

MUSCLECAR AUDIO UPGRADES

A practical guide for adding tunes to your ride without butchering your musclecar.

BY RICHARD TRUESDELL / PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE MANUFACTURERS

WHEN IT COMES TO MUSIC, MOST MUSCLECAR OWNERS SHARE THE BELIEF THAT THE ONLY ORCHESTRA WE NEED IS OF THE 7-LITER VARIETY, RESIDING UNDER THE HOOD, IN FRONT OF THE FIREWALL. BUT THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THE ENTIRE EXPERIENCE OF DRIVING A MUSCLECAR IS ENHANCED WITH PERIOD-CORRECT TUNES, EVEN IF THEY ARE COMING FROM A TINNY-SOUNDING SPEAKER LOCATED UNDER THE DASH.

There's an axiom, shared by many musclecar owners that installing a modern audio system will result in irreversible modifications to your pride and joy. But the reality is that performing major surgery is almost never a practical alternative. Not only is there a manufacturer that still produces traditional shaft-mount radios, but there are specialized suppliers who can rework your existing receiver with modern electronics while not altering the faceplate. Some can even supply you with a factory-correct unit right off the shelf...think of it as the best of both possible worlds.

Finally, there's another solution for those music-challenged enthusiasts fortunate enough to own a musclecar equipped with a factory installed AM/FM stereo receiver, a factory option that gained widespread availability as the '60s progressed. Now you can easily add a CD changer, a 100-channel digital satellite radio (complete with dedicated oldies channels) or even a hard drive-based mobile jukebox. The signal can be inputted into your system via an FM modulator. Turn your dial to 88.3 or 88.5 and you can play any



source through your FM tuner, a simple way to get your music collection into your musclecar.

On the following pages we'll walk you through the options available. Some are simple and relatively inexpensive while others will be more involved but will offer you the same level of sound quality as a contemporary OEM premium sound upgrade or a comparably featured aftermarket system. And none will require any modification to your car, allowing you the option to return your car to the exact same condition the day it rolled off the assembly line.

OPTION 1 CUSTOM AUTOSOUND REPLACEMENT RADIOS

Almost anyone in the classic, vintage and musclecar communities has heard of Custom Autosound. Hatched by the creative mind of classic car enthusiast Carl Sprague, who custom-built his first radio for his '63 Vette back in 1979, it now is the world's largest and probably only manufacturer of traditional shaft mount receivers, once the staple of the mobile electronics aftermarket. With 40 employees and 2,000 dealers around the world, it is the largest company specializing in providing modern mobile electronics components, including speakers, for the collector car community.

As mainstream aftermarket manufacturers Alpine, Clarion, Kenwood, Pioneer and Sony abandoned the traditional shaft market due to falling



demand, Sprague stepped up and secured the tooling necessary to continue production of shaft mount-style receivers in his own contract factories in the Far East. In order to ensure a supply of CD changer controller capable receivers, he even snapped up the tooling for the Kenwood KRC-3006, the last CD changer controller-capable receiver from a major manufacturer and continued production of the product, renamed the Custom Autosound KNW801, and can match it with the still-in-production Kenwood 10-disc CD changer. Think of it as a clone for your clone.

What makes Custom Autosound radios so unique is that once the raw receiver chassis arrives in their Fullerton, CA factory, they first modify the shafts for both width and height. This ensures that they will exactly fit your car's original opening. This is especially noteworthy on cars like the early '65 and '66 Ford Mustangs, which have their shafts offset above the center nosepiece of the unit, eliminating the need to modify the opening in any way.

The second unique element of a Custom Autosound receiver is that they are licensed by the various OEMs, meaning that while their units don't replicate the factory look of the original, as they feature modern digital readouts, they do feature trademarked logos from Chrysler, Ford and GM. This gives these units an air of originality once installed in your dashboard.

If you want to add a satellite radio tuner at the same time as you upgrade your receiver, many Custom Autosound receivers feature a line-level AUX input, eliminating the need for an FM modulator. This provides significantly better frequency response. While this may not be an issue if you have a big-block with a raspy exhaust system, if you have a musclecar that you drive often, especially on long trips, the variety

available from either of the two satellite radio providers, Sirius and XM, will amaze you.

Custom Autosound offers a number of speaker products (see sidebar). They also offer custom kick panels that will facilitate the installation of upgraded speakers without cutting priceless door panels. Their Web site at www.customautosound.com is a treasure trove of application information and is designed to connect you to a local dealer that can outfit your car with an upgraded system of the highest quality.

OPTION 2 ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE RADIO TOTAL STEALTH UPGRADE

When nothing less than a total original analog look with upgraded sound and functionality is required, then the only place to turn is Antique Automobile Radio. Using their own unique circuitry, they can literally gut your existing radio. As an option, if they have a core available, AAR can sell you a fully converted unit from their available inventory of more than 3,000 in stock and available units.

