



# Life begins at forty...

**Nick Tate** busts out the champers as he listens to Acoustic Energy's 'reimagined' version of its classic mini-monitor

**F**ounded by bass guitar-mad musician Phil Jones back in 1985, Acoustic Energy's first product was the AE1. Launched in 1987, it followed the trend for increasingly small, minimalist two-way bookshelf designs, epitomised by the hugely popular Wharfedale Diamond. Unlike the latter, the AE1 was mid-priced and conceived at least in part for near-field monitoring in studios.

Now the AE1 is back. This time in 40th Anniversary Edition guise. Designer Mat Spandl says: "we had to examine where we could improve upon the original while retaining the character which made it such a hit". It's been painstakingly voiced to sound like the first-gen AE1, although he added that he aimed the voicing

more closely at the Mk2 version, which he believes was superior.

The new design sports an aluminium dome tweeter with a larger 29mm voice coil (up from 25mm) with a larger rear chamber to absorb rearward energy and lower resonance. The bass unit is slightly larger than the original at 125mm, with a spun and hard anodised aluminium cone and twin magnets.

The cabinet is the same size and topology as the original, but the new internal treatment frees up 500ML of internal volume. It's made of high-density fibreboard with Acoustic Energy's RSC anti-resonance compound. It then gets a choice of Walnut veneer or Piano Black finishes (the latter with 10 layers of paint). The finish of my review sample is

superb, better than how I remember the original being. At the back is a simple pair of decent-quality speaker binding posts.

The new crossover uses low-order filters and high-quality components to achieve a natural 'live' dynamic sound, according to the company. Mat says it's been voiced more with domestic use in mind, rather than studio work. The result is a claimed frequency response of 50Hz-45kHz (+/-6dB), a 87dB/1m/1W sensitivity (2dB up from the original) and a nominal impedance of 6ohm. This means this new AE1 40 should be a tad easier to drive than the original, but you'll still need a gutsy solid-state amp for best results. In my listening room it works best up close to a rear wall on tall, stable stands.

## Sound quality

This is a fascinating combination of forensic detail and fun, but isn't the most even-sounding mini-monitor around, having a slightly rich upper bass that transitions up to a well-lit midband. Then there's its crisp, sparkling treble that illuminates the recording well and helps with its excellent 'out of the box' imaging. Factor in its expansive soundstage, and you have a small speaker with a large personality.

In this respect it retains the original AE1's distinctive character – although it's a bit more refined. The original's rough edges are subtly curtailed, yet there is still vigour and vim aplenty. Indeed the 40th Anniversary edition feels like it was made for fast, punchy pop, rock and techno music. Play Manix's *Join The Future*, and you'd think that a small speaker with limited low-end grunt wouldn't really do justice to this classic slice of drum and bass. Yet oddly the AE1 40 does, and with relish. This isn't a great hi-fi recording, but the diminutive Acoustic Energy doesn't care – indeed, the bassline sounds pluckier and more bouncy than almost any small speaker I've heard. The upper bass is a little bit 'plump', with a teensy bit of extra padding, yet this speaker never booms. You can feel the bass synth modulating up and down with great speed and grip, falling away gracefully as the AE1 is asked to reproduce the very low notes that its limited cabinet capacity prohibits.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Acoustic Energy AE1  
40th Anniversary

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
7.2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
295 x 180 x 240mm

**FEATURES**  
● 29mm aluminium  
dome tweeter  
● 125mm aluminium  
coned mid/bass  
driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
87dB/1m/1W (6ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Acoustic Energy

**WEBSITE**  
acoustic-energy.  
co.uk



Further up in the mix, there's lots of detail, aided by both the good-quality drive units and low colouration cabinet. There's almost nothing in the way of slurring or blurring coming from the AE1 40's compact enclosure. This in turn lets you hear right into the mix and enjoy the subtle filigree detail of acoustic instruments, such as the great guitar work on The Jam's live version of *That's Entertainment*. There's nothing in the way of embellishment here, either to the guitar or Paul Weller's plaintive vocals. The recording sounds cold and edgy, yet the emotion shines through

### The bassline sounds more bouncy than almost any small speaker I've heard

thanks to the intricate way this speaker communicates his phrasing.

Fire up a better quality pop recording like *Head Over Heels* by Tears For Fears, and the AE1 40 gets into its stride. Now we're hearing Roland Orzabal's impassioned vocals at full tilt with a morass of synth power chords crashing away in the background, set beside a big, close-mic-ed Eighties drum sound. Given the track was mastered for FM radio play, it's a bit compressed – yet this speaker ekes out loads of detail in a forensic way, as if it's shining a searchlight on the recording. The new AE1 40's skill is that it brings all this together in a highly satisfying way; its

#### HOW IT COMPARES

**Bowers & Wilkins 707 S3 (HFC 513, £1,400) is just the sort of bookshelf speaker that the AE1 40 finds itself up against pricewise. It's a class act, so the Acoustic Energy has its work cut out. The B&W gives a super-clean sound that's highly precise and detailed, with surprising bass power and depth. The AE1 40 has less bottom end extension, a slight upper bass bump and little bit of brightness up top. Yet it's far more dynamic and engaging and has a wonderful 'out of the box' feel. In other words, it's more flawed but so much more fun.**

innate speed, accuracy and lack of overhang makes this infectiously catchy.

On direct modern recordings, with amplification that doesn't flatter to deceive, this speaker can sound quite in your face – it's direct and focused, and doesn't hide the music behind cotton wool. That makes recordings like Deadmau5 & Kaskadee's *I Remember* real edge-of-the-seat stuff. The AE1 40's tweeter is unmistakably a metal dome, for better and for worse. Transients are super fast and explicit, so you can really enjoy the bite of hi-hat cymbals. However, this standmount will remind you of its presence. It's still a lovely sound though; sinewy, immersive, immediate and atmospheric.

Has the great stereo imaging that the original AE1 was famous for been retained? Yes, and it's possibly even better. The tiny cabinet and close-knit drivers make for a near point-source sound, which helps this new Anniversary edition perform a disappearing act with any decent recording. The beautiful Byrds-inspired country rock of The Long Ryders' *Too Close To The Light* pushes out hard into my listening room, growing ever more engrossing as the volume is ramped up. Inside the panoramic recorded acoustic, this speaker serves up an extremely well-structured sound. Each element of the mix is clear to hear and perfectly positioned.

Such excellent spatiality, plus the sheer speed and grip, makes this track a thrill ride. This character is of course what endeared the original

to its fans, nearly 40 years ago, and it's grin-inducing today. Whatever type of music you play – from the elegant psychedelic rock of Buffalo Springfield's Sixties epic *Expecting To Fly*, to baroque classical in the form of Bach's *5th Brandenburg Concerto* – this little loudspeaker just wants to make music magic.

### Conclusion

An excellent reboot of Acoustic Energy's first ever loudspeaker, the new AE1 40th Anniversary edition doesn't sound identical, but is close. Indeed, it captures the charm of the original while shaving off a few rough edges. Delightfully – unlike many 'retro modern' designs – it isn't insanely expensive, either. So, whether you view it as the recreation of an audio icon or simply just as an affordable yet capable standmount, it's still great value for money. The legend lives on ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Lots of fun; loads of detail; size
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Lacks bass extension compared with rivals
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Great remake of this iconic mini-monitor
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	

#### OVERALL

