

Genelec 5.1 Home Theater Speaker System (HT208B/HT206B/HTS3B)

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Introduction

The concept of power, or “active” loudspeakers, is one the audiophile community has fought since the beginning of time. Audiophiles have been wrong in their initial fears about all new audio formats (think LP, CD, DVD-Audio and even the almighty iPod), anything to do with EQ and, most importantly, room acoustics – they are wrong about active speakers, too. The idea of a company building amplifiers into speaker cabinets that are specifically designed to power the drivers and electronic (active) crossovers that make up a speaker system are in many cases better left to people who have real measurement tools and fixed environments to design from, rather than audiophiles who have a Platinum card and are looking to tweak. And tweaking is exactly what many of us have heard from the audiophile publications as they spew their misguided sermons of audio alchemy and stereo insecurity. Make no mistake, joining the “preamp of the month” club because some polyester short-sleeves-shirt-wearing audiophile reviewer made you feel badly about a past investment in your rig is a guaranteed mistake. Audio enthusiasts and lovers of music know and believe that their ears know best and make their investments accordingly.



This is where Genelec’s powered line of loudspeakers enters the game and starts kicking ass from the first snap. Rooted deeply in the world of pro audio, Genelec’s Finnish-made loudspeakers are a full departure from the world of mixing and matching electronics, as they are fully powered designs, meaning they have amps built right in. The drivers are familiar to audiophiles, as they can be found in various forms in speakers from the likes of JM Labs and Wilson Audio. The Genelec package delivers a much more predictable result, because the speakers are actually driven by electronic crossovers and amps designed to best meet the specific design needs of the speaker.

My considerations in selecting the review system I speak of here were based less on how much money I had to spend (not that an audiophile dealer would ever over-sell a system to a well-heeled client), but to the specific size of my listening room. My room is 16 feet wide by 25 feet long, with traditional eight-foot ceilings. The system selected by Bart LoPiccolo, the national sales manager in the United States for Genelec and an old personal friend from the industry, was comprised of three HT208Bs (\$2,499 each), two smaller HT206s (\$1,599 each) and a HTS3B subwoofer (\$3,499), with the promise that the approximately \$14,000 powered speaker system would have the power to “light it up” in my room. I liked their swagger from the start and got excited about my upcoming time with such an (if you will) in-the-box listening experience.

The HT208 is a two-way bi-amplified system with a one-inch metal dome tweeter and an eight-inch bass driver. Each driver has a 180-watt class AB amplifier and its own active crossover. The tweeter benefits from Genelec’s proprietary Directivity Control Waveguide, which is said to improve on- and off-axis response and decrease secondary reflective effects on the listening position. The HT208 is 15 inches tall, nearly 10 inches wide and approximately 12 inches deep, and weighs a modest 28 pounds. Reported frequency response is 48 Hz to 22 kHz, with an impressive max output of 110 dB. The ported cabinet is a textured black and only comes in one color, as they are almost always installed in a professional environment or behind a screen of some sort. They come with grilles, but I didn’t use them for the review. The cabinet is absolutely solid and the look, while not as sexy as you would expect from a Revel, MartinLogan or Wilson Audio speaker, still will make the grade in most rooms that can accommodate a black loudspeaker or will allow for them to do their thing

behind a screen or fabric wall. The rubber isolated back panel has several unique features that will be unfamiliar to the passive speaker owner. There are three sets of dip switches for room response settings, a sensitivity input control, a more familiar RCA and XLR balanced input, a power switch and an IEC connector for your AC power. You can also define how the speakers turn on, either by remote control via a 12-volt trigger, or by auto-start, which senses an input signal and turns the speaker on. A green LED on the front tells you when the speakers are active.

The slightly smaller HT206 is very similar to its bigger brother, as it is a two-way design utilizing a three-quarter-inch metal dome tweeter and a six-and-one-half-inch bass driver. In this case, the tweeter uses a 50-watt internal amplifier and the bass driver gets a larger 80-watt amplifier. Frequency response is 55 Hz to 18 kHz, with an SPL of 105 dB. The cabinet features are identical to those of the HT208 and allow for the same tailoring of the response for “dialing in” your room.

The HTS3B subwoofer was suggested for this review to provide the low-frequency side of things. A 10-inch active driver faces the front through an aluminum grille; on either side is a 10-inch passive radiator without grilles. It has the same finish as the HT208 and the HT206 and is 17 inches high by nearly 16 inches wide and 15 inches deep, weighing a hefty 62 pounds. With its integral 200-watt amplifier, this baby plumbs the depths from 18 Hz to 120 Hz +/- 3 dB and feels rock solid. 200 watts in the subwoofer world doesn't sound like enough when you have Bob Carver selling the idea that the “tracking down-converter” amps in his subwoofers can pump out 2,900 watts of power. In the pro world, there is less room for sizzle and numeric gamesmanship than in the audiophile world. Genelec's amps have the right rates and provide lots of real-world power. On the back panel of the sub, you will find an RCA and XLR balanced input, a dip switch for phase, bass roll-off, auto start and remote control switches, an IEC power connector and power switch. Something that is a bit out of the ordinary is a four-position phase adjustment for the HTS3B. This gives the user or installer added flexibility for room response.

