Opening Salvo
Letter from the Editor
Bill Leebens

In the forty years or so that PS Audio has been around, we’ve come to know a lot of talented, bright folks, whose only trait in common is that they love music. Besides musicians and engineers, we’ve encountered writers with a soft spot for music, obsessive record-collectors, teachers, historians and archivists...interesting people. People with something to say.

That’s the core group of contributors around whom Copper is being built. We want to bring to you the stories you won’t read elsewhere: stories about music and sound that will inform you, touch you, make you laugh, even make you angry. We won’t always agree with the opinions we print, but they will be defensible, and articulately presented ---or we won’t print them.

Our regular columnists include marketing guru Seth Godin, whose blog is read by millions of people per day, and who happens to be an incurable audiophile. Dan Schwartz is an LA session musician who has played with pretty much everyone, and has written for The Absolute Sound and Positive Feedback, to boot. Software wizard Richard Murison will discuss why bits are bits---but....Musicologist Lawrence Schenbeck presents music history with martini-like humor: dry, with a twist. You’ll also hear from our guys Scott McGowan and Duncan Taylor on listening to music, and recording it. Yours truly will be wearing a couple different hats, with pieces about the history of sound reproduction and vintage audio, as well as my own peculiarly-sick view of the business of audio.

Every issue will also have features that will be thought-provoking, or fun---or both, if we’re lucky. Ken Micallef wrote about life-changing music in Copper #1, and you’ll be seeing a lot more from Ken. Elizabeth Newton presented provocative thoughts on the meaning of fidelity, and in a future issue, you’ll read an interview with her.

In this issue: We’re honored to have a piece from Ken Kessler, with many more to come. Woody Woodward gives a decidedly jaundiced view of the Grammys. In every issue, we’ll pick a different country, and look at how the audio culture is just plain different from that here in ‘murrka: in this issue, Wing Cheung looks at the amazing world of Hong Kong audiophiles.

We’ve received a lot of feedback from our readers, regarding our first issue. We thought we’d anticipated most of the millions of possible problems, but one common comment caught us totally off-guard: "THERE’S TOO MUCH TO READ!!"

Ah. So: in response to the many who said this, we hear your pleas. With issue #3, Copper will publish every other week, allowing additional time to ponder/savor/write nasty emails. We’ll likely throw in an extra feature or two, just to mess with you.
This is only the beginning. Like PS Audio, we intend for Copper to be around for a while.

We hope you'll come along for the ride--- I expect it to be fun, with a lot of surprises.
All the way from Guantanamo Bay

In having read the first issue of Copper, I wanted to write in and let you know that I enjoyed each page. Just one complaint though, it was too short. Honestly though, it was great and I see a bright future for it. Thank you for sharing this with us, you’re heaven sent, and thereby your rewards shall be there in the heavens...!!

James D. Frazier
Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

Checkout This System

Wow! The first edition of Copper Magazine is fantastic. Great layout, splendid contributors and an attention to detail and quality that is not often seen in an online publication. I am looking forward to future editions.

I thought Bill Leebens would get a kick out of my speaker array. I have my Joseph Audio Perspectives stationed next to my “Vintage” AR3a (improved) speakers. I bought the ARs in 1975 and have been enjoying them ever since.

I have both solid state (Yamaha AS 2000) and tube (Rogue Audio Cronus Mag II) amplification and I occasionally switch between amps and speakers.

I like the Perspectives for Miles Davis and I like the ARs for Esperanza Spalding.

I am looking forward to Mr. Leebens’ articles, I am sure we will learn quite a bit from his experience with vintage audio gear.

Louis Fashion
More about CES

It was interesting to read your perspective on the CES. Unfortunately you did not include background that some readers might not know about. The CES is billed as a “consumer electronics” show where manufacturers can display to attract new dealers, and inform current dealers and the press/media of new products. It is seemingly not open to “consumers”. In fact that was easy to work around and simply by having a friendship with a high end audio manufacturer I was able to register about 15 times for the CES in Las Vegas and attend. Many audio buddies found similar ways to “forge” registration and attend.

THE Show, both initially in Las Vegas and later Newport, on the other hand is a show intended for consumers. No credentials are required, only a modest fee for admission.

Now having said all that, I agree with your observations about the reduction in high end audio representation at the CES and the success of THE Show. The company which I used to “coat-tail” admission stopped attending the CES, even though they shared room costs with another manufacturer, simply because it was not affordable for such a small, specialty product manufacturer. And a couple of years later I also stopped attending the CES.

The other point, from a consumer’s perspective, is THE Show is simply more convenient to a much larger population now in Newport. And displays/presentations are made by both manufacturers and area dealers. That seems to work out better for more attendees.

Regards, and best wishes to all involved in producing Copper.

Tim Price

One bad ass to Another

Paul, this is bad ass and a great read. I applause you and your team for the huge and unbiased editorial work. Dude, this is going to be really hard to do weekly! Seriously hard. Great job.
Great Starts
What a great way to start my work week! As a subscriber to Paul's Posts, I was well aware of the first edition of Copper. Upon first opening (clicking), I was amazed at the quality of this publication. From the writing to the graphic design to the online interface, Copper is a joy to experience. I read the entire issue without realizing I needed to get back to work! Congratulations on the first issue and let's all contribute to keep this publication going.

