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Upgrading Your Leased Car Audio

BY TIM KELLY

PHOTOGRAPHY: DG LEADBETTER

Just because you leased your new car or truck doesn't mean you can't make the stereo into the bumpin', thumpin', contest-winnin', super-loud system of your dreams. There seems to be a widespread misconception that you can't do anything to a factory stereo system if you have leased the car. This just isn't true.

When you lease a vehicle, you're really only paying for the time you use it. In most cases, that's two to four years. When that time is up, you simply drop the vehicle off at the dealer and your obligation is over. Many people go the lessee route for the most basic of all reasons – price.

It's pretty obvious that paying for the car for a couple of years is less

Most leasing agreements state that if you change items in the car, you must return them to stock configurations. Some places will let you slide on this if you have upgraded to a better system and wish to leave it in when the lease is up. In this case, the owner upgraded from the stock cassette deck to a McIntosh CD player.



costly than buying the whole thing outright and taking five or six years to pay for it. People can now get the cars they really want because the lease payment is much more in line with what's affordable every month, as opposed to an interest-accruing loan payment.

The catch is that you don't own the vehicle at the end of the term; you give it right back to the dealer. Also, every lease has a security deposit, usually equal to one month's payment. If there's a problem with the vehicle when you drop it off, the security deposit is the first money the dealer will use to pay for any fixes.

Some dealers even go so far as to tell their customers they can't do anything to the car and they even

have to buy the same exact tires for it if the original ones wear out! For most people, that's warning enough and they refuse to do anything in the way of customizing or upgrading their vehicle.

This is really sad, because you can do whatever you please to your leased vehicle as long as it's within reason. But what's within reason? I decided to ask Mike Cusimano of Toyota Motor Credit. Mike is the lease termination supervisor, and his department sees thousands of cars every month. His job is to make sure they are all re-sellable.

"Probably the biggest no-no on a lease is the stock deck," Mike said. "If a customer changed the deck and then returned the vehicle with the unit still in there, we basically



Adding an RF CD changer is a great way to upgrade your system without major install hassles. A few wired here and there, and you can take the player out of the leased vehicle when it comes time to trade it in.

say he needs to get the stock unit back to us or we'll have to charge to have one put in."

"But what if it's a better unit than the one that came with the car?" I asked.

"If it's obvious, like they substituted a CD player for the stock cassette unit, then we may let it slide," Mike replied.

As I continued talking with Mike, I realized that if an inspector can easily spot something, it becomes a problem. If speakers have been replaced, they don't mind, just so



If it's more bass you are looking for, you can add a powered subwoofer to the existing system or a removable bass box like the two shown here. Just don't do anything that can't be undone!

everything works. It may even go through if the lessee installed a really nice stereo system and left it, but only if the installation was very nice, especially cosmetically. In this case, the lessee must be a little crazy to leave a nice stereo in a car he doesn't even own.

Leasing a vehicle is like leasing an apartment. If you think something might cause a problem with the landlord when you move out, you don't do it. The same logic applies to a leased car. Don't be changing the seats, or the upholstery, or paint, etc. All this stuff will get you into trouble when you drop off the vehicle.

So What Can You Do?

Now that the fear factor has been reduced, what can you do? Probably the number one consideration is constructing an upgrade that's easy to remove. You're going to pay for the new stuff and there's no sense leaving it in the vehicle when you return it anyway. The dealership is certainly not going to give you money because a better aftermarket system is there.

Look at the source unit first. More and more new cars are coming with CD players standard. These units are generally manufactured by the big names, but they don't have all the cool features and connectivity that the aftermarket units do. If you like your current unit, keep it.

You should also ask your car audio dealer about a CD changer option. Not an FM modulated unit, but the real thing. Almost all facto-



While on the subject of head units, most install shops have wiring harnesses that allow for upgrading head units to be installed with minimal hassle.

units are now compatible with a CD changer. Stinger/AAMP, Soundgate, O.E. Conekshunn and others make interfaces that allow you to use brand name changers with your factory deck.

If you want a CD player and your car comes with a cassette, then upgrade. It's probably not a good idea to get the upgraded factory stereo at the dealer. Typically it's \$200 - \$400 extra to get their CD player over the cassette unit. It might have some fancy EQ with it, but if you haven't looked lately, you can get a kick-ass CD player for that money at a car audio store.

Keeping the factory unit presents one other problem, but it's an easy



Always keep the stock head unit in case you want to keep the upgraded head unit you installed.

one to solve. The biggest kick for the money is an amplifier. Aftermarket amps generally need RCA inputs and factory decks never have them. However, all the companies you see in the pages of this magazine have already figured this out.

Today's amplifiers have gotten so sophisticated they can either take low level inputs, RCA, or high level inputs. Some have special connectors, for others you can just cut off an RCA end and wire the output of your stock deck right into that and you're in business. Rockford Fosgate, SoundStream, Kicker, PPI, MTX; they are all capable of taking



If you're looking for better speakers, you can always install some Q-Forms kick panels, which are designed to custom fit into a lot of different cars. They go in easy, and can be taken out the same way. The only drawback is that the kick panels are designed for a particular car, so they may not fit the next vehicle you lease.

the input from your factory system and using it to make loud sounds.

Some decks are really special, though, such as the Bose systems, the JBL or Infinity systems, and other amplified systems. Worse yet, some are integrated with other functions of the car. The latest version of the Honda Civic and the

Chevy Corvette are examples. But there are solutions to these too. Lightning Audio, PAC, PIE, Stinger, and many others offer specific converters for these types of head units. There are lots of configurations available, such as keeping the source unit and adding an amplifier, or changing the source unit but keeping the factory amp, or even keeping the whole thing but gaining a pair of RCA outputs for adding a subwoofer and amp.

If you decide to replace the source unit, don't skimp on the installation. Here's a couple of tips to make sure you won't be sorry when it comes time to turn in the vehicle. First, make sure you use a dash kit. Most cars these days require a dash kit, even the ones with the DIN-sized openings. The object here is to not scratch a thing on the dash, those parts are expensive to replace.

Secondly, don't cut any factory wires. Every installer, even the big boys like Best Buy and Circuit City, have kits available to them that plug right into the factory harness. The other end of the plugs feature six inches of wire the installer can strip and then connect to the new source unit's wires. They also match the aftermarket wiring color codes, so there's no guesswork as to which wire goes where. If you're buying a new source unit, don't skip either of these.

Add an amp and crank things up. To save time and money, most installers will use the factory wiring that goes out to the speakers. This is okay for amps below 50 watts per channel, but run new wires if you're going above that. Again,

make sure it has a compatible input so you don't have any noise. An inexpensive solution here is to just add a sub amp or an amplified sub like an SAS Bazooka, keeping the rest of the system factory.

The next step might be to replace the factory speakers with better coax units or even separates. If you do this, be sure there's no cutting of the door panels or rear shelf area. It's not worth taking a chance; door panels can be really expensive to replace. Kick panel mounting would even be do-able if they can be easily removed later.

By now you should see that you can do most anything you like with your leased car: all it takes is a little common sense. Figure if you spend \$1,000 to upgrade, it's well worth it for a vehicle that you will be driving for the next two to four years. Simply plan the system so it's easy to remove when the lease is over.