Set-Up

I was lucky enough to get the royal treatment when it came to set-up of my Genelec review system from some of the biggest execs from the company in the United States. Bart LoPiccolo, William Eggleston and Greg Jenkins all came to my room to help assemble and tune this system for optimal results. You can expect the same kind of treatment (albeit maybe not with the big brass coming to your house) from your local dealer, as they will also treat you like a king and set up your speakers for you if you are so inclined. If you are a DIY type of guy who is looking for something truly special in a loudspeaker, you can certainly do the imaging and placement yourself. Upstream from the Genelec speakers were an Anthem D2 AV preamp and a Classe' CDP-200 universal disc player.

Will Eggleston suggested that I set all of the speakers to small, with standard 80 Hz crossover and the crossover of the sub to 80 Hz. This way, if I wanted to experiment with the sound, I was only affecting the preamp and not the Genelecs, and it gives me a default to fall back on if things get out of control. If you are not equipped with any kind of gear to properly measure your room response, you will be left guessing how close you are to the original settings.

A mic was placed in my listening position and Eggleston measured the response of each speaker individually, adjusting the dip settings as he went, and positioning the speakers so that the room response was optimized. The dip switch settings give you the ability to affect treble tilt, bass tilt and bass roll off in 2 dB increments. Once the full frequency bursts are analyzed, minute adjustments were made to get the flattest response from each speaker, then each individual response curve was overlaid and further adjustments made to get the system within 2 to 3 dB overall.

One of the biggest advantages is that placement relative to adjacent walls isn't as critical for performance from this type of speaker as it is for passive speakers. The Directivity Control Waveguide eliminates a lot of these sidewall interactions, and you can also change the response of the speaker to work in a more limited placement situation. Whose spouse has not complained about a speaker setting well away from a wall?

Music and Movies

My first impressions of the Genelec HT system were telling and didn't change much over the course of all of my listening sessions. First was how well-balanced the speaker system sounded. My experience with other two-way passive loudspeaker designs was that, although they did well (given that the drivers had to cover a lot of ground), I could always pick out the weak areas where they crossed over to the lower frequencies. The HTS3B blended seamlessly and effortlessly with the HT208s and, try as I might, I was unable to punch any holes in the handoff of lows and highs. The same was true for tonal quality, where the Genelecs did sway ever so slightly towards the brighter side, but portraying higher frequencies with more definition than does my current reference, the far more pricey Revel Studios, which are not any less resolving but perhaps more polite in their high frequencies. For instance, on Mickey Harts Dafos (Ryco disc CD), the hand tapping on the drum on "Dry Sands" through the Genelec system had a bit more palpability and immediacy to the soundstage than I remember through my Revel Studios. This effect added to the spatial cues, which are plentiful on this recording. More three-dimensionality would serve well here, as the reverberation in the large area where Dafos was recorded takes on more life. Dynamics, both micro and macro, were simply stunning in their clarity and definition. This was evident on the opening of "Ice of the North," where notes on the xylophone were presented with visceral impact. The sustained tone and decay were well-defined and natural in their ease. The soundstage was wide and slightly laid-back on this two-channel recording; you could easily pinpoint the instruments within it.

The HTS3B was given the pressure cooker test with "Caves of Kronos" which utilizes the Beam, a custom-made stringed instrument that Mickey used effectively at many Grateful Dead shows and successfully uses here to vibrate the marrow of your soul. This track has brought many subs to their respective knees with the subterranean thunder. The Genelec did quite a respectable job of keeping everything sorted out through most of this track. The opening starts with a group of Aboriginal rain sticks. This is a bright section of the recording, and the Genelec system portrayed this appropriately and with intensity. Transients are ultra-quick, giving this segment much more impact and aural excitement through the Genelec system. Relative to the subwoofer, I have yet to hear one that doesn't beg for mercy at the end of this track. While there were some signs of flinching, I will say that the Genelec was the best of the all the woofers I have subjected to this evil test, specifically not sounding congested or distorted, especially in the deepest registers.

The midrange on the Genelec system was quite enjoyable and would portray warmth and an open-sounding midrange bloom if that was what the recording offered (think of tubes as part of the recording process). For male vocals, I had to break out Shawn Mullins' Soul's Core (Sony Music CD). "Twin Rocks Oregon" has a wonderful tonal quality to it that is captivating and alluring. Mullins' vocals are pinpoint accurate and hung suspended back behind the speakers, with a nice amount of air surrounding both his vocals and the acoustic guitar. You could hear a wonderful resonance from the body of the guitar that added to the soundstage, inviting me to increase the volume at each verse. In case you were worried, the smaller HT206Bs can put out prodigious amounts of sound, despite their size and modest price. My ears ran out of gas before the Genelec HT206Bs did. I could not get them to sound distorted, bloated or congested, even at breathtaking SPLs of around 100 dB throughout my listening sessions. Find me an audiophile speaker that can do that, even if it's dressed up in bird's-eye maple veneer and can live through being shot point blank right in its Kevlar tweeter.