Jeff Maloney

How Good Does Great Music Sound?
As my audio systems improved from car radio to headphones to a house system, so did the sound of music. This seemed fine until I bought my first set of good speakers, the Infinity RS 1B. Powered by David Hafler from preamp to mid amp to main amp for the woofers. I still own them as I built them. And music sounds great through this system.

In fact, all music sounds great if you like it. But for me, as the reproduction of the sound increases, things happen and mostly not good. I seem to lose the engagement factor. Maybe it's because I am listening to the system and not the music. But it's not just that.

Over the weekend I was playing some Jethro Tull, Pink Floyd and Billy Joel. None are great production standards, but they are great music. I then played some reference music to hear great quality, just to make sure I'm not going deaf and the system is working fine. Then going back. This completely ruined me. I have learned to like so much music simply because it was great in sound. My new fear with getting a better and better system is will I lose more of my great music as the system gets even better?

While all music is incredible, there is a letdown in just how much of a poor to great span there is. An
example is Elton John’s Tumbleweed Connection. Great music and audio; but not all tracks. Two great ones are Talking Soldiers and Come Down in time. The rest are just below these although the album is a good example of great sound and great music in one place.

That’s it hope it inspires some thoughts.

Albert Dattolo

Baby Boomers

I have to commend you on the quality and content of the first issue of Copper. Once I started, had to read the whole thing from start to finish (from work!). As a mid-Boomer, musician, music teacher, and long-time audiophile (since the late ‘60s), I identified with a lot of your contributors’ points of view, and look forward to the next issue.

William Franklin

It’s too Frequent!

Congrats on the birth of your new child!

One major thing jumped out at me so I wanted to take a moment to drop a note.

I’m concerned that weekly will be too frequent. Not sure about this, but I’d like to see this survive over the long-term. To produce something of this quality weekly will be no small task and I’m worried about burnout from the production staff as well as email overload/burnout on the reader end. Schedules are busy these days and sometimes slow and steady wins the race. I have a hunch most magazines being published monthly is no accident.

I want to look forward to and anticipate the release of the next issue; that’s half the fun of it. It’s a bit like ordering a new component and waiting for it to arrive. While it drives one crazy, at the same time, that anticipation is half the fun. I’m not certain I’ll be able to stay caught up weekly so I thought I’d
share my concern. I want to be able to settle in and enjoy this without feeling like I’m getting buried or falling behind due to lack of time. To me, this should be like enjoying a good glass of wine, listening to a new CD, or watching a movie one’s been anticipating the release of - something one settles into and savors from end to end. If I had a vote, I’d much prefer quality vs quantity.

Food for thought.

BRAVO on the new venture. OUTSTANDING JOB!

Steve Majerick

No Way!

(In response to Duncan Taylor’s article Smell You Later)
No scientist would say that. First, smell receptors die regularly and cannot regenerate anything. Second, they are neurons and are replaced continuously from basal cells (stem cells) in the same region. Third, these same basal cells are studied to see if and how they might generate other neurons or if their properties can inform us about the process of neuronal generation.

Also, you state “Can even the richest smell temporarily remove you from full consciousness, or make you cry?” Proust (and neuroscientists) would say “Yes.”

Kal Rubinson

Breath of Fresh Air

I’m only a few pages in and I have to say, a breath of fresh air. Not at all to say that expectations were not high, I expected I would find some enjoyment within, I have to say better than expected. I would have to say I too wonder if weekly might just be too much to keep up the kind of quality I see in issue one... if you can, wonderful, if not once every two weeks or once a month... all good, in fact very good. The perspective is comfortable, friendly, quite a rarity on the net these days... THANK YOU !!!

Jim Klienfelder

Promises Kept

Just to say congratulations to you and the team on a job well done. As a professional journalist of some 40 years, I do know what is involved in a first issue and you have nailed it. Not only is the quality of the writing first class but you have delivered what you promised.

Stephen Blake
UK
Gobsmacked

Wow! I am gobsmacked! What a start to this enterprise. This hits so many good spots.

I am fearful that a weekly issue is very demanding and ambitious. If that proves to be the case I would be very happy with a monthly issue. Quality rather than frequency!

Thanks to all who have made this happen, not least Mr. Paul McGowan.

Bob MacKenzie

All the way from India

Just read the COPPER #1. What a gem of insightful information.

How entertaining can HiFi reading be?? This is it. Worth the time spent in reading about equipment, music and the way it sounds. CD and VINYL collections and not to miss Paul’s rendition of the CAC-TUS Flower.’ Awesome as it comes.

Manga
INDIA
Wine and Chocolate

By Seth Godin

I don’t drink wine, but I’m fascinated by it. The rituals, the industry, the marketing.

I do drink chocolate, because I decided I need some sort of vice, and after all, chocolate is about as perfect a vice one can have. And I showed up just as the chocolate industry started down the road to being as much like wine as they can be.

Hang in for just a few paragraphs, I’ll bring it back to audio, thanks for your patience.

Twenty years ago, John Scharffenberger launched the first bean to bar chocolate in the United States. He was the only maker (not Nestle, not Hershey, not anyone) who was buying beans directly from small farms and then, using vintage equipment, turning them into chocolate.

John was a winemaker, and he fully understood terroir and floral notes, as well as storytelling, branding and culture.

