

COMPANY PROFILE: FULL FAT AUDIO



No half measures

As it clocks up festivals and club installations at an astonishing rate, one might wonder how long Full Fat Audio can maintain its small UK manufacturing operation. **Rob Hughes** skims the surface of a very British amp company...

For one BPM counter-busting weekend per year, The Matterley Bowl in Winchester, UK, plays host to Slammin Vinyl's Sanctuary festival – a 10,000-strong gathering of fast-paced dance music fans who come to party amidst a heady mix of drum & bass, hardcore and hard house styles.

This year's event, which took place between August 8th and 9th, was powered almost exclusively by UK pro amplifier manufacturer Full Fat Audio, which provided over a hundred amplifiers for the festival – a testament to the growth of a company which, on its last visit to the venue in 2003, took along just four beta units in the back of a small van. This year, FFA also managed the Bionic stage, which, alongside Production Hire, it used to beta test its new model, the FFA 10000 – a two-channel 12 kg unit, which puts out a counterfeit Speakon-melting 5,000 Watts per channel at two Ohms.

Sanctuary marks the latest in a string of successful dates in Full Fat's hectic 2008 festival calendar. With Creamfields and Bestival still to come (at the time of going to press) in the final furlong of the season, the company already has Jersey and Guernsey Live, Rockness, Glastonbury 2008, Glade (where the company ran the entire Sancho Panza stage with a hefty Funktion One system), Workhouse and Tiesto at Ballinlough Castle under its belt.

Now into its fifth year, Full Fat Audio was founded in 2003 when managing director Dave Millard, a major proponent of Funktion One speakers, began designing amplifiers after joining forces with some friends met through his work with sound systems. Having cut his teeth during the early nineties dance scene in Cambridge, Millard relocated

to London with his family, where he acquired a shop floor job with BSS Audio. After being sent to college by the company, he eventually worked his way up through the ranks, ultimately landing a role in R&D and as a support engineer.

"When we started out we built ten amplifiers," recalls Millard. "We gave them to Production Hire, which roadtested them, and eventually called at one o'clock in the morning to say that the amps had blown up and to ask me to come and collect them and modify them. They stuck at this for about a year and a half while we corrected the problems and eventually the amps became stable. We started manufacturing more batches for people that we trusted until we'd ironed out all the issues. I was very aware about mass releasing a product that wasn't stable and because of this we now have a reliable product and a good reputation, especially for bass; people love our amps on bass systems."

The company's reputation for bass could be the reason why it is currently making a fair amount of noise in high-end nightclubs in the UK and across Europe alongside its presence in the touring and festival scene, which it has had for the last three years. It is no coincidence that many of these clubs run Funktion One systems, as Millard explains: "I was one of the first guys to buy Funktion One and now, eight or nine years on, there are quite a few London clubs that I either have an interest in or have sold Funktion One systems to, along with my amplifiers. They just go hand-in-hand, I have sold some Martin stuff as well but Funktion One is something I use as a reference. I love doing sound systems – that's how I started, and

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Full Fat Audio's amplifiers are increasingly in demand and still made in the UK

making amps now is just the whole picture."

With the support of companies like Funktion One and Noise Control Audio – for which it manufactures the OEM amps that NCA supplies with many of its systems – Full Fat Audio has grown to a level where it is now branching out into Europe. However, the company continues to manufacture its amplifiers entirely in the UK.

Most of the components and metal work are sourced in the UK and the company insists that it is more than happy with the quality still available from British manufacturing even though it imparts a slight price premium. As Millard explains: "I've got no plans to make them anywhere else but the UK. We've got staff working full time building them, we've got a good team and I think the quality is there. They are a bit more expensive, but people seem to like dealing direct with us. We're approachable, people can talk to us, the amps are built to last and they're not mass produced items. We could make more money on them if we made them easier to manufacture, but sometimes quality suffers with that. We have spent a lot of money on the box; it's very road worthy and rugged. We used 2mm aluminium instead of 1mm or steel.



Dave Millard knows his amps without looking

"We try to keep it light but very tough."

A peek underneath the cover of an FFA amp will quickly reveal that the box is not the only component that the company has worked hard on. The units only utilise Class D technology, developed in-house, along with switchmode power supplies. This has allowed FFA to achieve the high power levels that its amps produce, while at the same time making them particularly efficient – something it holds in high regard.

"I think for professional audio applications, efficiency is very important, as is cool operation. From my experience working with sound systems, I used to use big old linear amps, which got very hot and thermal and they are hard to move around. These days with the credit crunch, efficiency has a knock on effect in conserving fuel and electricity coming out of the wall. It all helps."

FFA has seen considerable growth this year with the electronics contractor that builds its amplifiers having recently moved premises and incorporated dedicated production for the units. The small family-run business based at Leighton Buzzard is also responsible for manufacturing a number of parts for Cadac mixing consoles, something that FFA has seen the benefits of. "Having worked with Cadac who are at the very top end of audio, they understand our needs. We don't see ourselves quite there yet but its something to aspire to certainly."

New research and development to expand the FFA range to incorporate high power four channel amplifiers and more cost effective installation products is nearing completion and the company is now setting its sights on other sectors of the industry: "We haven't got into the proper touring sound system market – some of the bigger PA companies are something I'm planning to target next. We've also spoken to some British manufacturers of loudspeakers for theatre and its something we're keen to support with our products. It does seem that people like L-Acoustics and Camco are very well known together now and I'd like the same association with a good British loudspeaker manufacturer. Recently we've started doing business with Shermann Audio. That's another British market that we seem to have got into because we are a very British company."