"... YOU GOTTA check out these little guys."

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the home electronics guide
RATING: EEEEE

"... they get the basics right – really nicely balanced bass, oh-so-smooth midrange and detailed high frequencies – they also communicate rhythm with real gusto. ... music came across with absolute conviction."

by Steve Guttenberg

Atom

Canada's Paradigm Electronics has a long history of pushing the performance envelope of value-priced loudspeakers. Their smashing little Atom may be the best sub-$200 list speaker on the planet; it might even threaten some of the better $300 list speakers as well. Maybe Paradigm signed a deal with the audio devil or something, because the Atom manages to avoid the usual budget and size compromises that inevitably take their toll on musicality. The Atom's single greatest accomplishment is its effortless; it's a surprisingly confident performer.

While I've heard dozens of great mega-buck speakers that were born out of their designer's seat-of-the-pants engineering chops and intuition, Paradigm's strategy involves rigorous research and development. Where the high-end designer may employ some minimal testing equipment and computer programs, Paradigm's Advanced Research Center has a state-of-the-art anechoic chamber so they can gather extensive data with their proprietary measurement system. The guys in the lab coats lay the groundwork for the most relevant test of all: good old-fashioned listening. Every work in progress is subjected to comprehensive, scientifically-controlled, double-blind listening tests. Their hard work paid off—you *gotta* check out these little guys.

"... Paradigm Atoms are hands-down value champs."

FEATURES:

- two-way bookshelf
- 5-1/2-inch polypropylene cone, die-cast chassis woofer
- 3/4-inch ceramic/metal composite dome
- vented enclosure
- shielded design

- frequency response 55 Hz-20 kHz
- 8-ohm nominal impedance
- power handling 15-80 watts
- finishes: vinyl wrap Light Cherry, Rosenut, Black Ash and White
- 5-year warranty
- 10-1/2 x 6-1/2 x 8-1/2-inches (HxWxD), 7 lbs ea.

"The Atom's single greatest accomplishment is its effortlessness; it's a surprisingly confident performer."

When it comes to speakers, no one should ever say they don't make them like they used to, they (pretty much the entire range of serious manufacturers) make them better than ever. Even so, the quality of the Atom's ceramic/metal composite dome tweeter and 5-1/2-inch polypropylene woofer, with its die-cast frame, are unprecedented for speakers in this price range. The key to Paradigm's outstanding value lies in their ability to manufacture every part of their speakers in-house—in this way, they keep the quality up and the prices down.

Paradigm's extraordinary QC effort is extended to every Atom rolling off the assembly line; every speaker's performance is measured and compared to a "reference" Atom. Every one matches within a ±1 dB tolerance. Occasionally Paradigm engineers subject speakers coming off the line to a full battery of listening tests. It's really cold up there, so I guess dancing to some funky James Brown CDs warms them up.

CONNECTIVITY:

Cheap speakers usually make do with cheap wire-clip speaker terminals, so the Atom's beefy gold-plated binding-post speaker terminals were a pleasant surprise.

LOOK & FEEL:

The Atom's look is nothing fancy, just a vinyl-wrapped box with a molded rear panel, but what a nicely finished box it is. The accountants saved a little money by making the Atom's grilles non-removable. Oh well, at least it was a benign move that didn't affect the performance or appearance of the speaker. The upside is the grille will always stay neat and true.

"… the quality of the Atom's ceramic/metal composite dome tweeter and 5-1/2-inch polypropylene woofer, with its die-cast frame, are unprecedented for speakers in this price range."

Paradigm recommends setting up the Atoms with their tweeters at ear height, with the speakers separated at a distance that's two-thirds of the distance between you and the speakers. The company also recommends angling them so they're aimed slightly behind your head. Since the port is on their backside, jamming them into a bookcase wouldn't be such a great idea, but you can wall-mount them with Paradigm's MB 60 swivel bracket. If you prefer stands, check out their 30-inch Premier S-30's.

PERFORMANCE:

The Paradigm Atoms are at the head of their class not only because they get the basics right—really nicely balanced bass, oh-so-smooth midrange and detailed high frequencies—they also communicate rhythm with real gusto. I couldn't sit still whenever I played any of my Thelonious Monk CDs: the kinetic drive of his music came across with absolute conviction. That's something many far more expensive speakers fudge.

Powered by either a NAD AV 716 or Rotel RX-975 receiver, the Atoms did more than just boogie—they were also seductive little beasts. Art Farmer's blissful fluegelhorn solo on an old Gerry Mulligan CD was so beautiful I found it impossible to think about mere audio. Gee, I didn't know budget speakers could do that. k.d. Lang's sublime masterpiece, *Ingenue*, filled my living room with pure sensual sound and Tony Bennett came awfully close to virtually appearing between the Atoms. These speakers nail the midrange so voices, horns, guitars and strings sound just wonderful. Even when they were within a few inches of the wall behind them, their soundstage was remarkably 3-D.

Sure, they have their limits. Headbangers won't be satisfied, but the Atoms cleanly produced sound pressure levels up to the 90 dB range in my large room. That's loud enough to tick off my neighbors on either side of my apartment. Hey, I gotta test the limits of these things. Bass quality and quantity are excellent for a speaker of such modest dimensions and price, so you can get by *sans* sub for music-only systems in smaller rooms. The Atoms took their time to fully break in, but after a good 100 hours of vigorous play, the bass had the fullness of a 50-percent-larger speaker.

The Atoms slotted themselves into my two-channel home theater system with the assistance of Paradigm's most junior sub, the SB-8 (review in the works). Dolby Digital fans can flesh out an Atom-sized home theater system with Paradigm's matching center speaker, the CC-70, and the ADP-170 surround speakers.

As much as I love the Atoms, I'm not about to retire my $6500 speakers just yet. The Atom's bass can sound hollow or drummy when pushed by higher-energy music. I couldn't stop myself from indulging in some early Santana CDs; the 5-1/2-inch woofers couldn't keep pace with the band's heady pulse when I cranked the volume control a little too far.

VALUE:

So little money for a pair! The price is too darn low; the Paradigm Atoms are hands-down value champs. They creamed B&W's groovy new lifestyle speakers, the LM 1s. The Atoms were better balanced, played louder, deeper; their top end is sweeter, and they can rock out with greater authority. The Atoms also trounced my former low-priced faves, the itsy-bitsy Energy Take2s. Beyond the expected gains in oomph, the Atom's midrange finesse clinched the deal.