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Wilson Audio The WATT/Puppy

To celebrate a half century of the Wilson Audio family brand, it returns to its founding and arguably most iconic loudspeaker – The WATT, with bass support from the Puppy!

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Whether it be cars or guitars, anniversaries benefit small manufacturers because they present authentic marketing opportunities. One of these is a reason to

release a special model while another is to declare one's provenance. You can't fake longevity, so the real value is that anniversaries cannot be 'made up' as they arrive only with the passage of time. And while it's hard to believe, 2024 marks the first half-century of Utah-based Wilson Audio Specialties, and the designated birthday cake is The WATT/Puppy you see here.

Note the use of 'The' in the model name, not WATT/Puppy nor System 9 if this were to pick up where the series left off [see 'A Puppy's Tale', right]. It certainly merits the 'The' as in 'The Connaught' or 'La Ferrari' as it's more emphatic than a mere number. Yet neither is it a marketing conceit because The WATT/Puppy (from £41,998 depending on paint finish) is the beneficiary of all that has happened at Wilson in the past 13 years. It's a career marker and a returning legend.

GET THE LOOK

An analogy is apt here. I recall once being told that if you took apart the first Porsche 911 – turning 60 this month – and the latest iteration, there wouldn't be one interchangeable component, not even the badge. I cite this because the 25-year-long saga of WATT/Puppy, from 1986 to 2011, isn't dissimilar save for a hiatus ending with this model. From the very first WATT to the WATT/Puppy System 8 there was a constant evolution in materials, components, crossover design and aesthetics.

With its return in 2024, the analogy with Porsche continues visually – if you stand The WATT/Puppy next to the original [see inset picture, right], you'll immediately recognise it as a true descendant. Although differing dimensionally from the original, The WATT/Puppy shares the same look. In reincarnating the WATT/Puppy to 'The

WATT/Puppy', and to maintain the historical purity, Wilson even resisted adding 'flying buttress' handles as found on the sides of the Sasha V – those open wings that bracket the upper cabinet. Except for this

'The W/P is clearly a true descendant of the original'

speaker, skeletal frames now define a signature detail for all of Wilson's multiple enclosure models. Without them, the look will trigger nostalgic warmth in older audiophiles.

In standard form, The WATT/Puppy can be dressed in one of five colours, with a choice of silver or black fittings. For an extra fee, another 17 luxurious hues are available. Ultimately there's the premium 'Pearl' selection of 11 colours for still more outlay. While only the

customer knows how important looks are relative to price, the 'Pearl' colours bring the cost of The WATT/Puppy a bit too close to that of the Sasha V [HFN Sep '23] in its standard form.

TUNE IN OR TRADE-UP?

This raises an important point. The WATT/Puppy fits between the SabrinaX [HFN Dec '20] and the Sasha V, clearly bettering the former, as it should. The £17,000 difference between The WATT/Puppy and



A PUPPY'S TALE

It's easy to forget Wilson Audio Specialties started out as a record label, releasing audiophile LPs and CDs during the genre's most fertile era. As founder Dave Wilson was recording live in assorted venues, he needed a portable speaker to meet his standards in soundstaging and detail retrieval. The resultant WATT (Wilson Audio Tiny Tot) had a truncated pyramid enclosure and sloped baffle that aligned the drivers' acoustic centres.

It soon emerged that friends and colleagues wanted them, too, where smaller speakers would suffice, so a commercial version was introduced at the Las Vegas CES in January 1986. The WATT bettered other small monitors, including the BBC LS3/5A, for maximum SPLs and bass, but the latter remained restricted. The first 'fix' was the now-forgotten '2pi Steradian Beard', a panel attached to the front lower edge of the WATT to augment the bass, in use with the Gibraltar stand.

In 1989, the easier-to-drive Series 2 WATT arrived, but it was swiftly followed in 1990 by the first Puppy woofer enclosure. The latter endowed the system with bass flat to a claimed 40Hz, while the top-mounted WATT, now housing mid and treble, could be tilted for improved time alignment. The WATT/Puppy Series 5 was launched in May 1994, and was graced with X-material for the Puppy baffles. ('Series 4' was skipped out of respect to Eastern cultures.)