Internally, all of the original tubes and transistors are removed and replaced with a modern AM/FM digital tuner

with a 4-channel, 45-watt per channel amplifier, similar in overall performance to what's typically found in a modern aftermarket piece that you can buy at an electronics super store or at your local independent mobile electronics specialist. While these units retain their original analog faces, buttons and knobs, the controls are reprogrammed to access the upgraded electronics and a nearly invisible LED indicates if the AM (red) or FM (green) band is selected. The LED acts as a signal strength meter and on FM, turns yellow, indicating when you're locked in on an FM station broadcasting in stereo. How cool is that?

When they designed their circuits, AAR considered future technology and provided two separate AUX inputs. Not only can you access a built-in eight-track player on models so equipped, but the second AUX input can be used to access an external CD changer, satellite radio tuner or even a mass storage unit hard drive player with a separate controller (see option 3).

If you have a show-quality musclecar, this is really the only solution if you want no apparent visual change to your dashboard but feel that you can't live without a modern audio system. If AAR has a unit in stock for your car in stock, simply remove your existing unit and put it on a shelf. Their online store offers a



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VINTAGE AUTO RADIO

Vintage Auto Radio Waterford, Wisconsin, is one of the independent dealers for Antique Automobile Radio and is a common sight at many Midwestern vintage car events. Steve Weber and his partners are experts in upgrading musclecars with modern audio systems and explained that with dual AUX inputs, their conversions of your existing radio can be the most flexible, especially with their ability to access external sources.

"For about \$400 plus your core, we can upgrade almost any existing radio," says Weber. "If your radio has a specialized feature, like a Town and Country tuner or an integrated eight-track player, the fee will be about \$50 more but the result is a radio that is indistinguishable from the original. Some of our customers even insist on concealing the tuning LED indicator or mounting it remotely. Since this is in essence a product custom-built to your specification, anything is possible."

Weber noted that it is easy to input the signal of a portable device, like an Apple iPod into an AAR-modified radio, even if you already have an external source. "With two available inputs our upgraded radios offer our customers the ability to access almost any source. On our units with factory tape decks, one you put in an eight-track or cassette, it will override the previously selected input."

OTHER UPGRADES

Because speakers are typically mounted below the dashboard or behind trim panels, upgrading and replacing these components at the same time you change your radio is certainly a great idea.

While aftermarket speakers come in a variety of standard sizes for contemporary cars, your musclecar may require a specialty speaker. Custom Autosound not only offers a drop-in replacement for virtually every car speaker ever devised, they also have some products that are unique to the collector car market. The best example is their line of dual dash speakers. These are a great alternative for new 2-channel stereo installations as they replace a single oval speaker with two round speakers mounted on a plate the same size as the original speaker.

Because amplifiers are also concealed, typically under the front seat, the rear deck or in the trunk consider adding an amplifier at the same time. You can have the best sounding radio in the world but if you lack the power to play it loud enough to overcome the symphony under the hood, you've wasted your investment.

Finally there's the issue of installers. Two suggestions here; if you're at a show and you listen to an especially good installation, ask the owner who did the work. More often than not, it will be a local mobile electronics specialist, the same guy who sells and installs competition-level super systems to the tuner car crowd. Conversely, musclecars are fairly roomy, much more so than a modern car and these artists usually will welcome the opportunity to apply their craft to help you reach your goals, sonically as well as aesthetically. If you outline your priorities at the start, they are the ones best equipped to turn those desires into audio nirvana.

continually updated list of available units. If you can find a core unit with a good faceplate and knobs at a swap meet, you can send it to AAR for conversion.

At the time this was written, we visited the online store and found a variety of radios in stock. Some of the examples we found were an original AM radio with side shafts to fit a 1971 to 1973 Dodge Charger or Plymouth Road Runner, an original 1972 Ford Mustang AM/eight-Track, an original 1968 Chevy Impala AM/FM with a rollover face and a 1969 AMC Javelin/AMX AM receiver, all now featuring a digital AM/FM tuner with an upgraded 180-watt 4-channel amplifier with dual AUX inputs.

