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ALL-IN-ONE MUSIC PLAYER/RIPPER/SERVER/STREAMER/RECORDER/AMP

# COCKTAIL AUDIO X35

It's several years since we first played with Cocktail Audio's range of remarkable all-in-one players, which vary from the compact to the full-size, as here, with the latest X35. It can be considered a "just add speakers" solution mixing the ingredients of sources — music streaming including Tidal integration, Spotify Connect, CD ripping and hard-drive storage, DAB+ and FM radio — with its abilities as a DAC and amplifier, with 2 × 100W of Class D power to drive your speakers. It has AirPlay, and it networks to play from and create its own music shares. And we note the latest Cocktail units are firmly up to date with the latest trends — the X35 is Roon ready and MQA certified, while also including a phono input for a turntable, from which it can record to hard drive. Quite the mix of ingredients, this Cocktail.

## EQUIPMENT

One of Cocktail's most immediately notable characteristics is a huge front-panel LCD display, a full-colour seven-inch diagonal screen on which you can surf its menus and enjoy album art, which the X35 gathers automatically along with metadata from Gracenote, for which a two-year license is included (the fee thereafter is around five euro a year, though freedb metadata and art is free).

If an on-device screen seems a bit old-school for you, the X35 can show its interface on a TV via HDMI. And of course there's an app to control everything, called MusicX, and also a web interface allowing control of the X35 from a computer. Enough interfaces for anyone, surely!

It's a well-built full-size unit, with an all-metal chassis and a front panel of 13mm aluminium,

with the volume knob to the left alongside the standby power button and useful front-panel sockets for headphones and ad hoc USB and minijack analogue inputs. On the right is a push-to-select knob with 'menu' and 'back' buttons below. Between the knobs is that enormous colour screen and the CD slot.

Round the back, the X35's versatility becomes evident. Full-size high-quality binding posts are provided to connect with your speakers. But there are also analogue and digital outputs, the latter impressively including USB and HDMI, as well as optical, coaxial and AES/EBU.

In addition to those front-panel inputs, the rear adds turntable phono input, one analogue RCA pair, and digital inputs — optical, coaxial and AES/EBU, plus a pair of USB 3.0 host slots.

There is a gigabit Ethernet connection for networking, though also Wi-Fi available, and once networked you have access to streaming music services, networked music shares (UPnP and Samba are supported in both directions), Spotify Connect, AirPlay streaming from Apple devices, and TuneIn's airable music service which includes internet radio. The antenna connection allows FM and DAB+ reception.

So much stuff! What *isn't* there? Bluetooth is a notable exception (Cocktail has previously stated it doesn't like Bluetooth's quality, which is a fair point, though few have the nerve to exclude it on that basis), and there's no USB-B connection for playing direct from a computer, despite all the other digital input options and the high-quality DACs inside, which are ESS Sabre<sup>32</sup> Reference DAC ES9018K2Ms with a dual-core Dual Core ARM Cortex A9 processor at 1.0GHz handling

the processing. The Class D amplifier modules are backed by isolated power circuits, a high quality toroidal transformer for the audio circuits and separate switch-mode power supply for the digital.

## PERFORMANCE

The challenge for any manufacturer creating such a multipurpose unit is keeping it all useable. Here things start well with a large 116-page printed manual — it seems a bit overwhelming at first but it's easy to find instructions for whatever you're doing. And whereas a criticism of earlier Cocktail units was the need for a dedicated app, that has now been addressed with MusicX (search Novatron MusicX), which has both phone and tablet versions available, though the latter pretty much keeps the phone layout and just leaves the right of the screen blank.

The MusicX app (pictured) makes it far easier to surf your stored music and sign into your music services — which here include the free Airable (internet radio from TuneIn) and subscription services Tidal and Deezer (also Qobuz and Napster, neither of which are officially available here). Tidal is particularly interesting here, because the X35 is MQA certified. MQA is a compression system which 'folds' high-res music into a smaller streaming format, and certification means that the X35 can do the clever trick of fully unfolding Tidal's MQA 'Masters' tracks. This requires a HiFi-level Tidal



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subscription, but that delivers everything at CD quality while the MQA compatibility adds high-res streaming of the Masters files. We were able to confirm this, with Joni Mitchell's 'Blue' and others coming through at 24-bit/192kHz, and many more at 24/96 or 24/44.1.

To use Tidal directly you do have to use the Cocktail interface or app; the dedicated Tidal app on, say, iPad is rather prettier and slightly easier to use, so you could do that and then AirPlay the result to the X35, though this limits quality to CD level. Any other app can also send music via AirPlay from iOS devices or Mac computers.

For Spotify subscribers there's no need to enter your password into the X35, just use the Spotify app on any device and select the X35 as your preferred output; it then streams directly from the internet, which takes the load off your devices and Wi-Fi, plus will work for Android users, who otherwise, without Bluetooth, have to rely on the MusicX app and DLNA.

