

'Dummy's' guide to AV

Interested in the world of multi-channel and home cinema but don't know where to start? **Ken Kessler** has the answer, in the form of a simple yet savvy book that omits nothing



[Ken Kessler]
Senior Contributing Editor Ken Kessler writes exclusively for *HFN*. He loves Italian hi-fi, hates cables and is known for his strong views on virtually everything

Survival Guide (US \$19.95, ISBN 0-9764894-0-6) should have been snapped up by the publisher of those yellow-cover Dummy Guides: it's perfect for the series. That they didn't speaks volumes for the problem that hi-fi (and home theatre) faces. If Dummy Guides couldn't be bothered to deliver a book covering the entire sweep of the multi-billion-dollar industry called 'consumer electronics', yet they'll publish stuff like Jane Austen for Dummies, what hope is there for anything beyond Tivoli radios and iPods?

WRITTEN BY A WOMAN

What also speaks volumes is that *The Home Electronics Survival Guide* has been written by a woman; one who categorically has no time for the male chauvinistic dominance of the hobby. Her CV is interesting because she both worked in the real film industry and had a spell in retail. It was the latter field that alerted her to the need to educate millions of consumers who are given short shrift by that verminous creature known as the 'hi-fi retailer.'

(Note: If you feel I'm too hard on retailers, note that the majority of the Q&A letters to this and other magazines usually contain some reference to the writer's inability to find a ☹

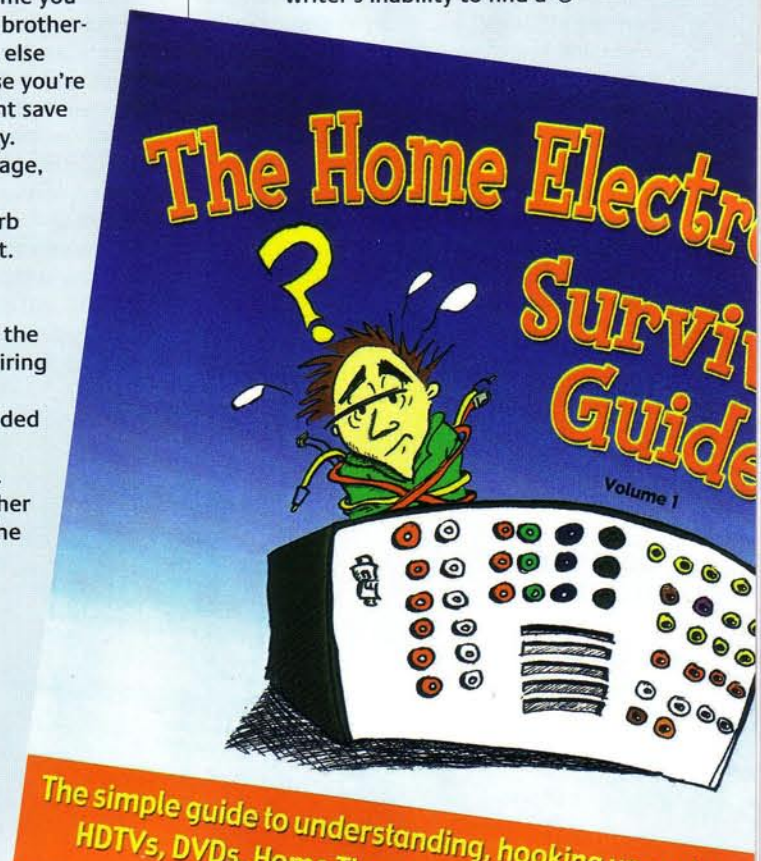
While 2005–2006 further proved that two-channel is here to stay, enough happened in the world of multi-channel and AV to pique the interest of even the most hardened audiophile. Blu-ray reared its head, flatscreen prices plummeted, HDTV arrived even in the UK. And if you want to access the coolest guide ever to turntable set-up, Mikey Fremer's *21st Century Vinyl*, well, you'll need a DVD player (deliciously, one wag said that MF's next release would be an LP about home theatre set-up).

With convergence inevitable, despite our staunch pockets of resistance, there's a learning curve ahead for many of us. And even those of us who are totally au fait with everything from HDMI to colour temperatures know people who aren't. What's been missing is a straightforward volume you can simply hand to your brother-in-law or boss or anyone else who turns to you because you're an 'enthusiast' who might save them time and/or money.

