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## BLUE SKY EXO 2.1

Oct 1, 2007 12:00 PM, BY MARKKUS ROVITO

In its never-ending quest to convince producers to mix and monitor with subwoofers, Blue Sky breaks the price barrier with EXO 2.1. The 160W system (35W per satellite speaker, 90W subwoofer) delivers beautiful, accurate, balanced Blue Sky sound at an attractive price.

The box includes a subwoofer with four screw-in pointed feet for keeping the base off the floor, two satellites with speaker wire, printed documentation, stereo minijack-to-minijack cable and a wired remote control box. Should you need it, the manual includes setup guides for speaker and subwoofer placement, as well as instructions for electroacoustic calibration of the system using audio files from Blue Sky's Website. Setting up the speakers posed no problems; the sub just has to be turned off before plugging in the remote box, and then it's time to start boom'n'.

The remote box — with Gain and Sub level knobs — represents a nice perk over other systems. Its ample wire lets you place it wherever it's handy to adjust the levels or swap out cables. The box accepts three input sources — stereo XLR/¼-inch TRS, stereo RCA and stereo minijack for an iPod, laptop, etc. — which all pass through simultaneously, so you could have three sound sources going at once. A nice added feature would be a switch that chooses the active input or an "all-on" position. The remote's minijack headphone output mutes the speakers and inactivates the Sub knob when used. Its output was a little low; I usually had to increase the Gain knob when using headphones for an equivalent-sounding volume.

While many other monitor systems have more than one input, most don't have a remote box like this one. It's a treat to be able to plug a computer's output into the RCA jacks for those things that often use a computer's standard soundcard, such as iTunes or other media-playing software, and then use the XLR inputs for connecting to a higher-end audio interface that's used for music production. The remote concept is not new, but it's unusual for music production-oriented monitors. Blue Sky borrowed the idea from mainstream computer speakers that have had them for years. But don't worry; Blue Sky didn't borrow its sound quality from such speakers.

Blue Sky is positioning the EXO 2.1 as a low-cost option for music production and, perhaps to a lesser degree, as a high-quality upgrade from consumer systems for people to listen to music and watch movies. So I listened to the EXO against two other 2.1 subwoofer systems — a fairly standard JBL consumer set and Blue Sky's step-up MediaDesk 2.1 (\$699) system — and a mid-range priced pair of bi-amped Event 20/20 monitors. My first impression was that the EXO sounds thinner than the MediaDesk, with less perceived space between frequencies possibly due to the smaller satellite speakers. However, simply jacking up the volume banished some of my misgivings, and I quickly became very fond of the EXO sound when listening to some of my most familiar and favorite tracks. While pumping a group of bass-heavy Lil Jon, E40, Mike Jones and other tracks, it seemed that the budget EXO system sacrifices not sound quality, but power for the price. While the MediaDesk bass felt a touch warmer and rounder than the EXO, the smaller system held its own and can reproduce that booty-rumbling bass you want, although I often had to crank the Sub knob all the way for the most satisfying sound.

For critical comparison, I turned to The Orb's electro-dub masterpiece *Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld*. That album's stark contrast between bass-absent and bass-heavy material helped me appreciate what the EXO sub brought to the table. When the dub grooves kicked in, it could pump out neighbor-irritating low end, but even the more ambient spaces demonstrated how the sub clearly bolsters mid-range sources, such as synth patches, filtered beats, vocals and acoustic guitar. This task of frequency "outsourcing" is one reason Blue Sky evangelizes subwoofer systems; you dedicate a frequency range to the speaker that can best reproduce it, rather than trying to squeeze the full range from one monitor.

That separation may even help to keep cost under control. While it may be unfair to compare the EXO with the much more expensive Event monitors (the Events are more powerful, capable of rich bass and have the edge in pure sound articulation), I would still feel comfortable mixing with the EXO system, at least as a secondary system that comes closer to more common real-world listening experiences. For a low price, the EXO handles the low, mid and high ranges with aplomb, giving you clearly defined spaces that let you know when you're doing the job of instrument separation while mixing. Consumer systems like the JBL I tested tend toward muddiness that leads to ear fatigue and can't hold a candle to the EXO.

By all rights, the EXO 2.1 should be a big hit. Its low cost will allow newer or more casual music producers to enter the realm of subwoofer systems, as well as present an attractive secondary or even tertiary monitoring option for established producers. For pure practicality, its remote box and natural handling of both standard computer audio and DAW audio interface monitoring address the reality of many computer-based musicians working in dorms, apartments or cramped bedrooms. I prefer to monitor at comfortable, ear-sparing levels of 85 dB or so, which the EXO can easily go above and beyond, so its lack of thunderous power was apparent, but not bothersome. Having the Sub knob at full gain was frequently my sweet spot, so you're not going to approximate club environments. But from any perspective, the EXO 2.1 is one kick-ass little system.

### BLUE SKY

#### EXO 2.1 > \$399

**Pros:** Trademark Blue Sky sound. Quality frequency separation and sound articulation for the price. Handy breakout box with gain control and flexible I/O. Dandy looks. Inexpensive.

**Cons:** No individual input switching. No 5.1 configuration option (yet).

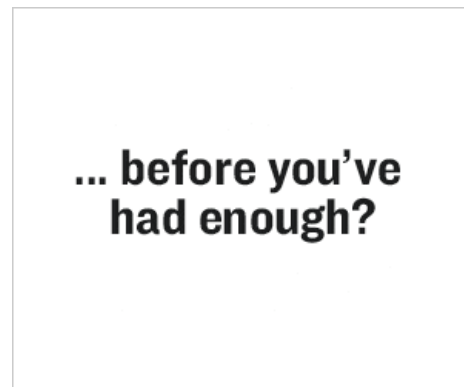
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