## CD PLAYBACK AND RIPPING

CD playback is straight-forward, and discs are recognised on insertion via Gracenote so that you have the track listing and artwork marvellously large on that full colour display — or on your app or browser or however you're controlling the X35.

CD ripping involves a few conceptual leaps; you first select 'Bit rate', which only offers 128/256/320k options, and then the format — WAVs, ALAC, FLAC etc. But the bit-rate doesn't universally apply. From their final files the WAVs and FLACs were clearly lossless files, not subject to the lower rates. It would be better to lock off the bit-rate menu if WAVs or FLAC are selected. Interestingly everything is ripped at WAV first, then converted in the background to your choice.

But the actual ripping was simplicity itself — load a CD, wait for the X35 to identify it, then press 'menu' and rip the lot. In 'autotrip' mode you load 'em in, it autotrips and spits them out. Easy.

It's not only CDs you can put on the hard drive. Any input can be 'recorded' at a bit-rate up to 192kHz. Plug in your turntable and get digitising if you wish. Files can be edited using the front-panel (it takes practise!).

You can also import files into the X35 from USB or network share — indeed we just drag'n'dropped some high-res AIFF files into the share which appeared on our Mac, and then selected them for playback via the app.

Once you have a good selection of music in there, the joys of preloaded music become obvious, especially with such well-organised



access — it's a component-based alternative to a computer collection. Of course with the X35 you could easily have both — stream file collections from computer via UPnP, plus full-quality CDs and recordings straight out of the hard drive. If, despite the Cocktail's gigabit Ethernet, you encounter playback issues with enormous PCM or quad-DSD high-res files, those might be the ones to store on the hard drive, for seamless playback (and gapless albums are no problem either). Versatility is the name of the game here.

## USB AND UPNP

Again the app makes browsing of files from USB storage or from your network neat and easy from the comfort of your phone, though an alphabetical jumplist would speed browsing through large collections. The X35 proved one of the most filetype-friendly players we've ever encountered, welcoming everything from MP3, AAC and WMA up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM in FLAC or WAV, and DSD up to quad-speed DSD256 plus DXD to 24-bit/352.8kHz — not to mention APE, Ogg, and the oft-omitted Apple Lossless and AIFF. It even played a multichannel FLAC file which we keep in our test folder just for a laugh. Top marks here.

We used the X35 in two ways — first taking its analogue output at a fixed level into our reference system, to hear the work of its DAC and audio circuits in isolation. Then we utilised its power amplifiers to drive several different sets of speakers, delivering a complete system from just the one box plus speakers. Its amplifiers were clearly able to handle speed and dynamics well, and gave an impressively clear window onto recordings; the high-res file of Bowie's *Blackstar* snapped along, the crazy snare and bass parts cracking and thumping out with the rapid fire of a machine gun, and no sense of overhang. Piano was delivered highly percussively, and if things lacked a little of the smoothness of our reference power amps (pairing it with high sensitivity horn speakers made things a little too edgy at times), the X35's amps proved a good match with smoother-sounding speakers, and a resident pair of German standmounters with only middling sensitivity were able to brilliantly illuminate the strands of our favourite Holst works, to give the

breathy edge of Diana Krall vocals, and to drive along beatier rock and pop to great effect.

And there's a fundamental confidence in the stability of hard-drive playback — no network or streaming worries, the best possible ease of path for a processor to pass through the bits. Even if we know it's overkill to have 1958 Billie Holiday at 24-bit/176kHz, how sweet and rich and complete it sounded, not so much a window through 60 years of time as a walk-in stereo holodeck to the original session.

The MusicX app is an essential tool for browsing between different inputs and services, especially given that the supplied remote control is quite bafflingly laid out and wildly over-comprehensive; the app is a lot easier! The browser access is useful as an easy way to edit metadata for tracks and files.

## CONCLUSION

What's remarkable about the Cocktail Audio X35 is not only that it does so very many things, but that it does them well, and under fairly easy control. It takes a bit of getting to know, but once settled in, you can enjoy CD playback, and ripping to hard drive and then the joys of hard-drive based music, in addition to digital, FM and internet radio, network streaming, USB stick/drive playback, music services including Tidal with MQA, all in an attractive Roon-ready amplifier with additional inputs and a strong supply of Class D power for your speakers. When considering its price, remember to factor in those many many different abilities — and also the ease of upgrading the amplification years-hence while retaining the X35 for its source and storage abilities. Impressive. ■

### Cocktail Audio X35

- All-in-one solution
- Huge capabilities and facilities
- CD ripping and input recording

- No Bluetooth or USB DAC

**Price:** \$3199 without hard drive; \$3499 with 2TB hard-drive (up to 8TB supported)

**Contact:** Tivoli Hi-Fi  
**Telephone:** 1800 848 654  
**Website:** www.tivolihi-fi.com