Five years later, the System 6 (as opposed to Series 6) was introduced with the same drivers but an increase in cabinet volume and a revised crossover. System 7 featured new drivers from Scan-Speak, in place of those from Dynaudio, while the System 8 of 2006-7, with its M-material panels and inverted dome tweeter from the MAXX, evolved into the first Sasha (2009), the latter's W/P suffix acknowledging its roots.

'The WATT/Puppy benefits from all that's happened at Wilson over the past 13 years'



LOUDSPEAKER

the Sasha V, though, is a sharp taste of the Law of Diminishing Returns.

It's because The WATT/Puppy is so truly proficient at recreating soundstage, detail, textures and air that, to justify the move up to the Sasha V requires a set of conditions beyond access to a bigger bank account. These would include a larger room, the most revealing sources and amplifiers, and a set of ears so gilded they can discern the actual make of strings on Buddy Holly's Fender Stratocaster. And the plectrum.

CABINET SHUFFLE

Yes, The WATT/Puppy is *that* good, even though the Sasha V necessarily has a tad more low frequency extension [see PM's Lab Report, p49] and finer upper module adjustments for tighter time alignment. The siblings therefore also present a lesson in loudspeaker design because the drive units in The WATT/Puppy are identical to those found in the Sasha V [see boxout, below]. It seems, then, that

RIGHT: The WATT's 25mm doped-silk dome tweeter, with rear wave attenuator, was unveiled in the Alexx V and is married here to Wilson's 178mm 'QuadraMag' pulp/composite mid driver and dual 203mm stiffened-pulp, reflex-loaded woofers

the *raison d'être* for the Sasha V's added premium, post-The WATT/Puppy, is the deployment of larger cabinetry.

At this point, you can imagine how this is going to be a tough review to undertake, even though my own experience includes at least five of the WATT/Puppy incarnations, including the 'Beard/Gibraltar' and two of the Sashas. What makes this so challenging is that we're dealing as much with comparing cabinet volume as with anything else.

Daryl Wilson describes the path which, *in reductio*, he placed the same drivers in The WATT/Puppy's reduced enclosure [see interview sidebar, p47]. The progress in available materials since the WATT/Puppy System 8 is as crucial

THE WATT/PUPPY VS SASHA V

When one realises that The WATT's 25mm doped-silk dome tweeter and 178mm 'QuadraMag' pulp midrange – and the Puppy's 203mm stiffened-pulp, reflex-loaded woofers – are the same as those in the Sasha V, albeit in smaller enclosures, the question must be asked: is it simply a Sasha V 'Mini-Me'? First, we need to examine Wilson Audio's design evolution since the WATT/Puppy System 8 ceased production in 2011.

Among the developments that led from the System 8 to Sashas W/P, DAW [HFN Mar '19] and ultimately V, is the Convergent Synergy Carbon (CSC) tweeter, with its carbon-fibre rear-wave chamber, introduced in the Alexx V [HFN Jan '22]. Integrating the CSC tweeter with the midrange and woofers was key in transforming the Sasha DAW into today's Sasha V.

In both the Sasha V and The WATT/Puppy, this CSC tweeter is married to the AlNiCo/QuadraMag midrange driver previously available only in the Chronosonic XVX, Alexx V and the Alexia V [HFN Jan '23]. Also in common, The WATT/Puppy is constructed with the latest versions of X-Material for the enclosures and bracing, S-Material for the midrange baffle, and V-Material for the top of the Puppy, serving as the 'vibration-sink interface' for the WATT.

It's worth comparing the dimensions of the Sasha V with The WATT/Puppy so we can picture the difference in scale. Without spikes, the Sasha V occupies 1145x368x608mm (hwd) while The WATT/Puppy pulls back to 1050x305x474mm (hwd). Also, a Sasha V weighs 111kg while each WATT/Puppy tips the scales at a svelte 73kg.

Having established that the drivers in The WATT/Puppy are exactly the same as those in the Sasha V, the bass drivers, in particular, are working into a reduced cabinet volume and are reflex-loaded via a smaller, rear-firing port. This has necessitated an adjustment to the bass/mid crossover and to the tuning of the port [see PM's Lab Report, p49].

Also, the first Wilson Audio product to use its custom-made copper capacitor, wound in-house by its 'RelCap' division, was the Sasha V. The WATT/Puppy uses a version of this copper cap in the tweeter section of the crossover that is even more refined – all because the capacitor's development coincided with that of The WATT/Puppy.

