

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Nordost White Lightning Anniversary

By Alan Sircom

White Lightning Anniversary has the toughest job in the Nordost catalogue, because it wears more hats than the brand's other cables. The suffix 'Anniversary' is there for a reason. White Lightning is the spiritual heir to the original Flatline speaker cable from 20 years ago. Flatline needed big shoulders, because it revolutionised loudspeaker cables and was the foundation stone for everything Nordost stands for today. White Lightning Anniversary shoulders its own burden, but in a very different way.

The starting place in the Leif cable range, White Lightning represents the first analogue interconnect and loudspeaker cable in Nordost's line-up that is likely to be demonstrated as a product in its own right, which means it's likely to be presented both to those who are currently sceptical of the significance of cables in general, and those who 'get the cable thing' and are wanting to check out what Nordost does. As such, White Lightning is likely to end up in the widest range of systems, both in cost and performance terms. If it succeeds, it opens some minds to the importance of cables and Nordost's design ethos. If it fails, it turns sceptics into cynics and pushes people away from more up-scale Leif, Norse 2 or even Odin solutions. It must also be able to be good enough in its own right to be the end-point for some, and the jumping off point for the true seeker. That's a lot of responsibility for one family of cables.

Both interconnect and speaker cable feature silver-plated 99.9999% purity, oxygen-free copper solid-core conductors in an FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) insulation. The loudspeaker cable uses ten 16 AWG conductors in its construction and the interconnect features four sets of 26 AWG, fully shielded by a braid with 95% coverage. In creating the new Leif range, the company has paid obsessive-compulsive levels of attention to the connections, geometry and configuration of these cables, to round up and eliminate any subversive elements, including padding in the interconnect, stray dielectric effects in the loudspeaker cable and other enemies of SMERSH.

All of which looks good on paper, but is functionally meaningless if it does not translate to the way the cables perform in a system. Fortunately, it more than ticks that box too. Nordost recommends a thorough burn-in before serious listening, ideally by a dealer who has access to one of Nordost's own Vidar machines. I gave the cables a week under the cosh with a Blue Horizon Proburn burner-inner-thingy. I left one interconnect cable unburned for comparison purposes, and yes it makes a difference, to the point that if someone offers the service, jump at the chance.

Suitably burned in and plumbed into one of several different systems, it's clear White Lightning is more than up for the challenges it faces. It's like an aural accelerator, playing the leading edges of music with precision and speed of attack, as if the musician was unimpeded by the recording and replay processes. This is a common Nordost trait, and as you move up the ranges, this leading-edge delivery becomes increasingly more pronounced and almost uncanny. If you are used to the Nordost way of doing things, this is an immediately recognisable characteristic, which the White Lightning does extremely well



(albeit not to the standard anticipated by the monofilament wires). To the uninitiated, it's like your system just grew a supercharger. How to hear this in one easy lesson; play something with some urgent stick-work, such as the military-like opening to Art Blakey's 'Blues March' from his classic *Moanin'* album. Suddenly, the drumming becomes that bit more insistent and direct; Blakey never sounded tired, especially when playing this intro, but on White Lightning he's wired!

A lot of people mistakenly think because this excellent leading-edge performance so redolent of Nordost is the immediate impression, it's the only characteristic of the brand. White Lightning shows that thinking to be out of kilter. Ask any passing synth player; sounds have an attack, decay, sustain and release. How that ADSR envelope is built can define much of how things sound (the shape of the initial waveform and its subsequent harmonic and enharmonic structure being the other major components in the sound of sounds). And White Lightning approaches all these elements of a sound with exceptional even-handedness. There's no rosy glow to the sound, but neither is there an etched or bright presentation. The White Lightning sound is fluid, tightly coiled and exceptionally consistent. If you want to listen to your music as nature intended, White Lightning shows you how. And it really applies universally; from 'Photoshop Handsome' by Everything Everything to the Marriner/ASMF version of Barber's Adagio on Argo with touches of Little Walter, Rubén González and Al Green between the two. Best of all, the interconnect and speaker cables behave in an almost identical manner, to the point where breaking up the band would be a travesty.

Chris Thomas – in his review of Blue Heaven in issue 87 – pointed to something that I think is key to the White Lightning sound. He noted a shift to making the Nordost sound a little bit sweeter and possessed of an even tonal balance, and that's precisely what happens here. The old Flatline and Flatline Gold of 20 years ago were fast and furious, but with the prevailing zingy sound of metal domes of the time, could be edgy. Many came to like that sound, but it wasn't as accurate as this is.

You could think of this as Nordost, only smaller. It delivers all the fundamental qualities of openness, naturalness and speed of attack as its bigger brothers, just not to the same degree of explicitness. It's in the soundstaging that you can see where your extra money goes as you climb the range. It's lacking that expansive width and depth that typifies Nordost's upper slopes. This is still a good cable for those after image depth and height, it's just that it paints more 'rolling hills' than 'mountain ranges'.

Like the new Blue Heaven, White Lightning Anniversary manages to harness the transient delivery common to all Nordost cables with the broadband natural performance that was hitherto the domain of the brand's big guns. That alone will win friends. That it doesn't have the expanse of sound you get from further up the ranges is understandable and more than acceptable under the circumstances.

In short, White Lightning Anniversary is Leif affirming! +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Nordost White Lightning Anniversary Leif Series interconnects

Capacitance: 43.0pF/ft

Inductance: 0.046μH/ft

Price: 1.0m pair - £125

Nordost White Lightning Anniversary Leif Series loudspeaker cables

Capacitance: 8.7pF/ft

Inductance: 0.18μH/ft

Price: 5.0m terminated pair - £375

Manufactured by: Nordost Corporation, USA.

URL: www.nordost.com

UK Distributor: Atacama Audio

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