It took a few months, but his team discovered that chefs didn’t see a real need to switch from big blocks of the French chocolate they’d always used, but that consumers were eager to embrace this new hobby.

Because they were buying a story, a lifestyle and a set of expectations.

Fast forward to today, when there are more than a hundred bean to bar companies in the US. And every bar tastes different, every bar has a story. We’ve gone from the banal dollar Nestle milk chocolate bar to the $14 Rogue Porcelana 84% dark bar, made in batches of a few hundred at a time.

Right about now, the ‘shoulds’ start to appear.

You should like this one more than that one.
I was sitting with Carlos, the head of Cacao Hunters, a new bean to bar venture in Colombia, and we were tasting his stuff. I couldn’t help it--part of me started worrying that I wasn’t tasting what I was supposed to taste. After all, Carlos is a pro, this is what he does. How dare I speak up and say what I tasted?

What if I was wrong?

The wine folks figured this out a very long time ago. A large number of well-heeled people don’t want to be wrong. Being wrong isn’t what got them to be well-heeled, after all.

And so they await instructions. They look for clues (like price!) to help them figure out if they like something for not.

So that’s my first point: if you go into a hobby seeking reassurance, you’re likely to find it. There are plenty of people happy to tell you what you should like.

And it turns out that more often than not, being told you should like something makes it more likely that you will like it! This alone might be enough reason to read stereo magazines.

The second thing: After six or seven bars, Carlos and I took a break. We spent about an hour talking about his marketing strategy and drinking tea. Then I grabbed an unopened bar from a small experimental batch, tasted it and said, “wow, this is the single best thing we’ve had all day.”

With chagrin, I realized that it was the very same varietal we’d tasted two hours earlier.

But here’s the kicker: we went back to that first bar and compared it to the second one, the one I had just opened. They didn’t taste at all alike.

Same beans, different taste.

That’s because, like music, like room tone, we’re dealing with something that’s really hard to quantify. That’s because beans grow on trees, and one tree is in fact going to taste really different from another one.

The should on the table: They both should have tasted the same, and my taste buds should have realized that they were the same. The truth, though, was quite different.

In this case, my taste buds were confirmed by others. They did actually taste different (to us, anyway). But it’s not that simple.

In research in the Journal of Wine Economics, researchers found that among judges at wine competitions (judges!), blind tasting of wine led judges to say a glass of wine was different 90% of the time when it was actually the same wine. Nine out of ten times, they didn’t taste what they should have.
I was thinking about this when I was sitting in the listening room of one of the most famous audio reviewers of this moment. And I thought his stereo sounded lousy. Of course, I didn't say anything, because I shouldn't hear that, and because who am I to question the emperor and because, hey, bad things happen in basements.

You are welcome to sign up for ‘should’. Or, if you want, you can just enjoy what you listen to.

If you like it, that's good enough for me.

**Seth Godin** blogs every day. He eats dark chocolate every day. And he's always been bad at should.
Is 44.1/16 Enough?

By Richard Murison

You hear it mentioned often that the standard digital audio format adopted by CD, 16-bit audio with a 44.1kHz sample rate, is perfectly capable of representing everything that a normal person can hear. Like most simplifications in any field – never mind digital audio – the real answer is “Yes, but....”. We’ll take a look at that and see if we can shed some light on where “Yes” ends and “, but....” begins.

Looking at it from the dispassionate viewpoint of mathematics, what does mathematics say about the numbers that represent the music in a digital audio file? The problem was first analyzed by Harry Nyquist and Claude Shannon (and, incidentally, by several others as well) and is therefore known as the Nyquist- Shannon theorem. First of all, they made the assumption that the numbers themselves are exactly accurate. Note that this is a bad assumption, since, in order to have absolute precision, each number would have to be represented by an infinite number of digits. But we’ll stick with that assumption for the time being.

In their analysis, Nyquist and Shannon showed that the most important criterion for representing a waveform accurately by reducing it to a sequence of regularly-measured (“sampled”) numbers was that the waveform itself had to contain only frequencies lower than one-half of the sample rate, a number known as the “Nyquist Frequency”. Provided that this condition is met, those numbers can be used to reconstruct the original waveform exactly. In other words, it can recreate not only the value of the waveform at the specific sampled points (obviously), but at every other point in time between samples. It achieves this by summing a series of Sinc() functions, one for each sampled data point. Now this is a purely mathematical construct, since you can’t build a DAC that sums Sinc() functions. But it does nevertheless provide absolute proof that the sampled numbers do in fact completely represent the waveform.

So that was the “Yes” – what about the “, but....”? There are two obvious buts, and one less obvious. Let’s see if you have spotted them, because I have either mentioned or hinted at all three.

The first “but” is that we assumed that the sampled data numbers were of absolute precision, and clearly they are not. We must – for practical purposes – limit the precision that we use, for the simple
reason that more precision requires a bigger file size. In digital audio, because the data is stored as binary numbers, we express the precision in terms of the Bit Depth. For CD audio this means 16-bit numbers. This is approximately equivalent to a 5-digit decimal number. Every stored number therefore contains a rounding error at the level of the sixth digit, for which the technical term is “Quantization Error”. These quantization errors will serve to limit the accuracy with which the original waveform can be recreated.

