

# Can It Really Be This Good?

## Rotel RCD 930AX CD Player

BY TOM MILLER

**R**otel Hi-Fi is on one hell of a roll. Dating back to their early CD players, Rotel's budget offerings have been price-performance winners. In the last year, the company carried its legacy into the realm of integrated amplifiers with the stunning RA 970BX. What then should we expect of the new Rotel entry level CD player, the \$299 RCD 930AX?

Whatever you expected — it wasn't enough!

We high end audiophiles often think a \$299 CD player is for the audio illiterate who wanders into Circuit City on a Saturday afternoon. Not for studly sophisticates like us, right? Well, we would certainly be missing the bit stream this time, for the RCD 930AX is as much a delight as the 970 integrated. Do we have some divine intervention going on here?

Before waxing rhapsodic over the Rotel's sound, let's pause to consider its humble profile. It uses a one-bit digital to analog converter with "a Second Order Delta Sigma noise shaping filter." Sounds good to me (and it does). The digital filter that follows the DAC is equivalent to an eight times oversampling filter. The RCD 930AX is remote controlled, of course, and features the good-looking slim profile of all Rotel's latest budget gear. And, just like the Model T, it comes in any color you want as long as it's black.

Now, the sound.

Drop this sweetheart into a high ticket audio system and I dare you to guess its price tag. It is far from perfect, but it is even further from unacceptable. What a delightful device! I used the Wilson WITT loudspeakers, driven by



BEL 1001 MkII and Conrad-Johnson Premier Eleven power amplifiers (reference cables by MIT and Transparent, depending on the amplifier). Preamplification duties were handled by the steadfast c-j Premier Ten, which now reaches the end of an illustrious run, soon to be replaced by the Premier Fourteen. Farewell, friend.

It is remarkable that CD sound at its most affordable has now achieved a purity and level of resolution that just a few short years ago were beyond products costing thousands of dollars. The Rotel offers a grain free window into the performance, from the heart of the midrange into the lower treble. The voices of The Real Group (*Unreal!* Passport/Town Crier TCD 519, see sidebar) are reproduced with a natural warmth. Further, the Rotel keeps the voices separate from one another spatially and timbrally. A little dryness creeps in at the top of the female range, but this flaw is minor. The RCD 930AX also handles the resolving duties deftly, capturing the precision singing of The Real Group without blending them into a mass. Oh sure, it doesn't separate and flesh out the voices as well as a Theta Pro Gen VA — what does? — but it neatly sidesteps digital crunching artifacts. There is a natural smoothness and continuity in vocals that belies the Rotel's price.

Advancing into the upper octaves, the sound loses some of its purity and resolution. The cymbals on "Ol' 55" and the "Hold On" reprise off Sarah McLachlan's *The Freedom Sessions* (Arista 07822-18784-2) get a little wispy sounding because of the dry lower tre-

ble. The cymbals don't have enough of the metal body sound, although the transients of the sticks striking the cymbals are reproduced cleanly. To the Rotel's credit, the cymbals don't get gritty or harsh.

On each recording, depth was reduced somewhat. Yet within the foreshortened field, it was still possible to perceive different layers of depth in the sound. Side to side image focus is excellent, with width that extends well beyond the outside of the speakers. I suspect that the loss of depth is related to a lack of power in the bottom octaves. The bottom two octaves definitely sound rolled off. The way deep rumble on "This Land" from *The Lion King* soundtrack (Disney 60858-7) is too light. There is, however, a side benefit from the bass character; the "action" of instruments such as bass guitars and kickdrums is made more apparent. You can hear the detail within these instruments as easily as you would with state of the art gear (if not more so). The two instruments do not blend together. Further, this level of resolution is maintained — honestly — in the midrange.

The only other nit I have to pick with the RCD 930AX is a slightly excessive lower midrange and upper bass. Male voices get a tad heavy and when the music gets busy, this region becomes too prominent, blurring some important musical information. For instance, the subtle interplay of timbre between the drums on Janis Ian's "Tattoo" (*Breaking Silence*, Morgan Creek 2959-20023-2) is partially lost. Likewise, there is a subtle disruption of the music's "swing."

The Rotel RCD 930AX far exceeds the limitations described above. The colorations described have remarkably little effect upon its ability to convey the essence of the musical performance. Yes, we lose a little ambiance, a little focus (not much) and a little bass. But the purity, resolution and overall timing that the RCD 930AX seems to effortlessly recreate more than make up for the flaws.

The success of this \$299 CD player leaves us with only one conclusion. The promise of CD is finally coming true. ■

## ROTEL RCD 930AX CD PLAYER

<b>TONALITY</b>	<b>71</b>	Weak bass, dry lower treble and overly rich lower mids are mild nuisances, not fatal flaws.
<b>DYNAMICS</b>	<b>69</b>	Excellent resolution of dynamic nuance, but peaks are softened.
<b>RESOLUTION</b>	<b>75</b>	Beautiful midrange nuance, some losses in the lower mids.
<b>IMAGING</b>	<b>73</b>	Lateral focus and location excellent, loss of depth and instrumental body.
<b>TIMING</b>	<b>70</b>	Well coordinated but for looseness in lower mids under stress.
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>70</b>	You can be guru of the neighborhood with this recommendation. Rotel does it again.

