

# Head Honcho

Creek's new OBH-21mk2 headphone amplifier is simple yet sweet sounding, says Jon Myles.

**W**ith headphone listening – be it at home or on the go – enjoying something of a resurgence these days, more and more people are looking to dedicated amplifiers to get the most from the experience.

Yes, many integrated amplifiers include their own headphone circuit but the quality can be variable, so for anyone after the very best sound from their expensive set of 'cans' a standalone unit is the way forward.

And there's plenty of them out there at the moment – from feature-packed full-sized components boasting their own in-built DACs, tone controls and sophisticated options such as crossfeed, to more minimalist designs with simply a few inputs and a volume knob.

One look at the Creek OBH-21mk2 on review here will tell you it resides firmly in the latter

category. It's an upgraded version of the company's already successful OBH-21SE headphone amplifier and consists of a slim metal box measuring a svelte 95mm x 60mm x 180mm (H/W/D) with just a rotary volume control, two 6.3mm headphone jacks and a small blue operating light on the fascia.

At the rear are three pairs of RCA sockets incorporating a line-level input, a loop-out for chain-linking to other components and a pre-out to enable the Creek to be used as a preamplifier if so desired.

A set of easily-accessible DIP switches on the base of the unit allows for various gain settings to match output with different headphones – 0dB, 6dB, 10dB and 12.5dB. Cleverly, two more switches enable attenuation of the pre-amp output without altering the headphone settings.

Power comes from a wall-wart

style 24V supply and while the Creek is relatively compact it's reassuringly weighty at 630g, with cushioned metal feet providing a firm foundation on whatever surface you place it on.

So while not the flashiest headphone amplifier around, the Creek OBH-21mk2 is decidedly well-built for its £325 price with a purposeful look – and its simplicity makes operation refreshingly simple.

## SOUND QUALITY

Creek has been producing headphone amplifiers since 1993 so it's fair to say they have a pretty good idea what they are doing.

And straight from the off the OBH-21 made a good impression. Hooked up to a Naim NDX streamer and fed a selection of material ranging from Red Book CD to high-resolution 24bit/192kHz files, it brought the best out of whatever headphones it was connected to.



Much like the company's bigger integrated amplifiers, the Creek has a very natural, organic sound to it with little evidence of transistor harshness.

On a pair of Oppo's PM2 planar magnetic 'phones there was a good sense of depth and punch to the low-end on The Chemical Brother's 'Block Rockin' Beats'. The electronic bass lines had both shape and power and they never wallowed.

The Oppos can be a little too smooth for my tastes at times – seeming to prioritise midband warmth over absolute bite – but the Creek exerted a firm grip on them, seeming to add some welcome sparkle to the top-end.

On Tommy Smith's 'Azure' the saxophone lines were well-etched with a definition to the leading edges of the notes that I'd not heard previously through the Oppos.

"The midband had a slight warmth to it but not so much that it ever sounded bland while treble was clean and extended"

Switching to a pair of more neutral-sounding AKG K702 headphones, the Creek showed it has plentiful reserves of power on tap. These are tremendously revealing 'phones yet a little insensitive and in need of some quality amplification to give their best.

But with the gain increased to 10dB on the Creek the AKGs went loud with ease – the OBH-21 bringing out masses of detail in even the most complex of mixes. On Ornette Coleman's dense 'Free Jazz' outing – which features two separate quartets playing in each channel – there was ample air and space around the various instruments, allowing me to track the different musical lines with ease.

The midband had a slight warmth to it, but not so much that it ever sounded bland, while treble was clean and extended. The only criticism is that the lack of a crossfeed facility – which subtly blends elements of each channel together – meant that the Creek did have a stark left/right separation on this piece.

But that's a minor quibble – and one that rarely raised its head, as the Creek is adept at getting the best out of whatever 'phones you attach to it. Swapping over-ears for a pair of



The rear of the Creek features an on/off switch, power socket and line-level input, as well as loop-out and pre-out sockets.

Noble's new Savant in-ear monitors (see review elsewhere this issue) and the 24/88.2 version of Daft Punk's 'Random Access Memories' positively romped along – the Creek propelling

on the end of the excellent FiiO X3 2nd Generation portable player with good results for the past few weeks but the Creek seemed to take them to another level – imbuing the sound with more presence and realism. Which, after all, is what headphone listening should be all about.

## CONCLUSION

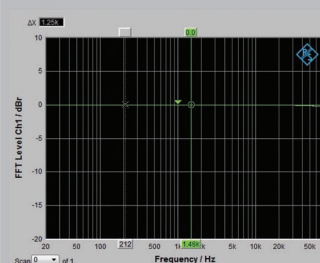
The Creek OBH-21mk2 might not be the most feature-packed headphone amplifier you can buy, but it is certainly one of the best sounding at its price. Detailed and punchy with an organic, free-flowing sound it is eminently capable of driving whatever 'phones you care to partner it with.

the music forward with all the necessary speed, yet never sounding forced. I've been using the Savants

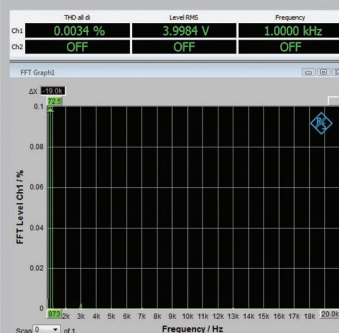
## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

From its headphone output the OBH-21mk2 measured flat from 2Hz to 100kHz and maintained this result as volume was steadily reduced over its full range.

### FREQUENCY RESPONSE



### DISTORTION



Changing gain using the underside DIP switches also made no difference to frequency response.

Distortion was a minimal 0.003% at 1V out and again, the gain setting made no significant difference.

As stated in the specs the unit provides no gain (0dB), up to x4 gain (12dB) selected by DIP switches, from input to headphone jack output, and it would swing up to 3V out easily, distortion starting to rise through 0.2% at this level. This is plenty enough, even for insensitive planar magnetic headphones from Oppo and Audeze. However, overload was slow and up to 6V was available before distortion rose to 1%. Noise was minimal at -117dB.

The OBH-21mk2 measured very well all round. **NK**

Frequency response	3Hz-80kHz
Separation	92dB
Noise	-117dBdB
Distortion	0.003%
Gain	x4 (12dB)
Output	3V

**CREEK OBH-21mk2**  
£325



**OUTSTANDING** - amongst the best.

**VALUE** - keenly priced

### VERDICT

Simple yet sonically superb. The Creek is a tremendously impressive headphone amplifier which allies power with musical poise.

### FOR

- drive
- detail
- smooth sound

### AGAINST

- minimal features

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