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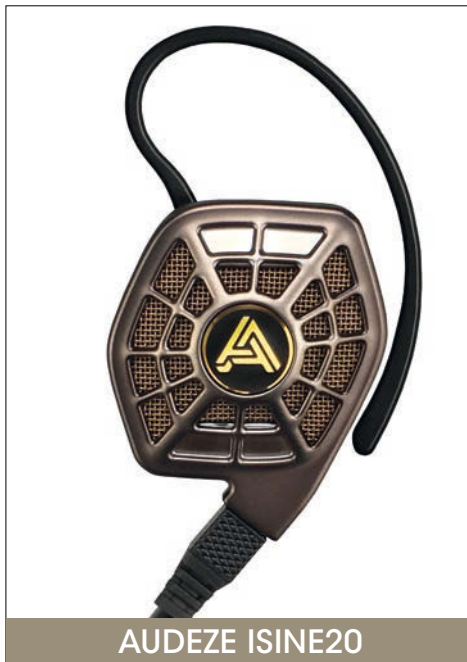


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JBL 4312SE loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

JBL might now be part of the Harman Group, which is itself now part of Samsung, but the heritage behind that name has not been lost. The company, founded in Northridge, California back in 1946 by James Bullogh Lansing, put its initials to many classic designs, one of which was the 4310. The 4312SE is the re-embodiment of that late 1960s, early-1970s classic, announced last year to mark JBL's 70th anniversary.

However, JBL's 4310 was distinctly studio-orientated design. In fact, that's industrial grade understatement: the 4310 practically invented the near-field monitor (prior to the 4310, studio monitoring were all 'soffit' or 'in-wall' designs, and even if the BBC can also lay claim to producing free-standing near-field monitoring options, their loudspeakers were hard to find outside of a BBC studio for years), and its next-generation design – the 4311 – was so popular in the studio, it begat one of JBL's most successful domestic models of the era, the L100 series.

The list of recordings that were fed through 4310 and 4311 loudspeakers is considerable: think everything recorded on the West Coast from *Surrealistic Pillow* to *Tusk* (and beyond), plus virtually every studio starting up or undergoing a refit from about 1974 onwards. The ubiquity of the 4310/4311 lasted until the end of the decade, when the more 'lo-fi' aesthetic of Punk and New Wave saw engineers mastering on tiny Auratone 5C Sound Cubes and then in the 1980s studios almost universally adopted the Yamaha NS-10 as their desktop near-field monitor of choice. In no small respect, the performance and character of those near-field monitors helped shape the sound of recordings made at that time. Perhaps it's no coincidence that many recordings universally praised for their sound quality came out of California in the 1970s and 'almost' all of them were mixed and mastered using a pair of 4310s or 4311s. Just sayin'.

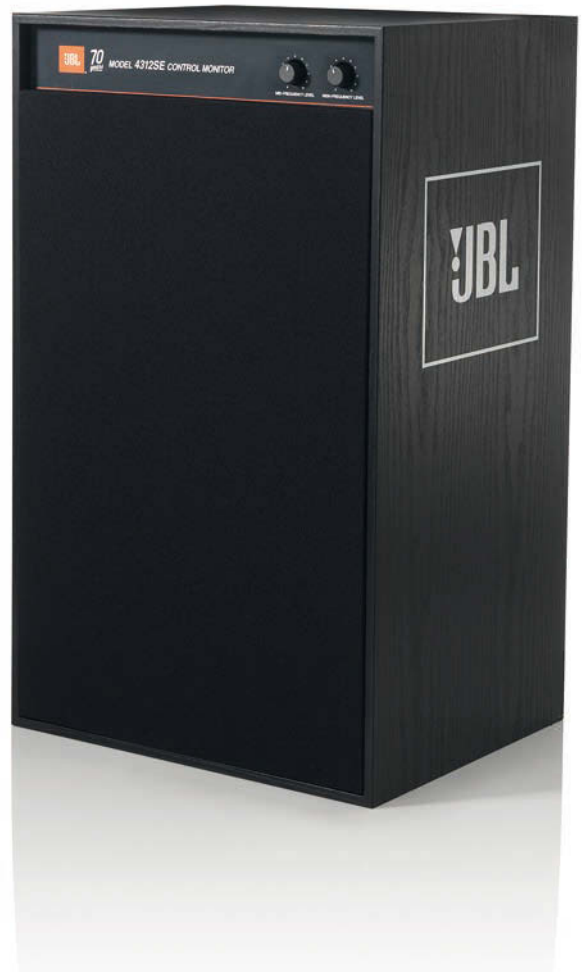
Looking at the JBL 4312SE with 21st Century eyes, it's hard to think of them as near-field monitors, because we have become so used to that term being applied to far smaller designs than this. A front-ported three-way cabinet wide enough to accommodate a 12" (300mm) bass unit is – by today's Sonos-driven standards, at least – a large standmount, which usually implies a long(ish) throw across a good sized room, but it's also worth trying the design in its

near-field placement; possibly wider than usual, and with the listening position less than 1.5m from the front baffles.

