

Home Audio Equipment Review

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Esoteric UX-3 Universal Audio/ Video Player

by Jeff Fritz

All of us like to think we get what we pay for. Whether we buy the latest luxury SUV or name-brand macaroni and cheese at the grocery store, more money *should* buy better quality. This is especially expected in high-end audio, where costs can be quite high -- seemingly out of proportion with the vast majority of consumer electronics. If the price tag is steep, our expectations are that the product offers a commensurately higher level of performance than lesser-priced alternatives.

However, most of us learn early on that cost does not guarantee quality -- or satisfaction. There have been occasions where I'll get a product for review and think to myself: *It costs how much?* Simply buying the most expensive components and assembling them haphazardly is a recipe for bad sound. Conversely, there have been many products over the years that are impressive in what they offer despite the fact that they cost a *very* substantial sum of money.

And that brings me to the \$8500 USD Esoteric UX-3 universal audio/video player.

"I can't imagine anyone being disappointed with the UX-3. I can imagine it being the last player you will want to buy for some years to come."



Review Summary

Sound "It's not lush or polite; it offers great clarity and detail retrieval, along with the ability to play both large- and small-scale works equally well." "I heard...a level of detail in vocals that I simply have not heard with lesser players." "An outstanding CD player" that "does SACD justice in every regard."

Features Universal A/V player with two-channel emphasis and "vault-like construction." Uses a "slightly less Herculean [VRDS-NEO transport] than that used in the company's more costly UX-1 and X-01" along with "24-bit PCM1704 Burr-Browns [DACs] in a dual-differential configuration identical to that of the more costly UX-1."

Use "There are *no* analog multichannel outputs on the UX-3." "It will...send a multichannel digital signal, via an iLink connection, to a properly equipped receiver or processor for playback of the two high-resolution music formats (and DVD-Video)."

A lot for your money

Value "You get a generous taste of the best at a price that is below what many consider the entry fee to the state of the art."

The UX-3 is one substantial component relative to just about every other source I've used. Unboxing it, you'll get a feeling of satisfaction; hefting it onto your rack you'll have no question that you bought a *real* component designed to last a lifetime, not a throwaway item that'll need replacing in a few years. The three point-in-cup feet insure perfect leveling as you set the UX-3 down, and they'll provide a degree of isolation from the vibrations inhabiting your listening room. The remote is chunky and full-sized, not a credit-card shaped job that seems to be all the rage. Simply put, the 55-pound, 17 3/8"W x 6"H x 13 7/8"D UX-3 is *gorgeous*. Its gleaming aluminum front panel and super-heavy-gauge steel chassis make for vault-like construction.

Although the UX-3 is quite arresting from an audio-jewelry perspective, the most impressive technology is tucked away. And though the it has functionality far beyond your typical CD player's, the front-panel layout is so clean and uncluttered that you'll wonder just what it is the UX-3 does. Chalk the austere look up to great industrial design. The truth is that the UX-3 is not a simple product, nor is there anything else like it, at least that I'm aware of, in the high-end marketplace.

So what does it do, and why? It plays stereo SACD and stereo DVD-Audio/Video, as well as good old Red Book CD through its RCA and XLR analog outputs. It will also send a multichannel digital signal, via an iLink connection, to a properly equipped receiver or processor for playback of the two high-resolution music formats (and DVD-Video). The UX-3 also outputs progressive-scan video through a bank of outputs: component, composite, S-video, D terminal, and DVI. It uses an Analog Devices ADV7314 216MHz multiformat video encoder with six 14-bit video DACs.

Did you catch what's different? That's right -- there are *no* analog multichannel outputs on the UX-3. This fact alone differentiates it from just about every other universal audio/video player on the market. (There are a few exceptions, such as the Ayre C-5xe. But that player has no video section, which differentiates *it*.)

Although I was at first a bit confused by the UX-3's output configuration, the more I thought about it the more sense it made. Consider this: many (maybe even most) of those interested in the high-resolution music formats have not bothered to set up multichannel systems. For them, stereo playback is the purist endeavor they enjoy, and that is not about to change. For those who *do* have multichannel systems, they're likely interwoven with home theaters. Undoubtedly, they have fancy processors and the like that control those complex systems.

Simply put, the pure analog multichannel preamp never really caught on; therefore, there's simply no need to have six-channel analog outputs when in most cases they won't be used. Esoteric, seemingly, has figured this out. I wonder if we'll begin to see more players configured like the UX-3.

