

## Bryston BCD-3 CD Player Review



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Canadian heavy hitters [Bryston](#) surprised everyone a few years ago with their introduction of a speaker line, which now, after wide acceptance and a slew of positive reviews, are considered class leaders in many circles. In fact, the Mini T three-way monitor is my current reference. Possibly more surprising is Bryston's introduction of the **BCD-3 CD Player**, with retails for \$3495, in an era where the conventional wisdom tells us optical disc playback is fading away in favor of hard discs, servers, and streaming. Not so fast.



First off, this is not Bryston's first player, they had the BCD-1 disc player in the lineup several years ago, and it was a big success. They also have been producing some of the best sounding DACs and servers regardless of price with the BDA and BDP series. In other words, Bryston has been doing high-performance digital going on a decade now.

Second, there are untold numbers of audiophiles with large CD collections, even if they have ripped them to a server. Some never even went about that laborious process and still maintain a CD library for primary listening. Not to mention that CDs are still released every week, and the reissue market has never been stronger, with legacy acts assembling lavish box sets with loads of unreleased archival material. The new thirty-six CD box set from Bob Dylan, *The 1966 Live Recordings*, chronicling the famous 1966 tour is a fine example, along with Pink Floyd's fantastic *The Early Years: 1965-1972* multimedia collectors set with over 20 CDs.



Even keeping in mind legacy CD collections, new releases, and a preference for physical media playback by some, what was Bryston's motivation for introducing a CD player in 2016? From what I gather, it is to have the final word on the product category, to produce a state of the art player that puts sonics first, trends be damned. According to Bryston, "We are aware that the music industry has written off the CD format; however, we have a significant number of customers who have substantial CD collections they'd like to enjoy," explained Bryston VP James Tanner. "We had the ability to leverage our BDA-3 DAC platform--one of the most popular digital products from Bryston--combined with a very good quality transport and deliver an audiophile CD player with astonishing levels of clarity and detail."

James Tanner sent me a note to emphasize the BCD-3's rather unique architecture. He stated the player "doesn't use the S/PDIF transfer of data and clock. The player is a synchronous system where jitter is essentially non-existent. The clock responsible for retrieving the data as it comes from the CD itself is also responsible for the D/A conversion process so there's no discrepancy between the master clock and any of its derivatives."

So there you have it. No stone unturned. According to Bryston, "The BCD-3 has been engineered to play back Redbook CD using a premium transport/laser pickup assembly mated to two AKM 4490 384-kHz/32-bit DACs. Bryston designed the player to utilize a single master clock that syncs the transport to the DAC, eliminating one of the primary sources of an unwanted artifact called jitter. The DAC in the BCD-3 is based upon the BDA-3 platform and includes a fully discrete Bryston Class A analog output stage and independent analog and digital power supplies."

The player is fully balanced with XLR outputs or unbalanced single-ended RCA outputs. There are two digital outputs as well, SPDIF on coaxial, and AES/EBU. There is also an Ethernet jack for controlling the unit via mobile device or for updating firmware (or gaining access to the IP address). The front panel is available in a black or silver finish, with either a 17 or 19-inch wide faceplate.

There is an optional remote control as well. We would have to address the elephant in the room, and that is the fact the player has no digital inputs, which has generally become the industry standard on digital disc players. But Bryston makes it clear the BCD-3 was designed with a purist approach and any functions that could possibly compromise Redbook playback were not even considered.

According to Tanner, “the advantage of knowing exactly what frequency (CD Redbook standard - 44.1) and bit rate (16) is available means you can optimize the Clock to the Drive and the DAC to eliminate jitter. Once you allow for a digital input you have no idea what digital signal will be coming in (44.1, 176, 192 etc.) so you have to re-clock and re-sample the input which increases jitter and requires totally different circuitry.” So if the BCD-3 is not for someone looking for a one box digital hub.

Now, confession time. I have not had a CD player in my system for quite a while, although I own a few, tucked away in a closet. I have gone full frontal into network playback with [Bryston's own BDP-2/BDA-3 server](#) and DAC combo in the main system, and the Sonore microRendu in the office system. However, I still maintain a library of approximately 5,000 CDs. And I still purchase several CDs a month, as that is the only format in which some releases are available.

The BCD-3 is built to a crazy high standard. It should provide any owner confidence and pride of ownership, along with Bryston's famous five-year warranty. Its heft alone is indicative of a robust power supply and a high-grade transport.



## Set Up & Listening

I set up the BCD-3 in my main system with an Aric Audio Unlimited tube preamp, (and briefly with the new Schiit Audio Freya) an Audio Research VS55 power amp, Bryston's Mini T speakers, a JL Audio d108 subwoofer, and Black Rhodium interconnects and speaker cable. Other than an Acoustic Zen power cord, no special tweaks were used. I had set aside a large stack of CDs in anticipation of the review and all that was left to do was spin tunes.

It has been awhile since I have played actual CDs, but within five songs of the great Maddy Prior's *Bib & Tuck*, I had no choice but to pay close attention and eliminate all external thoughts. Focusing on the music and the purity of tone became the only thing I was capable of doing. The first few tracks are acapella, and the layered voices hang in space making it easier than normal to suspend disbelief that you are listening to a canned performance. But more importantly, the natural tone and timbre of the voices were superb.