I will return to this subject in a later column, but for the time being the simplest way to assess the impact of quantization error is to consider that it adds noise to the signal. This noise is a bit like tape hiss, and for 16-bit audio this digital tape hiss is at a level which is below -95dB (unweighted). Compare this to the performance of analog tape, which (as best as I can tell, but I’m no expert) doesn’t get much better than -85dB (unweighted), and you can see that 16-bit audio has the potential to outperform the very best analog tape, which is pretty impressive. On the other hand, microphone feeds, as well as amplifiers and DACs, can have background noise levels in the region of -120dB, so 16-bit audio falls well short of the capabilities of current electronics.

The industry has addressed this by introducing an alternative 24-bit format. This increases file sizes by 50%, but reduces the level of the quantization noise down to below -140dB, which is a long way below the threshold of audibility. By using 24-bit audio, the “but” introduced by the assumption of absolute precision can be safely eliminated.

The second “but” is the assumption that the signal contains only frequencies below the Nyquist Frequency. For CD’s sample rate of 44.1kHz, the Nyquist Frequency is 22.05kHz. But the upper reaches of the range of audible frequencies is widely held to be 20kHz, so why is that a problem? Simply put, just because those unwanted high frequencies are inaudible doesn’t mean that they are not present in the signal. Therefore it is necessary to filter them out. The filter required for that job must pass all frequencies below 20kHz, yet block all frequencies above 22kHz. That transition band is extremely narrow, and for that reason filters with this sort of characteristic are known as “Brick Wall Filters”. Such filters are known to have audible consequences, and this is another topic that we must reserve for a future column. For the time being, the important takeaway is that digital audio can capture accurately not the waveform you want to capture, but that waveform after it has been passed through an appropriate brick-wall filter.

Did anybody spot the third “but”? It’s not obvious. And I’m not going to discuss it at all, save to throw it out there for you to ruminate over. It is this – a real-world DAC does not work by summing Sinc() functions. So, based on how real-world DACs work, how does their performance deviate from the mathematical certainty upon which the Nyquist-Shannon sampling theory is based? That’s an interesting question. We’ll spend a lot of time in future columns looking at how DACs work.

*Sinc(x) = Sin(x)/x*

**Richard Murison** enjoyed a long career working with lasers, as a researcher, engineer, and then as an entrepreneur. This enabled him to feed his life-long audiophile habit. Recently, though, he started an audiophile software company, BitPerfect, and consequently he can no longer afford it. Even stranger, therefore, that he has agreed to serve in an unpaid role as a columnist, which he writes from Montreal, Canada.
Where are the Bitchin’ Stereos?

By Bill Leebens

Here’s a simplistic premise for you: When stereos became secondary to Macs, PCs and VCRs on campus, we lost our way in America. That single change was sufficient to plummet our nation into the hellish Night of the Long Knives that is life in America today.

Think about it: every disaster in American society since that time, circa 1982, can be traced to the fact that college students drifted away from their time-honored pursuits of listening to music, getting high, and getting laid, to such arcane pursuits as “writing code”, “Googling”, and, God help us, “social media”.

Has any good come of it all? I think not. Cyberneticists proclaim the “information era”, which is a polite euphemism for “we are a nation of sheep who know nothing, and thus must have facts readily available at all times, as we can’t remember—what were we talking about?”

Notice that the term isn’t “wisdom era”; without the aid of Cerwin-Vegas filling dorm rooms with Jimi Hendrix and King Crimson at very high levels of volume, truly, there can be no wisdom. Instead, we are besieged with endless images of talentless celebri-droids with freakishly-large hindquarters who relentlessly inform us of what they’re eating, wearing, and what and whom they’re doing.

---And our parents warned us that sitting in a dorm room all day listening to records was an aimless, pointless pursuit?? Puh-lease: after years of reading liner notes, we were Doctoral candidates in Philosophy, capable of spontaneously composing gems like “Existential Angst in the Lyrics of Humble Pie vis a vis Those of Small Faces: a Kantian Critique” with one hand, while eating pizza with the other. Pfui! What better preparation for the world of corporate-speak could we have had? How do you think today’s grant-writers and university presidents got where they are today? Let’s see today’s ADD-afflicted Vine-watchers extract marketable skills from their obsessions.

Seriously: we may have been herd animals, but we were capable of sitting, sharing music (and pizza), and talking about it. Have you seen an average group of college freshman these days? They’re barely capable of lifting their eyes from their phones or of removing their ear-buds, and text each other while within a yard of one another. They’re every bit as frightened and frightening as an
Appalachian-pale group of fundamentalist home-schoolers, and far less able to quote scripture. And we were supposed to have been anti-social?

All of this is traceable to the displacement of music-listening as a social activity, and it all started on our college campuses, amongst our supposed best and brightest. Those inclined to life as worker-bees never stood a chance. Social hierarchy, which had been based upon meaningful criteria such as the possession of a great record collection and 15” woofers, degenerated to latching onto trivia such as processor speed and monitor size. Can mastery of Linux attract sorority girls in the same way that Sly and the Family Stone could?

Again: I think not.

Can the downfall of our civilization be overcome? Judging by recent Presidential debates, no. But if one were to lapse into an uncharacteristic state of optimism, caused perhaps by listening to “Hey Hey My My” repeatedly at 120 dB, one might think: “Maybe. What the hell.”

The appearance of “headphone culture” points to the possibility of the revival of interest in music, even though few things are more bass-ackwards than sharing music by passing headsets around. Siddown with some pizza and speakers and crank it up! Talk to each other!!