Highlights

The principal highlight of this or any Esoteric source component above the company's DV-50S is the

transport mechanism. The UX-3 houses Esoteric's proprietary, built-in-house VRDS-NEO transport. The version in the UX-3 is slightly less Herculean than that used in the company's more costly UX-1 and X-01, but it is still an incredible work of engineering art. The goal of the VRDS transport is to eliminate any vibration of the disc, as well as to correct small inconsistencies in disc flatness. It accomplishes these tasks by clamping the disc with a circular plate that runs the full diameter of the disc. According to Esoteric, this also serves to reduce read and timing errors. Construction highlights of the UX-3's VRDS-NEO include a duralumin turntable and a bridge made from 10mm SS400 steel. Seeing the VRDS-NEO next to the Pioneer transports that most all of the other players on the market use is eye opening. It's like the difference between an inexpensive sub-compact car and a Lexus flagship -- night and day.

The design details that will affect two-channel audio performance are impressive. Audio DACs are 24-bit PCM1704 Burr-Browns in a dual-differential configuration identical to that of the more costly UX-1. And like the UX-1 (and X-01), the UX-3 converts the DSD data stream to 88.2kHz PCM and then to analog. Esoteric does this for reasons of its own, all of which make for better sonics in the company's opinion.

The chassis is separated into three sections to provide robust shielding between the power supply, the transport, and the output stages. Output jacks are robust, chassis-mounted types. Separate power supplies are employed for the DACs, the digital circuitry, and the analog stages. The video outputs can be turned off when listening to audio-only program material. A removable IEC power-cord socket is supplied so that you can use an after-market cord (in my case, a Shunyata Research Diamondback). Clearly, Esoteric has focused on two-channel sound with the UX-3, and that's how I used it in my system.

Setting up

I connected the Esoteric UX-3 to my Boulder Amplifiers 1010 preamplifier with a set of Shunyata Research Antares balanced interconnects, which then fed, via another set of Shunyata Antares XLRs, the matching Boulder 1060 stereo power amplifier. The speakers were my long-time reference: Wilson Audio Specialties Alexandria X-2s. The majority of my time with the UX-3 was spent in my newest upgrade, the Music Vault listening room, which you can read about on *Ultra Audio* in my "The World's Best Audio System" column. All components were plugged into a Shunyata Hydra Model-8 power conditioner, which was fed by a dedicated 20A line that terminates in one of the company's Venom outlets. Speaker cables were Shunyata Orions.

Spinning discs

The Esoteric UX-3 handled anything and everything I threw at it -- with ease. It's not lush or polite; it offers great clarity and detail retrieval, along with the ability to play both large- and small-scale works equally well. With whatever format I chose to listen, the UX-3 was a sonic delight in every regard. It was also operationally solid, with no glitches to report -- including the large remote. It is a wholly realized machine, inside and out.

I'm a big fan of anything from Chris Cornell. I went through college listening to Soundgarden and have had Audioslave's *Out of Exile* [Interscope 000 460 302] in my to-play pile for months. In between those two gigs, however, Cornell had a short solo career, and one of my favorite tunes, "Sweet Euphoria" from

Euphoria Morning [Interscope 90412], is always one of the first tracks I play when auditioning gear. I know its nuances well. The sound of that track has a slightly ethereal quality in the vocals, though the guitar work is incisive, deliberate and more up front. The UX-3 gave the ax plenty of bite, while the vocals had excellent clarity and spot-on tonality. The somewhat distant acoustic chosen for the song, with that etherealness intact, served as the perfect backdrop for the enigmatic lyrics. The UX-3 was off to a good start having passed the Cornell Test, and I was having fun already.

Sarah McLachlan's *The Freedom Sessions* [Arista 07822-18784] is a raw, bare-bones presentation of some of her better works. In this 1995 release McLachlan's band displays a level of unbridled energy that at times overwhelms her vocals, but it gives the album a more authentic feel that will please the live rocker in you. The last track, although listed simply as "Ol' 55," actually contains the album's second version of "Hold On." It starts at around the 4:40 mark, 35 seconds or so past the end of the previous song. You wouldn't find it unless you just let the CD run.

I've always liked this version of "Hold On" best because it seems the least rehearsed and contains tons of raw acoustic energy. The musicianship is at once laid-back and hard-hitting, which takes a system that can project significant amounts of air into the room while still maintaining the song's nuances. My system, anchored by the UX-3, produced an incredibly satisfying drum kit and incisive drive from the guitar, but it also got the subtle inflections in McLachlan's voice right. This disc player is not at all subdued -- it seems to like to get you involved in the proceedings, not simply have you as an observer. Its frequency extremes are plenty apparent, and its midrange is present and clear. I heard, on *The Freedom Sessions* and many other discs I played, a level of detail in vocals that I simply have not heard with lesser players. No issues with the UX-3's CD playback.