By way of confirmation, CEO Daryl Wilson describes The WATT/Puppy as 'a distilled and more compact version of a Sasha V'. So it's official!



to the evolution as the changes in drive units. It's all about trickle-down technology: S-Material, as used for The WATT's baffle, was first introduced and developed for the Sasha W/P, which arrived just as the System 8 was retired.

'It was the same with V-Material', says Daryl, 'which was developed for the XVX and was not available when the System 8 was being created. Even X-Material, used for all internal bracing and external enclosure material, has been refined since we last worked on a WATT/Puppy platform. The combination of materials we use for The WATT/Puppy yields quieter, more damped and controlled, sonically rich enclosures'.

Every detail had benefitted from some change, whether it was the incorporation of the 'Acoustic Diode' spiking system or the completely reimagined crossover model that's a far cry from what was available in 2011. Even the slope of the top module's baffle has changed, not least because the new speaker allows angling of the head unit. Like its predecessors, setup involves toe-in, but also microscopically adjusting the top module's angle, which was not part of the earlier models' installation regime. One final nicety is that the rod handle on the rear of the WATT, which David Wilson installed on the original speaker to help him transport it to recording sessions, has been re-styled so that it can be grasped securely and comfortably at any angle.

TRUE GRIP

Before taking delivery of The WATT/Puppy, I'd talked briefly to Daryl about his impression not of The WATT/Puppy side-by-side with the Sasha V, but what

LEFT: The permutations of Wilson's 'Standard', 'Upgrade' and 'Premium Pearl' colours with its six grille fabrics and black/silver hardware options make this a highly customisable design! It's seen here in a Bentley Blue finish with Parchment Grey grille

it was like compared to the preceding WATT/Puppy System 8. He maintained that The WATT/Puppy outperformed the System 8 in every area, from low frequency extension and slam to soundstage depth and width. He also spoke of greater midrange 'bloom'. Of course, Daryl is proud of his new baby, but could this new speaker system truly deliver on *all* of his promises?

I sat down to hear Willy DeVille's 'Assassin Of Love' [Polydor 887 312-2/POCD904 CD single] in anticipation of some of the most impressive bass to the west of Kodo drumming. It had served me in good stead through all those generations of WATT/Puppys. The heir to the line shook me with bottom octaves so solid, so controlled and so powerful that it almost sounded like the CD had been remastered.

OCTAVE OVERLOAD

Of course, scale and bass aren't the only criteria for determining a

speaker's capabilities.

For some, they're not even among the four of five most important, eg, I'm a midband and soundstage obsessive. But the weight, the presence and lastly the vocals, notable for DeVille's gruff

textures, immediately undermined what I recalled of the early versions. The WATT/Puppy's retrieval of bottom octave information was at a level I expected of speakers at least 50% larger – disconcerting enough. What I did not expect was focus I thought was the province of small monitors.

It then occurred to me that what I was listening to was an advanced interpretation of a small monitor (as it was back in the 1980s and for which it remains the template), if augmented with a woofer system that did not compromise the midrange and treble. Blind Faith's staggering, lone, self-titled LP [Atco SD33-304B], released in 1969, would do more to reveal the capabilities of the top module than the woofer enclosure, and so it proved.

Autoharp and violin on 'Sea Of Joy', Steve Winwood's distinctive, nasal vocals, Ginger Baker's odd, trashy cymbals – the clarity and freedom of coloration proved to be a testimony of sorts, a reminder of why this speaker exists, for here was a studio monitor with levels of detail Wilson Sr required of the first WATT of 1984. The transparency via vinyl

'The lack of coloration was its own testimony'

DARYL WILSON

Daryl Wilson, CEO of Wilson Audio Specialties, is immersed in the family business – he’s pictured below in the mid-’80s in the garage where his father, David Wilson, built the first WATT. The burning question? We asked Daryl, aside from the overall shape, does anything remain from the last-generation WATT/Puppy 8?

‘I’ve wanted to resurrect this iconic design for almost a decade’, says Daryl. ‘My father and I talked about it quite a bit, but at that time there weren’t enough new elements to justify reintroducing it. However, since my father passed in 2018, there have been a lot of individual component advancements.’

