

Trends Audio's UD-10.1 Lite Makes Music Sound Better

Kevin Hunt | The Electronic Jungle
November 16, 2008

We're in the midst of a digital conversion, a coast-to-coast switcheroo, but this one hasn't been dreamed up by the federal government, no one's scrambling for rebate coupons and it has nothing to do with HDTV.

In this fully volunteer conversion, people are saying so long to their CD players and connecting either an iPod or a computer stocked with a music library directly to a sound system. It's a digital-for-digital swap, CD for PC, born of convenience and the iTunes-fueled method of purchasing new music, digital downloads.



To get it right, however, requires a USB converter like the new Trends Audio UD-10.1 Lite from the Hong Kong company that built an underground following in this country with inexpensive, miniature digital amplifiers.

The trick in assembling a music server is to avoid a computer's sound card, almost always a cheap device wedged into a crowded, noisy motherboard. The iPod isn't any better at converting a digital music file to an analog signal you can hear. It's fine listening with earbuds, but duller than Muzak through a home entertainment system.



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The UD-10.1 Lite (\$99), a tiny silver box that links to a computer or laptop with a USB cable, extracts the music files in their original digital form, bypassing the sound card. What happens next with that digital signal is up to you.

The UD-10.1 Lite has two digital connections and a headphone connection that converts to an analog output that your audio system will recognize with the included minijack-to-twin-RCA adapter. (The UD-10.1 Lite's big brother, the \$169 UD-10.1, doubles the digital outputs.)

Let's say you want to hear jazz saxophonist Lee Konitz through your home theater or stereo system. Konitz moves, digitally, along the USB trail from the computer to the UD-10.1 Lite, where it detours into the UD-10.1's digital-to-analog converter. Newly analog, the signal travels through

a pair of RCA cables to the home theater's awaiting audio-video receiver. Suddenly, Konitz's sax pours through your speakers. The computer's sound card never sounded like that!

The UD-10.1 Lite's digital options preserve the original digital signal. It's then up to your audio-video receiver to convert it to analog. But the UD-10.1 Lite should sound better than your receiver. (Trends actually provides the digital connections for hi-fi gearheads who use the UD-10.1 simply to transport the digital signal to yet another little box, a more elaborate digital-to-analog converter.)

It doesn't have to get that fancy, or expensive, to hear a difference with the UD-10.1 Lite. Even my aging home theater, with a decade-old audio receiver and still-vibrant PSB Alpha B speakers, stood up and cheered.

I listened to one song, Madeleine Peyroux's "Dance Me Till the End of Love," at the same volume through my home theater in multiple scenarios, starting with an iPod. The Nano, with overwrought bass and dull vocals, bowed out immediately. Next, I connected my MacBook directly to a digital input on the home theater's audio-video receiver. Yes, it can be done, with a \$2 adapter that, plugged into the MacBook's headphone jack, welcomes a digital (Toslink) audio cable.

With the audio-video receiver converting the signal to analog, the MacBook showed superior clarity, restored balance and enhanced vocals. Such sound would sooth most ears.



Finally, the UD-10.1 converted the digital "Dance Me" to the analog "Dance Me." This "Dance Me" seemed bigger, fuller and buffed to a more glistening sheen. Vocals sounded more dimensional and, almost from nowhere, the piano gained prominence.

The differences were not as dramatic as those between the iPod and MacBook, but they were real. Trends Audio says the UD-10.1 Lite sounds even better when powered by an optional rechargeable-battery pack (about \$15) instead of a

computer's USB power. That didn't hold true here, but it certainly did when the UD-10.1 Lite was inserted into a more up-to-date stereo system.

The UD-10.1 Lite reminded me of another audio converter I auditioned earlier this year, the \$129 HagUSB from Hagerman Technology of Honolulu (hagtech.com). It apparently uses the same chip technology, but the HagUSB is more expensive and has only one digital connection.

Either of these products, or the many others like it ([Google](#) "USB DAC"), is a bridge to the next era of music playback in the home.

WHAT: Trends Audio UD-10.1 Lite Audio Converter

PRICE: \$99; optional battery pack, \$13

HOT: Transforms computer into high-quality music server; works with Windows/Mac

NOT: Requires adapter (included) for analog connection

AVAILABLE: obadimports.com; audiomagus.com

INFORMATION: trendsaudio.com