

Inside Monster's SuperDisc

Larry Jaffee

Providing the best of both worlds, Monster Music's new "SuperDisc" releases aim to bridge the audio quality gap between high-resolution audio and MP3. In its debut of Monster Cables, the high-performance audio/video cable company, the music arm actually has existed for 10 years, but in a sense as the sleek, minimalist Montreal, Quebec, Canada founder and CEO, in an exclusive interview.

Lee sees SuperDiscs leveraging Monster Cables' reach into 7,000 storefronts, such as national chains Best Buy, Circuit City, and Target, to audio/video specialists like Ultimate Electronics, and Fry's. The idea for Monster Music was partly born out of the notion that the retailers could use a better demonstration disc to sell more home theater equipment.

"How do we sell more bookshelves, amplifiers, subwoofers?" Lee asked rhetorically. "Sales of those aren't very strong, but video is going through the roof. So this is really a solution to sell more audio equipment and give consumers a taste of how great 5.1 music can sound," he said. Monster can get the Super Discs displayed in both the home theater departments and in the music departments.

SuperDisc launched with a small slate of releases, including 3 Doors Down's *Live Away From the Sun* (reviewed in *Widescreen Review*, issue 103), Ray Charles' *Genius Loves Company*, Peter Dinklage's recent studio album *On The Moon plus Live in New York*, and Charlie Brown's Christmas 40th Anniversary featuring newly recorded interpretations of the classic tunes by artists like David Benoit.

Lee admits Monster's AMI staff had "sleazebait" as demonstrated by the diverse styles in the initial SuperDisc selections. "We have some very music savvy people who have been in the industry for a long time, but it really has to do our demographic [of more theater-oriented]. But we're learning what the big sales are. Do we get hip hop or jazz or rock? Everybody has his one-sided opinion of what rocks the world. We're sorting through that."

In 2006, Monster Music is planning 25 releases during the course of the year. "We're focusing on only having 10 SuperDiscs sitting on the shelf at any one time, because we want to still focus on it. So we'll rotate the catalog," explained Lee.

In launching SuperDisc, he recently

seized a new opportunity that capitalized on both the relative consumer market failure of both DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD, coupled with the iPod phenomenon.

"The labels are now reluctant to do 5.1, they fear the audience is too small," said Lee. "[The labels] haven't been able to target home theater owners, but DVD is not just for movies—it works as well for music too," he added.

In the first line that "HIFI Ltd., the company co-founded by filmmaker George Lucas (Star Wars) in 1983, has certified an audio music product. That's not small feat for Monster HIFI Ltd. provides technologies and services for extending the production and playback of entertainment content in the professional and consumer markets. According to THX, the company's certification programs and technologies deliver the ultimate entertainment experience, providing superior playback of movies, music and games. THX Certified DVD video disc format, fully compatible with all video and audio playback systems. Hundreds of classic and current DVDs carry the THX logo, and it is promoted as a guarantee of the best picture and sound available.

Most SuperDisc releases provide two discs—in audio disc that offers a standard stereo mix, playable on any CD player, and one for DVD-Audio for a concert, for example, and "High Definition Surround Sound," a term coined by Monster in Dolby Digital and DTS-9624 as well as High Definition PCM 96/24 Stereo, all taken directly from the studio masters. In addition, some discs feature multiple mixes that allow listeners to select their own "Stereo or Experience," ranging from "front row performance" and "in the moment" to "on stage" and "orchestral."

Receiving a *Widescreen Review* critical composite grade of 4 in the November 2005 issue, the 3 Doors Down SuperDisc "is a standard concert experience that will bring out the best in your home theater."

Keeping in mind that consumers also want to play their favorite music in their cars, the stereo disc of a SuperDisc release "sounds better than a regular CD," according to Lee.

Lee also believes there is an under-served niche for home theater enthusiasts who will also gravitate towards SuperDiscs to take better advantage of their newly acquired digital music

devices. SuperDiscs include what Monster calls "High Definition Digital Music" files recorded directly from the master recordings, ready to drag and drop into your iPod or MP3 player. These Digital Music files are encoded in AAC (at 320 Kbps), WMA (at 192 Kbps), and better than CD-quality Apple Lossless (FLAC 48/88). Also included are Dolby Headphone encoded music files, which will give digital music players a surround sound music experience through any pair of headphones.

Lee is particularly proud of the restoration job done on a Charlie Brown Christmas performed by the young Guaraldi Trio. Monster took the original, 40-year-old analog three-channel tapes and remastered them to 16/24 High Definition Stereo and Surround. That was a phenomenal accomplishment. We remastered the three-channel masters out of the vault. They hadn't been played in 40 years. We archived it to 96/24 high-resolution digital, and then really did some magic to make it a great surround disc. They were all three-channel files. We came up with a very clever way of extracting a surround experience out of it without any artificial processing. It's not like sticking it in an ambient decoder because it's only three channels. The vocals and piano are both on their own channel. We took a very careful approach of extracting 5.1 out of it. When listening to "Christmas Time Is Here," you think you're sitting in the middle of the recording session. It's so pristine, it does not sound like a 40-year recording."

Lee believes that DVD-Audio and SACD failed because they required "too much involvement in the consumer's part to figure out. You needed special players."

Despite the relative failure of these formats, technology brands like 3 Doors Down, for example, were eager to try a new, high quality format, according to Lee. Monster was introduced to the band by the band's label, Universal Music Group. "Now that the band is on board, Universal is excited how we're promoting it," he added.

Larry Jaffee is a freelance writer specializing in home entertainment. For the past eight years, he has written for *Widescreen Review*, which covers CD and DVD production. His writing has been published in the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, *National Geographic*, *The High Fidelity* and numerous other publications.