Maybe there is hope. Maybe with persistence, we can help this generation turn out to be okay. Maybe even as good, right-thinking, and as normal as us.

**Bill Leebens** is Editor of Copper and Director of Marketing at PS Audio. He has been in and out of the audio business for over 40 years. Each time he returns to it, he becomes more cynical. He does not intend to go quietly.
Yet Another Ode to the Dead

By Dan Schwartz

What’s with 2016? Now it’s George Martin, of all people! I mean, come on...[1]

I know, he was 90, which is a hell of an age, and wouldn’t work anymore because he’d become hard of hearing. So it’s not out of regret that I write this, it’s out of appreciation. If not for Martin, and circumstance, I might have spent my life toiling as nameless drone in some commercial-art factory --- in advertising or something.

If he did nothing but sign and produce the Beatles, that would be enough; we all know that. I want to focus on two aspects of the man’s life that make him significant to me. The first is HOW he came to meet and sign the Fabs.

Brian Epstein had made the rounds of the record companies in London, rejected by both and EMI and famously by Decca (“guitar groups are on the way out”). A chance meeting when he was having more acetates cut put him in touch with a publishing arm of EMI, who had quite liked the songs - and he was smart enough to hold out for a record deal, even though he had already been rejected by EMI. This brought him to the office of Parlophone and Martin (and an instant friendship with Martin’s secretary, Judy). They met, Martin was unimpressed (while being impressed by Epstein), and that might have been that.

And then --- “It came clean out of the blue and was the result of an extraordinary combination of events in London.”[2]

Brian had been to see every label, large (EMI and Decca had 80% of the British record market) and small --- none had expressed interest. But George Martin called him in three months later and said he was giving “the boys” a contract. In the intervening months, George had earned the ire of Len Wood, who managed the four EMI labels, of which George was the head of one. How? Recently separated, he was having an affair with his secretary (they would get married once George was divorced, and this one lasted). Though they were extremely discreet, word had gotten out about them, and this being England in 1962, his penance was to do a favor for the publishing arm, which very
much wanted the Beatles and their songs recorded for EMI. The Beatles at this point had a fiercely
determined manager, potent energy and some raw talent. But the real musical skill was Martin’s,

On such things as an extra-marital affair millions of lives pivoted, including my own. The rest is his-
tory, all the way from “I don’t like your tie” to “And in the end...”

He said, of the meeting, “I did think they had enormous talent, but it wasn’t their music, it was their
charisma, the fact that when I was with them they gave me a sense of well-being, of being happy.
The music was almost incidental. I thought, ‘If they have this effect on me, they are going to have
that effect on their audiences.’”

Which brings me to the second thing about the man that is significant, to me: he was a real old-
fashioned record producer. Nowadays most real producers begin life as an engineer (as opposed to
the computer-enabled notion that everyone is a producer – it’s why I call myself simply a musician.
When was the last time you met someone who said they weren’t a producer?).

But not George Martin – he always left the getting and recording of sounds up to someone else. If a
record sounded good --- or sounded bad --- it was entirely incidental to the music contained therein.
He played a bit of piano, and oboe, and was famously an arranger. It was the sensibility that he
formed in learning those instruments, in learning the record business as it was, and then in produc-
ing a variety of acts, from Bernard Cribbins to Beyond the Fringe and Peter Sellers, i.e. comedy
records that he brought to the potent combination that changed the world. He had few peers: John
Hammond Sr., Orrin Keepnews, Teo Macero, a couple others.

The success of Martin and the Beatles, and the communication (in 60s parlance) with the world
that they undertook, said to a tremendous number of people ---including me --- that a life in making
music was possible (and was potentially rewarding).

I met him once and told him that my favorite of his arrangements for the Fabs was “Hey Jude”, be-
cause it was whole-note power-chords for orchestra. He said to me, “That’s what we learned from
them though, isn’t it – simplicity is best.”

Rest in peace, Mr. Martin – you inspired so many people; your rest is well earned.

And as with the last one of these I wrote, as I write this, another death has been announced: Keith
Emerson killed himself last night. I don’t even know what to say, but I’m thinking about it.

[1] Just so you know, these are normally written 4 weeks in advance, and my first piece was actually
going to run second – Editor Leebens decided to run last week’s Paul Kantner piece first, because,
you know, timely and all. And now that first piece is going to run third.

Dan Schwartz is a parent, sort of a husband, and has been a musician of some years, having played on quite a few records - and even a few good ones. He’s recorded or played with Rosanne Cash, Bob Dylan, Jon Hassell, Brian Eno, Bernie Leadon, Dave Navarro, Linda Perry, Sheryl Crow, Stan Ridgeway, and was a member of the Tuesday Night Music Club. In his spare time, he used to write for Harry and Sallie at the absolute sound and the Perfect Vision. Professionally, he keeps trying to leave music, but it keeps coming to get him.
Mission Statement

By Lawrence Schenbeck

Dr. Schenbeck—

Call me Larry.

If you insist. I see you haven’t written an introductory statement of purpose for your column. Why not?

Well, people already know me. I’ve been hanging around these parts for years. Maybe I was afraid of boring everyone right off the bat, what with my Dickensian childhood and all.

You do write about classical music, which is fairly boring.

No, it’s not.