The loudspeaker itself is a three-way bass-reflex design, with a 25mm magnesium/aluminium alloy dome tweeter (with waveguide), a polymer-coated paper cone midrange unit, and a new 300mm 'Aqua-Plas' coated paper cone bass driver. However, these numbers seem wrong: the JBL 4312SE being so resolutely American and 1970s in approach that the metric system could be viewed as political correctness gone mad, and as a result those drivers are 1", 5", and 12" respectively. Meters, schmeters! The (revised) crossover points are set at 640Hz and 5kHz, and with a nominal six-Ohm impedance and a 90dB sensitivity, practically anything will drive these loudspeakers. Also with a recommended amplifier power rating at 200W, the only way you will damage these loudspeakers through normal use is not through normal use: you are trying to use them as a PA system in a room that actually requires a PA system or are planning to go deaf in the next couple of weeks (remember that back in the day, these were the monitors of choice for bands like The Who). There are treble and midrange trim controls on the front panel (as the professional versions had back in the day, although the L100 series were more 'purist' in approach).

This is a pro loudspeaker for the domestic collector. They are finished in black woodgrain, with a black cloth grille and a large white JBL logo on the side. Aside from the 70th Anniversary flash on the front panel and a pair of modern multiway connectors on the rear, it could be a mint condition loudspeaker built 45 years ago. They need no run-in to speak of and sound best in a room that is either treated or heavily furnished (preferably in lots of velour, with at least two lava lamps and lots of shades of burnt orange and brown).

It's impossible to resist playing the music recorded on the 4310s back in the day through the 4312SE, which was perhaps why I had to play the Editor's Privilege card to get these babies home – within minutes of the press release about the 4312SE hitting the inboxes of reviewers, my phone started ringing with offers to test them, and all of them had the same idea in mind; to play the recordings of the time on the modern equivalent of the speakers of the time. And when you hear that combination, you know why they were so keen. Out came vinyl copies of *Hotel California* by the Eagles [Asylum],



Rumours by Fleetwood Mac [Warner Bros], *Aja* by Steely Dan [MCA]. And they stayed on from beginning to end, played louder and more perfectly than you ever expected.

I've had some limited exposure to the original loudspeakers and there seems to be a lot in common between old and new. The original were a bit more bright and brash, where these are a lot more 'balanced' in approach, but there is more in common than there is different. Play them, and play them loud, and you get the sound you always imagined bands like The Eagles were capable of. The 4312SE is effortlessly dynamic, presents a huge soundstage, and rock guitars (in particular) sound like rock guitars always were supposed to. The bass can be boomy – especially in rooms with a sparsely furnished modernist aesthetic – the midrange is always

forward and ever-present, and by today's standards this is not the most coloration-free sound around, but with that right music on the platter, you simply won't care because it's too much fun. This is not a loudspeaker in that context, it's a time machine!

Depending on just how catholic your tastes are, you might hit the end-stops of that fun sooner or later. Rock music, and especially West Coast AOR from the 1970s, is guaranteed to sound fabulous through the JBL 4312SE. Practically everything made in California from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s works on these loudspeakers. Other styles of music or recording technique need to go through passport control. Where Steely Dan is powerful, exciting, entertaining, and just right sounding, so Schubert can sound too loud, too ▶

“The 4312SE is rare because it doesn’t make the same compromises, and doesn’t make excuses for what it is.”



► exuberant, and just too ‘angular’. While I don’t subscribe to the ‘it’s good for Rock’ school of loudspeaker classification, it’s hard not to come up with that kind of conclusion here. This is a loudspeaker with a strong flavour that permeates all it touches; if that flavour suits the music to which you spend most of your time listening, then it brings out the best in that music, but the same flavour does not apply universally and if much of your listening pleasure doesn’t fit in with the 4312SE’s presentation... it’s kind of like adding Lee & Perrins to a crème brûlée. The colorations that do not trouble the listener when playing, say, Santana at high volumes come into play when listening to Glenn Gould play Bach’s Goldberg Variations at more laid-back levels. That said, if you want to listen to an orchestra at seemingly ‘orchestral’ levels, or you view a piano as more than just a genteel instrument for playing in the background, the heft and energy of the 4312SE is beguiling. And it’s here where price comes into the mix; you can get loudspeakers that achieve both that degree of musical grace

and refinement, and the ability to play music with energy and excitement, but not at anything like the asking price of the 4312SE. In fact, at around £2,500, most loudspeakers opt for a solution that is a balance of compromises. The 4312SE is rare because it doesn’t make the same compromises, and doesn’t make excuses for what it is. In many respects, the 4312SE is all the better for its uncompromising take on music.

