



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Magnum Dynalab MD-107T tuner

by Alan Sircom

The Magnum Dynalab MD-106T, that mainstay of top-notch FM tuner performance, is no more. Perhaps in the face of analogue radio beacons blinking out around the world over the coming years, that's not surprising. What is surprising is that the replacement – the MD-107T – is every bit as uncompromisingly FM-only as its predecessor. Only this time with a twist.

A lot of MD-106T goes into the new tuner; a very fine foundation upon which to build the last, best range of FM tuners. The MD-106T, which dates back to 2003, was the first Magnum Dynalab tuner to feature a triode-based output stage, found current flagship series of tuners. From the outside, the two are very different, even though the basic layout of meters and dials remains nearly identical. However, the MD-107T now features the thick faceplate with the cutaway sides first seen on the MD-109 flagship tuner and the MD-309 integrated amplifier reviewed last year.

Like all its flagship tuner range, Magnum Dynalab builds every aspect of the tuner from the ground up, including a custom-made, five stage RF front end. As opposed to many tuners (now reduced to an off-the-shelf chipset in most cases), the MD-107T separates out the RF and analogue stages of the tuner completely, and hand selects key components to help improve sensitivity and lower distortion. This is a common mantra among high-end brands, but in tuners with a hand built front-end, this careful matching really does make a difference.

The front-end goes into a hybrid, zero-feedback amplifier stage, designed by resident guru Zdenko Zivkovic and sporting a pair of Bugle Boy 6922 double triode tubes.

As before, tremendous care has been paid to the ground path, as stray earthing is one of the best ways of ruining the subtlety of a good tuner. The circuit allows for balanced XLR and single-ended phono outputs. The intervening years see a subtle redesign of this circuit; gently nudging the performance upwards, while ensuring 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' still applies.

The 107T also retains one of the key elements of its predecessor; the 6E5 'magic eye' tube smack in the centre of the front panel. This is one of the best visual methods of getting a bead on a good signal; the better the signal strength, the brighter the glow of the magic eye tube (it has a sensor to prevent the tuner eye from being powered up permanently). This is a system that was popular with classic tuners like the Leak Troughline (the 'scope tuning used on Day Sequerra and Marantz 10Bs uses a similar tuning method) and is a joy to use. It's replacement – FM synthesis and Phase Locked Loops – allow for greater signal stability and rapid station change, at the expense of never being completely 'on signal'; a station might be closer to 95.803kHz instead of 95.8 and if a synthesizer tuner jumps from 95.80 to 95.81kHz, it will always be slightly compromised. The MD-107T can tune with disturbing accuracy thanks to the

- ▶ LED readout, the signal strength and multipath meters and the magic eye... and it makes a difference (the bottom of the front panel sports five toggle switches, for power, muting, stereo/mono, two different kinds of IF bandwidth and a central dimmer switch).

Going without a phase locked loop also makes the tuner drift for the first half hour or so after power-up, and drift still more when fresh out the box. This is more of an observation than a concern and applied to any PLL-free tuner; anyone set to find this a hurdle to stop them from buying a MD-107T would find that hurdle entirely overcome when listening to radio stations.

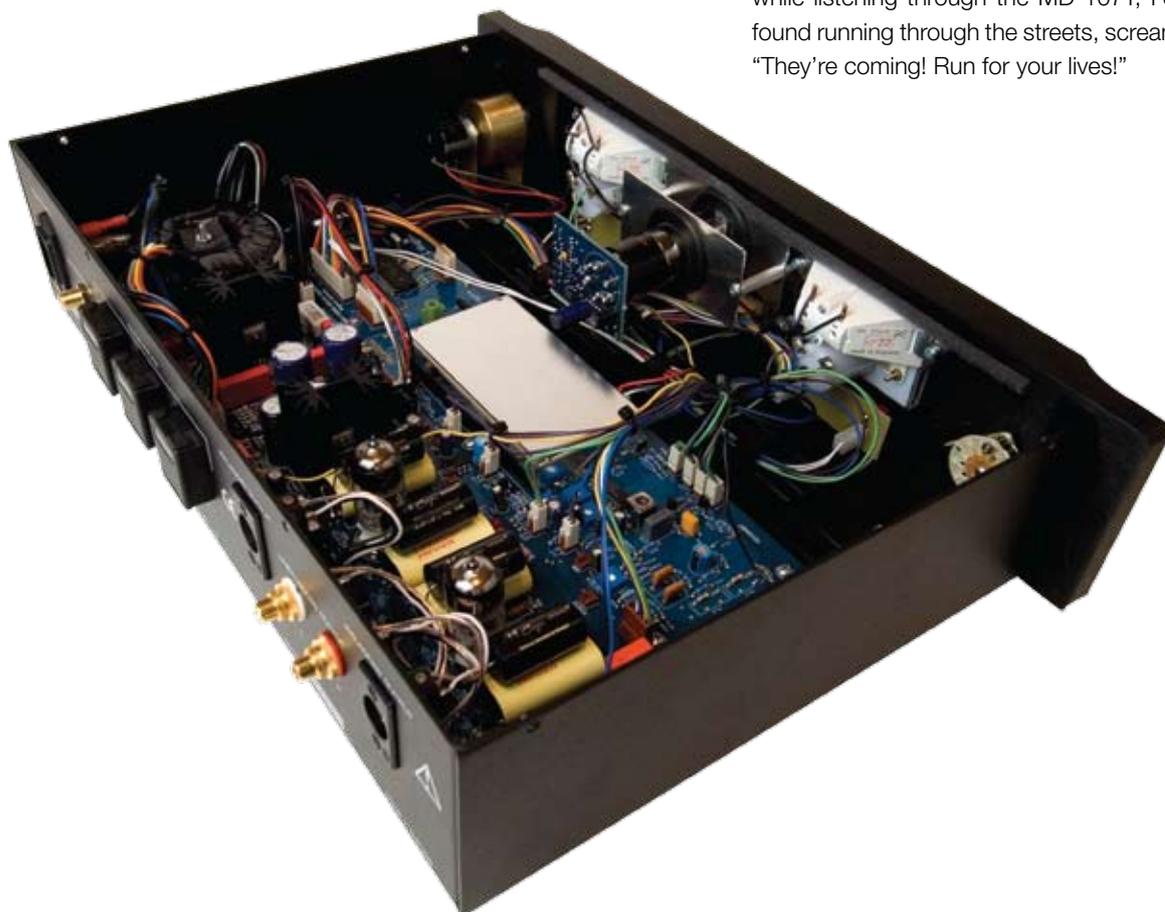
Now, about that 'twist' mentioned earlier. The leftmost dial on the front panel — that used to select a choice of two aerial inputs in the previous model (the rightmost still is the tuning dial) — does nothing in the 107T's standard guise. At the rear, one of those aerial inputs has gone away, leaving just the one F-type socket. Where the second input used to be are a trio of blanking plugs, marked 'digital inputs'. Magnum Dynalab offers a digital input module upgrade. This brings two conventional and one USB digital sources into the MD-107T; these are switched using that leftmost dial on the front panel, and the three digital sources get the benefit of passing through the MD-107T's sweet sounding triode output stage. This is a natural and obvious bonus for an FM tuner. When (and, sadly, it is 'when', not 'if' even if the 2015 FM switch-off date looks ambitious right now, the format is likely to see stays of execution rather than a reprieve) our analogue channels go to the great studio in the sky, the MD-107T doesn't have to become a doorstop. A remote control is the only other optional extra at £350, but a useful one at that.