But isn’t classical music, you know, a bit too serious? By which I mean long-winded and overly earnest.

Glad you’re so sure about that. Over here in 2016, I am no longer certain what “classical” or “serious” mean. The people who make vernacular music—by which I mean pop or jazz or folk—are often quite serious about it. Those who write about it seem serious too.

Come now. We still assign categories, and they still hold meaning. Consider the Billboard® charts.

Right. At the very least, we should cop to the major distinctions between so-called art music (“classical”) and various vernacular genres. “Classical” flows from learned tradition (actually, a succession of learned traditions), and it relies upon the work of a handful of trained specialists. “Vernacular” lies closer to what common people sing and play. As Chef Gusteau says in Ratatouille, “anyone can cook”—anyone can produce valid, important art, art that sustains a community by telling its stories and expressing its values. That has to be respected.
And yet, here I am writing a column for audiophiles—music lovers, presumably—about art music. “Classical” is not unlike high-end audio. It acknowledges, nay, celebrates a striving after higher ideals: exceptional craftsmanship; the possibility of experiencing rare and exalted states of mind; the challenge of making or hearing something more complex, subtle, or downright difficult than what’s available every day.

Vernacular music remains an everyday thing, rightly so. We need mac-and-cheese, we need routine, we need the comfort of friends and home. Classical, on the other hand, acknowledges our human instinct to seek out the special and unique. It’s not for every day, and it’s not for everyone. Genius is part of the equation: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner—those people were special indeed, and what they left us was unique. It lives on because we get more from it than what “Annie Laurie” or “Purple People Eater” offer.

Surely there is also special folk music, important rock or rap.

Of course. And on occasion Mozart wrote some pretty classy elevator music. That’s what makes culture fascinating. We can’t be contained easily within arbitrary boundaries. One interesting development in recent years is how our respect for the vernacular has given rise to performers who know their music history and display it with every breath they take. I’m thinking of Rhiannon Giddens, for instance, whose debut solo album is a mini-encyclopedia of American folk and popular song styles. Here she is, offering her astonishing version of Odetta’s “Water Boy”:

Or how about young jazz singer Cecile McLorin Salvant? In her live performances and beautifully crafted albums (available on vinyl, of course) she serves up each song as if it were a Fabergé egg: Billie, Ella, and Sarah are born again. Everyone she works with seems equally steeped in jazz tradition. At the moment, she is one of its foremost curators.

And see how comfortable all of us now feel in using words like curator? We recognize that celebration-through-preservation, this art of rebooting, reviving, remixing, and revisiting, is a way to insist, in the face of relentless technological and economic change, on our unchanging humanity. Everyone is gradually becoming a “classical” musician.

Okay, I get it. But frankly, I find all these careful recreations slightly creepy. Shouldn’t there be room for a rebellious yawn or two? Even classical music benefits from a swift kick every now and then.

You bet. If we can’t laugh, we’re dead in the water. One of the huge problems with mainstream art music today is that there’s too little humor involved. People sense that classical music is in trouble, so they circle the wagons and paste stern expressions on their faces. It doesn’t help. (No, lieutenant, your men are already dead.)

Think of this music’s great humorists: Anna Russell. Gerard Hoffnung and the Hoffnung Festivals. PDQ Bach. They thrived because knowledge and love were still alive, tradition still healthy enough to survive a few affectionate kicks.
We’d better start laughing again, because the emperor hasn’t stopped calling in tailors. There’s always going to be pomposity that needs deflating, posturing that begs to be mocked. We’re only human. Send in the clowns.

**Okay, so that’s your manifesto. Can we get on with some real music this week?**

What, Rhiannon Giddens isn’t real enough for you? I promise to include a few rebellious yawps in future columns. For now, try this: a Baroque concerto grosso as curated by Igor Stravinsky in 1938. Not funny, more like witty. It’s the wit that keeps us listening:

You hear the odd little way a series of single bassoon notes (joined by low strings) drop in to punctuate the melodic phrases? I just love that. Stravinsky is playing with Bach; he’s riffing on the idea of the useful bass line, a staple of Baroque style. (It’s not all about the bass, but bass lines do matter.) He can’t stop putting English on the ball. Pitches curve and then break where you don’t expect them to. This is great counterpoint. It’s also Music about Music. In future columns I’ll talk more about these things. And we’ll get back to Mahler.

**Oh, right. Another “great humorist”**.

Let’s just say he had a serious sense of humor. Stay tuned.

**Lawrence Schenbeck** enjoys good music, quiet conversation, and long walks on the beach at sunset. In spite of that he became a historical musicologist. He is the author of two books, many more scholarly articles, and countless liner notes, music reviews, and “casuals.” He lives in the Atlanta area with his family and too much music, Tchaikovsky being the least of it. Literally.
Dollars and Sensless

By Duncan Taylor

In the 21st-century world of music, it’s exceedingly rare to find a recording studio or musician with access to plenty of money—aside from a few at the top of the food chain. That’s practically a truism, as shown by clichéd jokes like, Q: What do you call a drummer without a girlfriend? A: Homeless.

Given their general level of poverty, it shouldn’t be a surprise that most good musicians have terrible listening rigs. You’ve probably heard this before, and in my experience, it’s true: some of the very best musicians listen to music on seriously inferior equipment. Their ability to hear through the crap and noise to the musicians playing, somehow overcomes the general horribleness of the gear.