Daryl cites the cabinet materials, the in-house developed and custom-made crossover components, internal cabling, driver tech, connection points, advanced shape and design analysis. ‘The only thing common to The WATT/Puppy Series 8 would be the driver sizes [25mm tweeter, 178mm mid, 2x200mm woofers] and the echo of its shape.’

Described as ‘truly and thoroughly remastered’, the back of the WATT/Puppy has a beautifully engraved 50th Anniversary medallion attached to the resistor panel, albeit limited to the 2024 production. ‘The WATT/Puppys built after 2024 will have the commemorative medallion replaced with something else’, says Daryl.

In practice, The WATT/Puppy supplants the retired Yvette [HFN Feb ’17] and is the smallest model with an adjustable mid/treble head unit. Below it is the sole single-chassis floorstanding speaker, the SabrinaX [HFN Dec ’20], which does not offer adjustable time alignment.



ABOVE: Cables from the main crossover pass up through the top of the Puppy, behind the WATT’s alloy rear handle, and terminated in gold-plated 4mm/spade posts. The WATT’s height is adjustable at the rear, pivoting on two fixed front spikes for fine adjustment of overall time alignment

approached open-reel tape, but with a key improvement that can only be attributed to Wilson Jr: no hyper-detail to render the loudspeaker clinical-sounding.

SERENELY SILKY

It’s a devilish balance, that of retrieving all the low-level detail, extreme treble clarity, brisk transient attack and smooth decay, while avoiding aggression or any potential for listener fatigue. I always employed valve amps throughout my 35-plus years as a Wilson user, but was always aware that the speakers could tip into the ‘hot treble’ zone, especially on the end of solid-state amps. Not so in the Daryl Wilson era, which meant that D’Agostino and Constellation amplifiers sounded almost as cuddly as my tweaked Radfords.

To test this further, I dug out a classic example of what went wrong in studios in the mid-1970s-to-1980s, when everything seemed to have treble turned up to 11. Arguably the greatest country vocalist of that period, Juice Newton has a set of pipes to rank with Mesdames Ronstadt, Cline, and Wynette, and nothing comes close to

the drama of ‘Break It To Me Gently’ from *Greatest Hits (And More)* [Capitol CDP 7 46489 2 CD]. Equally, its upper frequencies can rival the annoyance of a smoke alarm.

Whatever sorcery has served Daryl Wilson so well, it’s evident here in that it changed the occasionally glassy to the serenely silky. The transparency and detail of The WATT/Puppy had already done justice to Willy DeVille’s vocals, which are

‘The slam and sizzle were reproduced with command’

diametrically opposed to Juice’s, so the speaker rightly favoured neither. In the way it treated such divergent voices with both equanimity and authority, the ‘studio monitor’ status of the original WATT was retained even in its alter

ego as a high-end audiophile speaker. I cannot name many studio monitors which enter civilian life with such poise.

TOOL YOU CAN TRUST

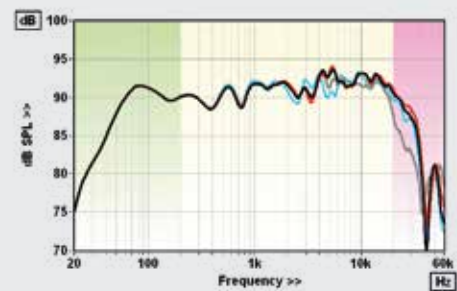
This is the reason why makers of both studio and domestic monitors, from PMC to Tannoy to JBL, run two separate ranges. Now, I am not suggesting for a moment that pro recording studios should invest in The WATT/Puppy system. Rather, I am ⇨