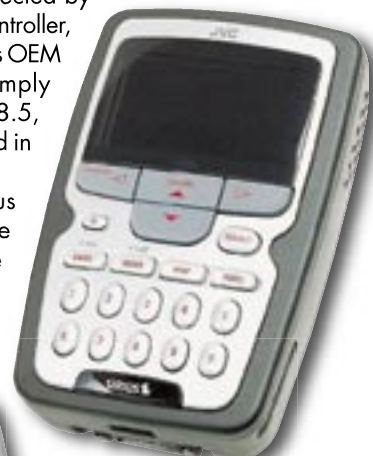
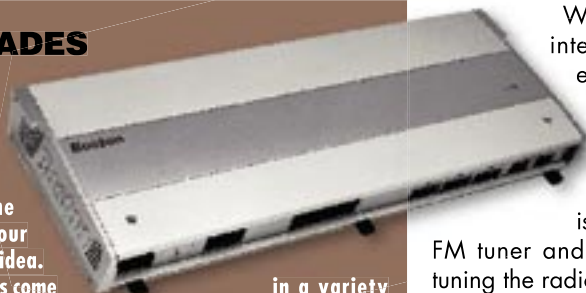
If you decide to add an external digital source like a CD changer, satellite radio tuner or even a mass storage unit, this upgrade can get expensive but when you factor in the value of your musclecar, it's proportionally less than adding a premium audio upgrade to many new cars. The cost will soon pale into insignificance the first time you play that song you remember from the night of your senior prom.

OPTION 3 ULTRA TECH EXTERNAL DIGITAL SOURCES

In researching this story, with a 25-year background in retailing mobile electronics, it wasn't much of a challenge to come up with additional solution for non-invasive upgrades. If your car is already equipped with an AM/FM stereo radio, you have a number of very interesting opportunities, all based on using an off-the-shelf FM modulator, the same device that allows you to add a CD changer to any car equipped with an AM/FM stereo radio.

What exactly is an FM modulator? It's an interface device that takes the output of an external audio source and "broadcasts" it in to an existing FM stereo tuner. The best known application is where the output from a CD changer, selected by an external controller, is sent to the car's OEM FM tuner and played by simply tuning the radio to 88.3 or 88.5, whichever frequency is not used in your area.

Instead of the ubiquitous CD changer, we now have two additional digital source options to consider; a satellite



radio tuner or what I like to call the mass storage solution, an external hard drive that can store your entire CD music collection on what amounts to a laptop's hard drive.

Satellite radio comes in two flavors, XM and Sirius and both are very similar in operation although they use incompatible satellite networks. Available from a number of well known aftermarket suppliers like Audiovox, Kenwood, JVC (Sirius) and Alpine, Delco and Pioneer (XM), both offer commercial-free music channels in a variety of genres, as well as brand name (CNN, FOX, Disney, NASCAR) sports, information and entertainment networks. Both are sold on a subscription basis starting at around \$10 per month. Unlike traditional terrestrial broadcast radio, the same signal spans the United States from coast to coast (not available in Alaska and Hawaii).

The second solution is a hard drive-based system. Units are available from Alpine, Dension, Kenwood along with a very high tech solution from Omnifi, a subsidiary of Rockford Fosgate. One Dension unit combines a removable hard drive with a conventional AM/FM tuner in a standard sized DIN (7x2x6-inch) sized chassis which can be mounted in an accessory housing under your dash or concealed in your glove compartment. The Alpine HDA-5460 is a DIN-sized freestanding unit with built-in controls that can be added to most existing aftermarket head units or can be used with an FM modulator as well. The Kenwood MusicKeg can be used with an external controller (which can also control an external Sirius satellite radio tuner) directly inputted via an AUX input or via an FM modulator in addition to being directly accessed by most Kenwood receivers with built-in CD changer controls.

The Omnifi DMP1 is unique. It combines a modular and removable 20 GB hard drive combined with a wired separate controller that looks a bit like a conventional detachable faceplate. You load song files from your PC but it offers a high tech option—the ability to use a wireless WiFi home network to transfer files from your PC to your car while parked in the garage, even while you sleep. This eliminates the need to even remove the hard drive from its in-car dock, the transfer controlled by software on your PC. With its 20 GB hard drive, you can store up to 3,000 compressed MP3/WMA song files. Or you can store up to 40 uncompressed CD, with full CD sound quality. ■

Sources

Alpine

19145 Gramercy Place
Torrance, CA 90501
(800) 421-2284
www.alpine-usa.com

Antique Automobile Radio

700 Tampa Road
Palm Harbor, FL 34683
(800) 933-4926
(727) 785-8733
www.antiqaeautomobileradio.com

Audiovox

555 Wireless Blvd
Hauppauge, NY 11788
(800) 229-1235
www.audiovox.com

Custom Autosound

1030 W. Williamson Ave.
Fullerton CA 92833
(800) 888-8637
www.customautosound.com

Delphi

5725 Delphi Drive
Troy, MI 48098
(248) 813-2000
www.delphi.com

Dension

3553 Atlantic Blvd #318
Long Beach, CA 90807
(562) 595-5143
www.densionusa.com

JVC

1700 Valley Road
Wayne NJ 07470
(973) 317-5000
www.jvc.com

Kenwood

P.O. Box 22745
Long Beach, CA 90801
(800) KENWOOD
www.kenwoodusa.com

Omnifi

546 S. Rockford Dr.
Tempe, AZ 85281
(480) 967-3565
www.omnifimedia.com

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