Being a complete musician requires serious dedication to the craft, the language, and the practice. When a guy can go nuts soloing in every key, scale and mode, I’m inclined to forgive him for not having pored over the writings of Martin J. King, Siegfried Linkwitz, or other audio gurus.

But it’s not just young musicians being choosy with their dough. It seems that everyone on the creation side of music has to stretch their dollars, and I’ve experienced that myself.

When I set out to build a live-track recording studio for Boulder’s local newspaper... do I even need to explain further? Newspapers across the nation have been in dire straits ever since Craigslist appeared. Let’s just say that a “limited” budget would’ve been a lot more than what I had to work with.

To keep expectations suitably low, we called the studio a “garage”. And we had to shoot video there, so the grunge would be obvious. I presented three different budgets to the folks at the paper---good, better, best---and in the end I had to cut the “good” budget in half, and make do with that.

I found the hardest hurdle to cross was creating a truthful monitoring system for myself without spending an arm and a leg.

Early on, I used -30db isolating in-ear monitors from Shure. You may now have read my current
feelings on the subject of IEMs -- mostly negative. But I was trying to mix inside the same room as the band, and the isolation allowed me to know something of the truth of what was being recorded.

It was around this time that I stumbled upon the nascent movement of people trying to modify planar headphones, specifically the Fostex studio cans. Lift your eyes to my column photo and you'll see I ended up taking the plunge... 5 times! After creating a reference pair for myself, I built pairs for each music reporter at the newspaper, as well as my choral music-loving mom.

What appealed to me then and forevermore, was the idea that with a little effort and knowledge, I could go out and get the sound I was looking for.

To judge my high frequencies, I'd go between the Shure IEMs, the Fostex and my Yamaha powered monitors with their wave-guided titanium domes. If a track's high end was too hot for the Fostex and Yamahas, I knew it was way too hot. If it sounded right on the Fostex but a little forward with the Shures, I knew I was in business. But for the vocal range, I couldn't trust the Yamahas, as they had a punishing crossover frequency right where I wanted presence in the mix. For that range, I trusted my full range 1964 Coral drivers in “Bigger Is Better” cabinets, which I built for my home two channel system. The Fostex cans were also good for this, aside from the 1KHz area. For the midbass, oddly enough, I found good resolution in a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. And of course I never let a full mix go before firing it up in at least two car stereo systems.

I have a feeling that most of you know how to assemble a system capable of speaking the truth. The truth is, truth ain’t cheap.

But what was I going to do-- not record a ton of bands eager for the opportunity? Despite the challenges, and in part because of the challenges, the search of mine for sonic truth was incredibly rewarding. For me, knowledge gained is a currency that buys my happiness. Being behind the glass, and helping create beautiful sounds is up there too.

Recently, a certain pair of Infinity IRS V speakers has my ears’ attention. It’s a little hard to go back to the constant juggle of monitors, after playing mixes over those monoliths! I have to keep telling myself to stay humble, and true to my broke-musician roots....

**Duncan Taylor** is a product specialist at PS Audio, and recording engineer and producer of live-track video recording studio Second Story Garage. He also plays a few instruments, pens a weekly music column for college students, and likes to build speakers and amps in his spare time.
Saved by the Bell (Labs)

By Bill Leebens

Last week in this column, I mentioned that we would be focusing on the period after World War II.

I lied.

The post-war era saw the birth and growth of what we would recognize as “the Hi-Fi industry”, but we need to go back a little further in order to understand the roots of that industry in America. If we want to thank, or blame, one person for the audio industry, that person would be Bell. Yes, as in Alexander “Mr. Watson, come here, I need you!” Graham Bell.

For starters: forgot all you know about him. Bell was brilliant, a polymath who in some ways rivaled Edison and Tesla. And unlike many of the industrial pioneers of the 19th century, he apparently was a decent human being. (Yes, there were patent wars surrounding the telephone, but there were patent wars about every major innovation in that era. And in ours.)

We can think of our era as having introduced incredible technological advancements, and while that’s true, few of them are fundamental advancements that radically alter daily life. Hang in there for a moment, and feel free to disagree---but does Moore’s Law affect the lives of coal miners in Wales?

It may, but mostly in peripheral ways, such as satellite TV at home, internet access, and so on.

Looking back to the 19th century, there were five technologies that changed the world, and in greater or lesser extent, changed the lives of millions of everyday folks:

1. Railroads (many developers, 1820s-1830s)
2. Telegraph (Morse and others, 1830s-1840s)
3. Telephone (Bell and others, 1870s)
4. Light bulb (Edison and others, 1870s)
5. Automobile (Daimler, Benz, others 1880s-1890s)

There were major advances in the 18th century as well (steamships, the cotton gin, the thresher,
and so on), but these five from the 1800s seem intertwined. As did ships in earlier eras, railroads made the world smaller, for the first time enabling millions to travel and move more freely. The telegraph enabled, for the first time in human history, long-distance communication without actual travel (by an individual, carrier pigeon or by a physical letter or parcel). The telephone built upon the telegraph, allowing transmission and reception of a voice, over long distances. The light bulb literally brought us out of the darkness, eventually supplanting the far-riskier oil and gas lamps and lights. Finally, the automobile increased personal mobility, allowing travel to places without rails or roads (although it would be decades before it became attainable for anyone but the very wealthy).