LAB REPORT

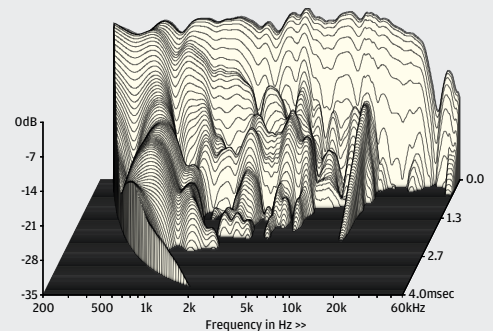
WILSON AUDIO THE WATT/PUPPY

The (new) WATT/Puppy's response [Graph 1, below] has many of the features already seen in the Alexia V [HFN Jan '23] and Sasha V [HFN Sep '23] – including the modes associated with the 178mm mid driver at 500Hz-1kHz and step at 3.5kHz once the 25mm CSC tweeter gets into its stride. These modes are also reflected in the CSD waterfall [Graph 2] along with the familiar low-level treble resonance at 14kHz. Nevertheless the overall response of this smaller cabinet is more uniform – errors are reduced by ~1dB over the Sasha V to just ±2.6dB and ±2.7dB, respectively, here – and the pair-matching is a superb 0.25dB (200Hz-20kHz) if we ignore a short-lived departure to 0.6dB at ~3.5kHz. Toeing in by 15° further flattens the presence/treble [grey trace, Graph 1] while the grilles are relatively benign [blue].

The reduced cabinet volume means bass distortion is a little higher (0.5%/100Hz/90dB SPL at 1m versus 0.25% for the Sasha V) and extension slightly reduced. Nevertheless, while the two 203mm pulp woofers have a symmetrical but rather 'peaky' response (84Hz here rather than the lower 74Hz of the Sasha V) they are augmented by the much broader 20-80Hz (-3dB) tuning of the rear reflex port to deliver a still impressive, diffraction-corrected 38Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz). Like the Sasha V, the WATT/Puppy is a fairly tough load but the smaller newcomer still bests its bigger sibling with a 1.5dB advantage in sensitivity – 91.8dB vs. 90.3dB/1kHz, smashing its 89dB rating. Wilson's specified minimum 2.87ohm/86Hz impedance is broadly met at 2.6ohm/97Hz while the modest +25°/-47° phase angles in the bass region contribute to a minimum 1.2ohm EPDR at 77Hz. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed drivers/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. L, black; R, red; ±15°, grey; grille, blue



ABOVE: A resonance at the top of the mid unit's range (3kHz) is joined by a short-lived treble mode (14kHz)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	91.8dB / 91.4dB / 89.5dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	2.6ohm @ 97Hz 10.4ohm @ 57Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-47° @ 68Hz +29° @ 728Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	0.6dB / ±2.6dB/±2.7dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	38Hz / 31.1kHz/33.1kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 0.1% / 0.4%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1050x305x474mm / 73kg



LEFT: Rear view shows lower-to-upper cabinet connections, rear-firing port, midrange vent and access to 'protection' resistors. The crossover is in the main cabinet and does not support bi-wiring

of the bass drum, the sizzle of the cymbals were reproduced with such command that I was finding it difficult to imagine more.

What sold me, however, was a raw performance from a long-forgotten various artists LP sampler from 1973, *Let It Rock* [Atlantic K40455]. After a blistering 'Back In The USA' by MC5, all scorching guitars with greater speed than The Ramones could muster, I sat back to savour Magic Dick's harmonica lead on J. Geils Band's 'Pack Fair And Square'. Arguably the greatest harp solo in history, it soars while testing clarity and transient crispness. It was, to put it succinctly, as in-the-room as I have ever heard in 50-plus years of loving it.

GRAND MASTER

Ultimately, there's a parallel here I simply have to declare. It is no secret that Daryl Wilson has taken everything that he learned at the feet of the maestro, his father David A Wilson, and used this knowledge not solely as a legacy but as a foundation for his own innate abilities. Just as every WATT/Puppy improved on its predecessor, so has Daryl moved beyond his father's achievements to become one of the pre-eminent speaker designers of the 21st century. The evidence? The WATT/Puppy is a masterpiece. ☺

saying that they would find the speaker as useful an analytical tool as I rate it for end-user pleasure.

HARPING ON

Despite the way The WATT/Puppy dealt with both the delicate and the majestic, it was the latter that proved the most enticing. The speaker was proving to be the opposite of the diminutive LS3/5A, for example, to which I turn for savouring vocals. Thus I was driven to playing the whole of *Led Zeppelin II* [Atlantic SD8236], with which John Bonham's juggernaut drumming came *ascloseasthis* to the Sasha V. The slam, the dryness

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Even with but a few dozen hours burn-in, The WATT/Puppy changed everything. It delivered in a reduced package 95% of the Sasha V's brilliance, a fraction barely noticeable unless the room size and peripherals can exploit it. This speaker defies the eye. What you hear surely cannot come from so compact a system? It is Wilson's new sweet spot. So it is with genuine awe I state: this is my final reference.

Sound Quality: 93%