You know that old adage, 'If you want something done, do it yourself?' Barb Gonzalez took it to heart. Instead of relying on a videophile to guide her through what should be the pleasurable task of acquiring and setting up a home theatre system, she decided to learn everything she could about the subject. And then she produced her own book about it, for the non-technophile, would-be owner.

Her self-published *The Home Electronics Survival Guide*

RIGHT: The Ken Kessler recommended survival guide by Barb Gonzalez



'Sony is saying that it's not possible to make a universal player'

film *The Fifth Element* looks dreadful on Blu-ray, as do most other releases. *Basic Instinct 2* looks somewhat better, but it's not as good as most HD-DVDs I have seen. Nevertheless, it's only when the likes of Warners releases its titles on both formats that we'll be able to make a realistic judgement.

Sony is saying that it's not possible to make a universal player even though Ricoh has announced a universal drive solution that can read both formats. We hear rumours Denon may be first in line with a universal HD-DVD/Blu-ray player, which is one sure way of not getting caught in a VHS v Betamax dilemma.

In the commercial domain, Digital Cinema took a step back in the UK with the release of the Disney film *Cars*, a digital animation that looks stunning but lacks a compelling storyline.

Furthermore, the digital cinema versions would not play properly, with the audio only re-starting about four minutes into the film. Cinemas had to use 35mm film prints until it was fixed. So, just who was responsible for this release in a digital form? Well, none other than Dolby's new digital cinema mastering division. Has no-one heard of QClng? 'Fries with that anyone?' ☹

BELOW: Samsung's BD-P1000 is the first Blue-ray player into the shops, but discs encoded in MPEG2 let it down



Bad DAB

Andrew Harrison examines the problems with maintaining DAB broadcast sound quality and reveals an explanation for the rumours that Apple is preparing to offer lossless downloads



[Andrew Harrison]
Andrew Harrison or 'Harry', as he's known, joined *HFN* in 1998. Now Deputy Editor, he loves all audio from iPods to classic vinyl

decent retailer with the initiative to make the sale by providing even minimal service. Nearly every problem with the state of hi-fi can be laid at the doorstep of hi-fi stores.)

Ms. Gonzalez authored and illustrated a 232-page volume that leaves out nothing, that deals with the most abstract and off-putting (for newcomers) arcana such as cables, and, as far as I can tell, makes no gross errors nor oversimplifies to the point of insulting one's intelligence. Above all, it is precisely what it says on the cover: 'The simple guide to understanding, hooking up and buying TVs, HDTVs, DVDs, Home Theater, Remote Controls and more!'

MAKING IT FUN

Her format is fun. Handholding extends to a list of words one needs to know for each chapter, there's a clear glossary, 'work sheet' pages to fill in, and slightly cutesy cartoons to illustrate procedures. But it isn't dumbed down – she includes a timeline from the first broadcasts through to HDTV, clear definitions of broadcast formats, cable connector types, etc. If anything *Hi-Fi News* readers might object to is its origins. There are segments of zero relevance outside the USA, such as their concerns for satellite radio, and some of you get riled with American usage. Get past that, and you'll probably find this will be one of the most-thumbed books in your arsenal. Of course, you'll have to hide it when your buddies come 'round.

For more, visit www.home-electronics-survival.com ☹

Maintaining good sound quality' was an ironic line in the BBC's response to complaints after it slashed the quality in July of its only remaining nearly-hi-fi DAB broadcasts. When the BBC spearheaded DAB in the late '90s, its digital radio transmissions were at 192kb/s – a quality level that, when using the MPEG2 codec, is close to 'high-fidelity'. But things went downhill as more stations were added, with all bar Radio 3 settling on a low-bitrate quality level that could euphemistically be described as 'annoying'. But Radio 3 remained the one small beacon of hope quality-wise.

BIT BUDGET

Whether the influx of listener complaints after Radio 3's quality drop will make whoever is responsible for broadcast quality take note is a moot point. The fact is that without extra airwave capacity in the shape of another multiplex, the bit budget for the BBC's radio services – and indeed that of the commercial stations – will remain stretched, leaving the same coarse, spitty, ear-bending noise that is so far from the initially-promised 'CD-quality' that it's not even funny anymore. Careful readings of the BBC and commercial stations' marketing now only declares the service to be hiss- and interference-free, to avoid a slew of complaints about

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