, these speakers are both entirely enjoyable and capable of considerable subtlety.

Set up in accordance with the manual's recommendations – on 24in/60cm stands (in this case an elderly pair of Atacama SE24s filled with Atabytes, and positioned 50cm from side walls) – they immediately cast a sonic picture with impressive soundstaging and focus. It's also worth a

little toe-in if the 4309s are used further apart than JBL's recommended 1.8-2.4m – just enough for the outside panels of the speakers to be glimpsed.

In terms of partnering equipment the 4309s proved surprisingly easy-going. Having started out with them on the end

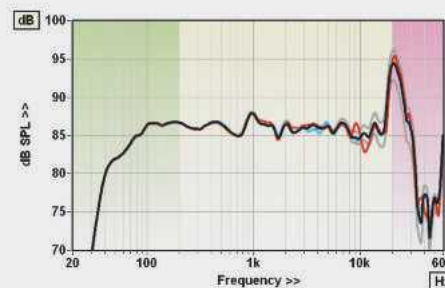
HORNS FOR ALL

Although James B Lansing's eponymous brand was formally established in 1946 it was only with Harman International's acquisition of the company in 1969 that the classic monitors that many still cherish today started arriving. Highlights include the three-way 4310, the 4311 and latterly the L-100 – its best-selling speaker, reborn in 2018 as the L100 Classic [HFN May '19]. These 4300-series monitors were the forefathers of the brand's current Studio Monitors range, including the compact 4312MII [HFN Sep '12], the massive horn-loaded 4367 [seen at our Hi-Fi Show Live in 2015] and the diminutive 4309 reviewed here. However, if these retro-inspired boxes are just a little too 'historical' in styling, but you're still tempted by JBL's sophisticated 'High Definition Imaging' (HDI) horns, then it has another more contemporary range just for you... Check out the HDI-1600 – this uses the same 2410H-2 25mm compression driver married to another 165mm bass/mid unit, although the latter trades the 4309's pulp cone for an 'aluminium matrix' that works up to a higher 1.9kHz. It's also reflex-loaded, but via a single rear-mounted port. Price is a comparable £1650. PM

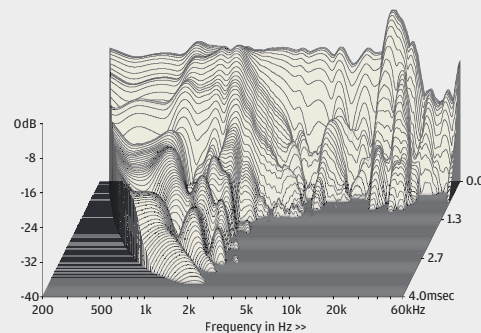
JBL 4309

With that mid/treble horn front-and-centre there's hope of good sensitivity from this little box, and JBL's 4309 does not disappoint, achieving 87.8dB/1m/1kHz and 86.1dB from 500-8kHz, according well with the rated 87dB. Neither is there a sting in the 4309's tail as regards its amplifier loading, presenting a very 'driveable' minimum of 4.06ohm/150Hz with a near-zero phase angle (-4°). Moreover the inductive upswing to +52°/1.74kHz – as the 25mm Teonex compression driver takes over – coincides with an easy modulus of 12.3ohm on its way up to a >20ohm span from 2.5kHz-9.4kHz. So the 4309 should be a great match for owners of low-power tube amps...

The forward response is more impressively integrated than we saw with the larger 4349 [HFN Mar '21] where a cancellation mode in the throat of the horn produced a notch at ~1.4kHz. Not so here as the 4309 offers a substantially flatter output, true to within ±1.8dB from 200Hz-18kHz just prior to a +9dB peak in output at 20.6kHz [see Graph 1 and waterfall, Graph 2]. Pair matching is a superb 0.6dB (200Hz-8kHz) but a wobble in the response of one speaker from 8-13kHz results in a poorer 2.4dB from 200Hz-20kHz. Meanwhile the 69Hz-335Hz (-6dB) bandpass of the 165mm pulp woofer is supplemented by the 'peaky' 43Hz tuning of the dual ports to deliver a fine 42Hz bass extension (-6dB re. 200Hz). Finally, the UHF pads offer a -2.2dB/+1.8dB cut and boost from 5-20kHz [grey traces, Graph 1] while the snug plastic grille exerts little influence [blue trace] – so any subjective 'colour' is just as likely to originate from the mild resonance at the 1.6kHz crossover [Graph 2]. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: Mild cone modes are at 900Hz and 1.6kHz while treble is clean up to ~21kHz dome resonance

LEFT: Bi-wire/bi-amp-compatible 4mm speaker terminals come courtesy of JBL's split 1.6kHz crossover. Note the wood-finish veneer wraps to the rear of the cabinet

weight, but then what would you expect with their dinky 165mm mid/bass drivers? What they do well, however, is cover their tracks with a sound so well-integrated and balanced that their sins of omission are easily overlooked,

especially in smaller spaces where they shift more than enough air to turn on the thrills. And all this while delivering fine detail and bite in the midband and treble. Also, for the record, having tried them with the treble turned up and down [see PM's Lab Report, adjacent], I returned to the default setting for the best balance of attack and sweetness.

And yes, my friend, they can certainly rock, as was proved with *I Don't Live Here Anymore*, the big-production latest set from The War On Drugs [Atlantic SEL 2-666913]. There's just so much going on here, and yet JBL's 4309s do a great job of revealing the detail in the dense, retro-tinged mixes while still keeping the music moving along smartly. '80s sound meets '70s-styled speakers? Perfect! ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The old-school studio monitor looks make the 4309s a leftfield choice in a market full of 'me-too' two-way standmounts, but they're well worth a shot. Not only is the sound a whole lot of fun, but these little speakers have subtler abilities on offer, and are just as adept when refinement and detail are required. Add in the ease of drive and sheer quality of design, build and finish, and the 4309s are something a bit special.

Sound Quality: 84%



their *Ebb Tide* album of standards [Sound Liaison SL 1050A; DXD]. Here the solo trumpet and flugelhorn sound characterful and detailed against the piano, bass and drums, captured live with an elegant mic setup for a real sense of atmosphere and performance.

Yes, you might easily imagine kicking back of an evening with music like this being played on the 4309s... Picture the lights down low and a glass of something warming to hand, the immediacy of these little monitors drawing you into your performances of choice.

DRUM AND BASS

I snapped back into the present by upping the pace with the fast, dynamic SWR Big Band Charlie Parker tribute *Bird Lives* [ACT Music 9934-2; 48kHz/24-bit]. Here the 4309s' speed and definition was much in evidence, even when playing the frantic 'Cherokee/Koko' opener at high levels. The speakers use their impressive bass – well, at least for speakers of this size – to give the band realistic scale. The high-speed drumming has both punch and drive, and there's striking clarity even when the musicians are throwing at the track all they've got.

In absolute terms – and here we're talking about speakers both much larger and considerably pricier – these little JBLs do give away something in terms of rib-tickling