For female vocals, I put in Sheryl Crow's The Globe Sessions (DTS) on DVD-Audio. I love "The Difficult Kind," as it highlights Crow's vocal prowess and extended vibrato shows she is more than a pretty face and has some real chops. The detail of vocal textures and nuance are highlights of this recording, allowing the Genelec system to capture the infinitesimally small attributes of the voice with added definition and clarity. Sometimes sultry and sometimes whispery, Crow's voice through the Genelecs compelled me to listen and, when I lured other non-audiophile-type listeners into my room, the effect was the same. People were dumbfounded that there is better audio than the one-fourth CD resolution crap on their iPods and the Genelec system was the preacher giving the sermon.

Once the guys from Genelec finished setting up the system for me, we watched a segment from War of the Worlds (Paramount Home Entertainment). In Chapter Five, the townsfolk are examining the crater produced by the lightning strikes when subterranean rumbling starts. After the crater lifts, then sinks, the subsonic control of the HTS3B gave the feeling of the ground collapsing around us. When the first articulated leg of the Martian machine extended itself up and out of the pit to come down crushing the car in front of Tom Cruise, the leading edge transients of the glass breaking were eye-blinking in their intensity. The high-pitched squeal of metal cut right through me. I found myself flinch under this sonic assault, which could be as loud as a public theater with easily three times the resolution. The electro-sizzle of the death ray and the poof of vaporized bodies were palpable and tangible through the HT208s. The Genelec system added stellar dynamics to this scene and will play much louder than you would probably want to play them, which I did all too frequently. Let my wife go talk to the divorce lawyer if she must. I was just having some good, clean fun.

Since we are on the subject of giant machines, I got a hell of a kick out of Transformers (Paramount Home Entertainment) on HD DVD. In Chapter Two, a helicopter that has encroached on restricted airspace is instructed to land on the tarmac surrounded by heavy artillery and Special Forces. Much to the dismay of the soldiers, the helicopter starts doing some very un-helicopter-like things. The sound of mechanical whirring and appendages folding and articulating as they took on new shapes were captivating in their clarity. After the enemy Transformer concluded its transformation, it opened fire on the soldiers with an intense staccato gunfire that rattled the windows and gave me goose bumps with how well-defined the sound was at such high volumes. Later, in the desert, when the scorpion machine attacked the Special Forces survivors of the first assault, the weapons it used against the soldiers were tangible and well-defined, underscored by subsonic roar and blasts of the battle and tearing metal that the Genelecs handled with aplomb. The character of the recording was never adulterated or congested.

The Downside

The Genelec system's speakers, performing together or individually, are very neutral in their presentation when set up correctly. They are faithful to the material they are playing, but can be somewhat bright if the material dictates it. I could see a tube preamp and a very resolute CD player as an optimal music playback system for someone who wanted the best of both worlds. Don't misunderstand the reason for me bringing up the sonic flavor of the speakers in the downside, as I am just discussing this aspect of speakers that are used mostly for pro applications. You will hear what is upstream from your Genelec speakers, which is more of a compliment than a knock.

While I wasn't driven to disgust by the finish of the speakers, I will say their sound is 10 times nicer than the available finish. Would these speakers be worth double to consumer clients in a sexy finish? There is no question in my mind. If you are seeking modern sculpture for your living room, look at KEF's Muon speakers (assuming you have \$140,000 to spend on speakers). If you want sound that can compete for \$14,000 for a 5.1 system, look at a Genelec system with my full recommendation.

Conclusion

My "passive" loudspeaker bias has been reset by this impressive loudspeaker system. The dynamics sounded spectacular and I was surprised at the overall volume that such small speakers could produce in my listening room. Detail and imaging were exemplary, and tonal balance and midrange were absolutely enjoyable. The Genelec system remained true to whatever I put through it and added real excitement to movie soundtracks. Music was accurate and engaging on every source, from my iPod to DVD-Audio. Soundstaging and spatial cues were very good, and leading edge transients were a hallmark of quality.



The HTS3B subwoofer is the best sub I have had in my system. Period. Taut, quick and supple, the HTS3B matched stride for stride with the HT208s and HT206s, always blending

perfectly and complimenting every aspect of audio playback. It never sounded boomy or plodding in its presentation, and made it through admirably on my sub torture track.

As far as value is concerned, I don't think that your money could be spent more wisely, considering that you could be free of the huge external amplifier and expensive speaker cables. Creatively, you could even make an argument, in the spirit of the best possible sound for your money, that you could hock your audiophile speaker cables and beefcake power amp to pay the modest asking price for a Genelec system. I can guarantee that you will be getting one hell of a sound system without blowing the budget. Take a listen at a dealer, and I am sure you will agree.

The only thing you have to do is to change your mindset. I know I have. All in all, the experience was rewarding and educational. Highly recommended.

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