Just as music evolved, so the performance of the system called for different requirements. Swapping out West Coast rock of the 1970s for early 1980s Kraftwerk quickly showed the limits of that easy, louche, dynamic sound. Fast paced electronic beats – such as the massively influential ‘Numbers’ from *Computer World* [EMI] – had some of their attack and release softened. When listening to Steve Gadd’s drumming on the title track of *Aja*, this was not a problem, because those fast beats had some decay and even sustain, but ‘Numbers’ is more like a modulated click-track and there are some very deep, very powerful electronic sounds that don’t have the swing, the decay, and sustain of a drummer hitting a bass drum: they are just pitch, attack, and release. The moment bands started swapping out drummers, sticks, and skins for 808s, 909s, and LinnDrums, the beguiling call of the 4312SE gets a little weaker.

One could argue that the move to smaller desktop monitors like the Yamaha NS-10 created mixes that had greater speed of attack at the expense of bass depth and that awesome sound of the 1970s, and the 4312SE highlights that sea change in the studio. On the other hand, a lot of listening to the 4312SE might make you argue that digital was little more than a 40 year mistake in sound quality, because even the move from analogue to FM synthesis is highlighted here. The fat, drifty sound of MiniMoog oscillators gave the music an organic texture that just goes away when keyboard players started playing cleaner, but more bland-sounding Yamaha DX7s instead. OK, so we are going through a return to interest in analogue synthesis today, just as people have rediscovered the joy of vinyl, but it’s not simply ‘retro’... these things sound good for a reason.

In a way, the 4312SE came out just as everyone was busy forgetting dubstep, but that genre was positively made for these loudspeakers. The wubby-wub-wub-wubbiness of deep dubstep bass comes across here with so much power ►

“It is reorganising your eyeballs (and all parts south) in a way that makes the efforts of smaller loudspeakers seem laughable.”



▶ and intensity that you can feel standing waves forming inside your squishier parts. Played at some volume, ‘Limit To Your Love’ from James Blake’s eponymous first album [ATLAS] feels like it is reorganising your eyeballs (and all parts south) in a way that makes the efforts of smaller loudspeakers seem laughable. The ‘no digital’ rule is therefore more of a guideline.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to the JBL 4312SE is also one of the saddest. As the review finished and I boxed the loudspeakers up, news was received of the deaths of both Walter Becker of Steely Dan fame and Holger Czukay of the pivotal Krautrock band Can. That meant taking time out to unbox them (again) and spending a few hours just listening to both bands in the manner they were meant to be heard. No other loudspeaker would do.

Would I own a pair? Absolutely! If money (and space) was no object, I’d have a pair of the JBL 4312SE like a shot on a pair of short stands, with a good vinyl front-end,

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, front ported, bass-reflex standmount loudspeaker

Inputs: Five-way Binding Posts

Driver complement: 25mm Magnesium/Aluminum Alloy dome tweeter with waveguide (054ALMg-1), 125mm Polymer-coated Pure Pulp cone midrange (105H-1), 300mm Aqua-Plas®-coated Pure Pulp cone woofer (1200FE-8)

Recommended amplifier power: 10–200 Watts RMS

Frequency response (-6dB): 44Hz–40kHz

Sensitivity (2.83V @ 1m): 90dB

Nominal Impedance: 6 Ohm

Crossover frequencies: 640Hz, 5kHz

Finish: Black woodgrain with black cloth grille

Dimensions (H×W×D): 60 × 36.2 × 30.5cm

Weight: 25.2kg per loudspeaker

Price: £2,500 per pair

Manufactured by: JBL

URL: jblsynthesis.com

Distributed in the UK by: Karma AV

URL: karma-av.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1423 358846

probably even an open-reel player, and a lot of music from the 1960s and 1970s. In all truth, it probably wouldn’t be my only loudspeaker, because there are times when greater levels of clarity are needed for classical music and there are times when I want to reach types of music that simply don’t respond well to this type of loudspeaker. But the JBL 4312SE joins that very small, select list of loudspeakers still available to the end user that defined the way music sounded for almost a generation. If you have a collection of 1960s and 1970s rock music, you owe it to yourself to hear what it is supposed to sound like, and it’s supposed to sound like it does through the JBL 4312SE. This time machine comes very highly recommended. +