The flute on the enchanting "Simple Gifts" (*A Celtic Spectacular* SACD [Telarc SACD-60571]) is woven in and amongst the soundscape in a way that requires it to be cleanly delineated but at the same time rhythmically connected to the rest of the instruments. It requires a player that can sort out complexity while not spotlighting any particular frequency. The UX-3 proved to be neutral in that regard, while able to keep fine high-frequency details dense and whole. This proved to me that the UX-3 was capable of producing both micro- and macrodynamics with equal acuity. Whether you gravitate to large-scale symphonic works or more intimate jazz recordings, if my experience is any indication, you'll be able to enjoy both equally as played with the UX-3.

The UX-3 does not homogenize detail; it sorts things out to a striking degree. The introduction to Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells 2003* [Warner R9 60204] was cast on a tonally rich soundstage in my room. The music was rendered with satisfying pace and rhythm, with dynamic shading to spare. When the bass line comes in at about a minute into the track, the added energy did not take away from the already-present instrumental forces.

Can the UX-3's performance be bettered? Frankly, I've not heard Ed Meitner's latest EMM Labs combo, but the DAC6e/ Phillips SACD 1000 setup was not equaled by any other player near its price (around \$12,000 when I last heard it) -- perhaps until now. Without a head-to-head confrontation between these two sources, I can't really proclaim a loser, just two winners.

When you are considering a universal player like the UX-3, you also have to consider the future of the SACD and DVD-A formats. Will they be around for much longer? How much new music in those formats will you have to choose from? In my case, because I have a considerable number of high-resolution discs in my collection, I need something good to play them on. Aside from that consideration, however, is that the UX-3 is an outstanding CD player and does video as well. I'm sure I'll take advantage of the home-theater aspect of the UX-3 at some point, but *I know* it'll get daily use in my system as a CD player. You'll have to sort all of these considerable details out for yourself when determining whether the UX-3 fits your ideal. With HD DVD and Blu-ray on the horizon, the picture gets even cloudier.

Comparison

I owned Esoteric's popular DV-50 universal A/V player (\$5500), which is sonically identical to the current DV-50S (\$6000). I enjoyed every moment I used it. The DV-50 adds multichannel analog outputs to the feature set, beneficial if you will use them in your system, and is a wonderful-sounding player in its own right. It is, however, easily trumped in terms of two-channel sound quality by the \$3000-more-expensive UX-3. The UX-3 sounds weightier and more robust in the vocals. It is quicker and punchier in the midbass, and also casts an ever so slightly more accurate soundstage. These improvements were apparent with most every type of music I played. The DV-50 might be termed a bit more *polite*, but in my system the level of dynamic energy and weight that the UX-3 produced was all positive, all the time. The price of a used DV-50 or new DV-50S might make it more attractive to you, and I don't think you'd be disappointed with either anchoring your system, but in absolute terms there is no real comparison in sound quality: the UX-3 wins hands down.

As I've noted, the UX-3 converts DSD to upsampled PCM, whereas the DV-50 and DV-50S do not. Banish your preconceived notions about how the various technologies are implemented. Just listen and you'll hear immediately which is superior. The engineers at Esoteric obviously know what they're doing -- the UX-3 does SACD justice in every regard.

Final assessment

If you are first and foremost a two-channel audiophile, the UX-3 should suit you well. That's its focus, clearly. If you *might* want to enjoy some DVD-V over your stereo, and if that *might* include decoding surround sound at any time in the future, the UX-3 has the facilities to let you do those things with a little more investment in gear. That strikes me as the perfect balance for many users reading this review. You don't have to pay for multichannel analog outputs that you aren't going to use, but you can, with some effort, go the surround-sound route down the road.

You also get an engineering tour de force that will elicit pride of ownership and should last virtually forever. Having lived with Esoteric's insanely priced P-01/D-01 separates as well as the popular DV-50, I can confidently say that the UX-3 is my favorite Esoteric to date. You get a generous taste of the best at a price that is below what many consider the entry fee to the state of the art. I can't imagine anyone being disappointed with the UX-3. I *can* imagine it being the last player you will want to buy for some years to

come.

...Jeff Fritz

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Esoteric UX-3 Universal Audio/Video Player

Price: \$8500 USD.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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