Irish singer/songwriter Luka Bloom's *Head And Heart*, from 2014, is an album I have listened to on numerous occasions for both musical pleasure and during reviews. Not only is it superbly recorded, but it is an excellent mix of well-chosen covers and several originals. The performances from Bloom and his sympathetic band are top notch. The title track is a John Martyn song, and it sets the tone for the rest of the album, with shimmering acoustic atmospherics. The BCD-3 allowed for another level of involvement in the music, and Dylan's "Every Grain Of Sand", and the great Don McLean's "And I Love You So" really hit home. This disc proves yet again that in digital audio, sample rate, bit depth, and format are trumped by care in the production process.

I buy a lot of music in FLAC from Bandcamp and, on some occasions, a physical CD is mailed to accompany the digital download. Two recent purchases, by neo-psychedelic bands Beautify Junkyards, from Portugal, and Us And Them, from the U.K., saw shiny discs arriving in my mailbox and I could not rip open the shrink wrap fast enough. The music is exciting, proudly retro, trippy, and pastoral. It is also better produced than most current modern recordings due to the fact they really dive into the retro aesthetic.

Us And Them's *Summer Green And Autumn Brown* sounded cozy as tea in the English countryside. The female lead vocals, wide open arrangements, and lyrical touches like the use of harpsichord, bells, synths, and wide stereo panning was so well reproduced by the BCD-3, it illustrated again that lovingly-produced Redbook-quality music is far more desirable than squashed higher resolution downloads. There was so much space between the instruments and vocals that those to who continue to question the fidelity of the CD are downright swimming upstream.

*The Beast Shouted Love* by Beautify Junkyards is cut from similar cloth, with delicate, psychedelic arrangements, retro sounding,

mellotron like keyboards, and spacey melodies. The classic, mellow progressive folk-rock vibe, with a mix of male and female vocals, sung in English and Portuguese was hypnotic, and the BCD-3 unraveled the complex arrangements without breaking a sweat. I had this disc on repeat, and it will get tons of spins in the coming months. Again, digital recording has gotten a bad rap, but only due to abuse of the format. This album sounded as lush and warm as just about anything I have heard recently on vinyl.

I went through a pretty a large stack of CDs, some that were well produced, and some that were not great. Either way, the BCD-3 extracted what was ever in the pits, with a precision and depth of character that was admirable. Addressing a few things, I did not have the inclination to use the digital outputs on the BCD-3. The analog output stage was so sweet sounding, there was no incentive.

The tray loading mechanism was as smooth as butter, and I could hear no mechanical noise while the disc was loading unless I had my ear a foot away from the player. Lastly, the front panel has more control buttons than usual, and I liked having a scroll ahead button available for getting to specific passages of a given track. There are also rarely seen Time, Repeat, and Random buttons.



## Conclusion

The Bryston BCD-3 is the most natural, unmechanical, distortion-free CD player I have encountered. If the format is in decline, it is not because of sound quality. Properly mastered discs produced with care sound sensational on the Bryston. At \$3500, it will be the last player you may need for your compact disc collection. If Bryston updates the player via firmware, a network jack makes it easy for the user to implement. The network connection also allows for remote control.

if one does not want to spring for the optional chunky metal remote control unit, which by the way will control multiple Bryston components. It is important to point out you can use thirdparty universal remote units, or your web browser, or a mobile device once the BCD-3 is on your network. The choice is yours.

The BCD-3 is a purist, no holds barred approach. It is not entry level in cost or design. No apologies there. To reiterate, there are no digital inputs, no SACD or DVD-A playback, and it does not brew coffee. It simply produces state of the art Redbook CD playback. If this is what you seek, the Bryston BCD-3 is a **must audition**.

## Specifications

**Bryston BCD-3 CD Player:** \$3495

[www.bryston.com](http://www.bryston.com)

Outputs: RCA, XLR, S/PDIF RCA, AES/EBU XLR

Control: Ethernet, USB-A, IR, DC, RS-232

Features:

DACs and transport slave to single master clock for jitter-free performance

Dual balanced AKM digital to analog converters based on BDA-3 design

Fully discrete class-A operational amplifiers form the analog output section

Options:

Available with silver or black faceplate

17" or 19" faceplate available

Rack mountable option available (2U)

BR2 remote control available (see Accessories in Other Products)

## Review System 1

Server: Bryston BDP-2  
DAC: Bryston BDA-3  
Tape Deck: Revox A77  
Turntable: Rega Planar 3  
Phono Preamp: Lounge Audio LCR MKIII, Lehmann Cube SE  
Preamp: Aric Audio Unlimited, Schiit Audio Freya  
Amplifier: Audio Research VS55, Simaudio 760A  
Speaker: Bryston Mini T  
Cables: Wireworld, iFi, Transparent, Black Rhodium  
Accessories: Symposium Rollerblocks and Svelte Shelves, Shakti Stone, Bryston BIT-15, Salamander rack

## Review System 2

Music Server: Sonore microRendu  
Turntable: Project Debut Carbon DC  
Phono Preamp: Graham Slee SE  
Preamp: Schiit Audio Saga  
DAC/Streamer: Simaudio 280D  
Power Amplifier: Onkyo M5000R  
Speaker: Magnepan MMG, Spondor S35R  
Cables: Wireworld  
Accessories: Cable Pro Noisetrapper, iFi iPower, Audience aR6

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