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Gear Up SCOTT STEINBERG

House Jacks Pair with Sony for New Soundtrack

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Bill Ford, executive chairman of Ford Motor Co., speaks during the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.
 Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Starting today, Sony is kicking off the 2012 Detroit Auto Show on an unexpected note, courtesy of a cutting-edge audio system. Rather than using pounding bass lines or sinuous grooves to illustrate the 12-speaker, digitally-amplified Dolby Pro Logic II surround sound system that adorns the Ford Flex crossover, they are instead highlighting the human voice's power to mimic high-end instruments.

"You hear so many demos that default to drum loops, horns and *Seinfeld*-style ditties as a listener showpiece," explains Austin Willacy, singer/songwriter for the a cappella rock band the House Jacks, which provided supporting vocals for this project. "What people are unused to hearing is how the fidelity of today's sound systems can capture the harmony and intricacy of the human voice, especially when multiple singers apply their talents together. It's a singularly fresh approach."

Rather than compose a stiff-sounding technical demo, the Bay Area group — whom fans of *The Sing Off* and *Monday Night Football* may recognize — instead created a more relaxed two-and-a-half minute teaser illustrating the system's capabilities. Using their elastic esophagi to replicate the sound of guitars, swelling melodies and toe-tapping percussions, Willacy says the group has assembled a funky-out, soul-tinged showpiece that pans around drivers' heads in surround stereo. Comparing its recording process to classic funk and pop albums ("like mixing a Sly and the Family Stone record"), he claims the work more elegantly underscores the innocuously-titled Audio System from Sony's reach than any computer-generated sampler.

"Ford has been offering premium sound systems by Sony for years... We thought it'd be a great idea to create a demo track to highlight [this]," explains Ian Hubbard, director of Sony Automotive Entertainment Solutions America. "Our original thoughts were to use natural instruments and vocals vs. anything synthetically created. But at the same time we wanted something unique and exciting. Vocals are ideal in highlighting natural frequency response."

Packing touch controls and 390 watts of power, he insists that the performance-minded system should please wheelmen who spend more time listening to music in their vehicle than at home or in the office. But Willacy claims that it may resonate equally with casual car enthusiasts. Asserting that the output accounts for ambient noises like engine sounds or outside air rushing by, he says that built-in equipment optimizes audio for the performance venue, like any good sound engineering system. But in this case, the concert hall just happens to be a freewheeling, four-door ride.

Hype aside, it's too early to judge whether the hardware, or singing demo itself, will have the intended effect on showgoers, let alone everyday consumers. But Hubbard argues that using real musicians provides an interesting and attention-grabbing way to highlight the company's creations. Listeners may also benefit from such corporate-sponsored crossovers, he suggests, should they become more commonplace going forward. They could offer a more organic-sounding antidote to today's overproduced demos in age where artificial technology permeates nearly everything.

Still, prospective automotive shoppers aren't the only ones who systems could use an upgrade, says Willacy. "I drive a 1996 Acura Integra that's got about 208,000 miles on it with a sound system that was installed over 15 years back," he laughs. "But in our business, that's a good thing. If you can hear every last intricacy of a song on crappy speakers, you can imagine how amazing it'll sound on higher-end models."

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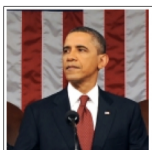
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