As with its predecessor, the MD-107T opens up FM radio, and there's no such thing as 'background' listening through this tuner. It makes you appreciate

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paying the license fee for Radios Three and Four, natch, but it also makes you grow to love the more bland parts of the airwaves. Heart and Magic FM's mediocre and limited palette of pop hits from the last 25 years is revealed like a precious jewel, even to the point of getting the point of Shakira, without needing to watch Her Bendiness' videos at the same time.

It gets you into the studio, or – in the case of those weekend radio plays on Radio Four – in the midst of the action. If that whole Orson Welles *War of the Worlds* play was re-run today and I happened upon it by accident while listening through the MD-107T, I'd be found running through the streets, screaming "They're coming! Run for your lives!"





Like many British folk, I have a guilty secret – a passion for the Forecast, especially the late-night forecast, preceded by Ronald Binge's *Sailing By* at a quarter to one every morning. The combination of the soothing light music (Jarvis Cocker famously chose it as one of his Desert Island Discs, because it had wafted him off to sleep so often) followed by the Melville of Met Office is somehow captivating even through a car radio, but through the MD-107T it becomes high drama. First comes the reassurance that all is well in Blighty followed by a Hemingwayesque image of man against mighty forces. "Malin. Southeast veering southwest gale 8 to severe gale 9, occasionally storm 10. Rain, then thundery showers. Poor, becoming moderate or good" ceases to be simply a list of meteorological conditions on the 107T.

As you might expect, it does retain the 106T's uncanny ability to listen into broadcasted sound, including the repetition of sheep-related FX in *The Archers*. And yes, you can pick out individual sheep baa sounds all over again. I'd expect nothing less; in all fairness, the basic elements of the previous model were already beyond reproach and the addition of an improved output stage and a thicker front panel would be unlikely to amount to a significant downgrade in performance. Progress has been achieved and this is a better tuner than its predecessor, but this is not about 'upgrades' as much as 'continued use'. Come FM-bye-bye the 107T has a potential future that its predecessor simply does not share.

I'm certain if any company can make DAB/DAB+ acceptable in the future, it'll be Magnum Dynalab. I'm also convinced that many of the people leading the charge in getting audiophile sound out of the replacement to FM will be users of MD-107T tuners. And, personally I can't think of a better way to see out FM's twilight years and herald in Digital Britain's future than with this tuner. For as long as we have FM, you'll have sublime sound, and with the digital module in the wings, it seems like you'll have the same long after other FM tuners become a distant memory.

And yet, it's as an FM tuner that the MD-107T really shines. I've been having a recurrent dream, that goes something like this: the big-wigs in 'Digital Britain' walk into my room, hear a few minutes of Radio Three or Four through the MD-107T and say to themselves "My God, what have we done?", walk out heads hung in shame, only to cancel the FM switch-off. If they heard it, they would change it – the MD-107T really is that good. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Magnum Dynalab MD-107T tuner

Type: All-analogue FM tuner

Input: 1x 300ohm F-type connector, optional digital inputs, including USB

Outputs: 1x pair single-ended, 1x pair balanced

Output Levels: 1V single ended
2.2V balanced

Signal/noise ratio: 80dB

THD mono/stereo: 0.10%/0.18%

Stereo separation: 50dB

AM suppression: 70dB

SCA & IF rejection: 80dB

19kHz/38kHz pilot tone rejection: 75dB

Frequency response (± 1 dB): 15Hz-17kHz

Dimensions (HxWxD): 11x48x34cm

Weight: 7.96kg

Price: € 5470,00 (silver or gold finish +€ 250)

Manufactured by: Magnum Dynalab

URL: www.magnumdynalab.com

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