All five increased access to the world out there, in ways that are difficult to even imagine today.

So---audio? Bell? Hello??

Right. The short story: Bell’s mother was deaf, Bell’s father was a teacher of the deaf as well as an instructor in speech. Bell followed in dad’s footsteps, and married one of his students, who was also deaf. Bell conceived of taking the concept of the telegraph—which could only send one message at a time over a given stretch of line—and multiplexing transmissions, sending multiple messages simultaneously at different frequencies, which could then be separated and read. The idea was to make the telegraph more accessible to individual users, allowing universal communication.

But: things went wrong—or very right, depending upon your point of view. Many others pursued the idea of the multiplexed telegraph (also known as the “harmonic telegraph”), but with the assistance of Watson (Thomas Watson, not to be confused with the founder of IBM of the same name)—a machinist used to helping inventors translate designs into working prototypes—Bell’s version was made to work, and a patent was filed just ahead of rivals.

But here’s the important part: unlike others, Bell, having taught elocution and phonetic speech to the deaf, realized that since the device could reproduce signals over a wide range of frequencies, it might be able to reproduce actual speech. It was, and it did.

As is true of all successful inventors, Bell knew how to promote his creation. The first World’s Fair, the Centennial Exposition of 1876, was held in Philadelphia to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and allowed him to exhibit a working model of his telephone over lines run from one end to the other of the main exhibit hall, which at that time was the largest building ever constructed.

Among the other exhibits at the Centennial Exposition was the arm and torch of the Statue of Liberty, the first piece completed. The press and notoriety brought to Bell’s invention by the Exposition ensured that he would be recognized as the one, true inventor of the telephone; subsequently, he prevailed in all patent challenges, and worldwide fame and wealth were guaranteed.

The End? Hardly: more like The Beginning. So, we have Bell, who created a device that could reproduce human speech. Later that same year, Edison demonstrated his phonograph, which could both record and reproduce speech, and in a limited way, music. Of the two inventions, the telephone came to be the cash-cow, as well as the device requiring massive, worldwide infrastructure.
An important part of that infrastructure was the source of most of the fundamental research on sound, its perception and its reproduction: Bell Labs. And Bell Labs was the birthplace of everything that resemble Hi-Fi, including stereo. In Part 2, we'll look at how much important work was done at Bell Labs, and how much is stilled owed that facility and its commercial arm---Western Electric.

**Bill Leebens** has bought and sold vintage gear since the days when it was new. He regrets that a goodly number of classic American components now reside in Japan, because of him. Mea culpa.
Leon Bridges

By Scott McGowan

I think it is the right of every generation to revere its roots.

A reviewer friend of mine watched the Grammys and recently penned his dissatisfaction with today’s music, citing its present lack of melody. Citing how it screams instead of sings. I read the cynic and agreed a little, but also laughed a little. Some of what we’ve seen at the Grammys this year could indeed be described as unmelodic.

But talking about the lack of “melody” in “today’s” music ought to sound eerily familiar to this refined gentleman of the baby-boomer generation.

I will ask the more-aged readers of this column to recall the incendiary reception afforded the un-melodic and repetitive artists who never made anything of themselves: Hooligans such as The Beatles and Chuck Barry and Elvis (with those gyrating hips, corrupting our young women, playing their kind’s music). Growing up I was regaled with tales of the Rock n’ Roll Generation. Our parents had alcohol, we had drugs, they told me. Our parents had rules, we had none. And most prominently Our parents hated our awful music and long hair. Well, I’m neither disappointed nor surprised. Indeed I welcome it, and hope someday to shake my cane from a rocking-chair and yell at lawn-infringing youngsters. It sounds fun.

Many of you remember this moment:

(Picture of Paul McCartney which you must use the online version to see)

It was when Paul sang “Yesterday” in The Beatles’ second appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1965. With it, The Beatles finally won-over the hearts of many belonging to The Greatest Generation.

Every once in awhile, out of the maw that is the present generation’s horrible music, a welcomed link to the past arrives: an artist who reminds us that melody and musicality still exist in the hearts of our nation’s young.
Enter twenty-six year old Leon Bridges and his touching, rocking, silky-smooth debut album (Columbia Records, 2015) Coming Home.

I can only speak for myself when I say that the sounds of CCR and Skynyrd and The Who only bring to my mind memories of overplayed wedding music—and definitely not Woodstock. But sample your 20- and 30-year-olds, and you will find robust support for Ray Charles, Al Green, Marvin Gaye, and Little Richard. But if I had to pin Bridges to any American musical icon, it would be seminal soul and R&B artist Otis Redding.

In December, the talented young Bridges and his powerful band rocked the halls of Rockefeller Plaza at a Saturday Night Live performance. He is not Paul McCartney by any stretch. I know. But does it give the latter generations a sense that we are doing something right?

His hit single (by the same name) “Coming Home” got 20 million plays on Spotify in a few short months. Other fantastic tracks include “Smooth Sailin’” and “Brown Skin Girl.” But my favorite track is #6, “Lisa Sawyer” about his mother’s life and discovery of the Church. Listen to how young Bridges phrases each line. Listen to his careful, understated lyrics. This is not an easy song to sing. He’s a real pro.

Check out his album on Spotify or Apple Music.

This may be the first time many of our readers will hear about Leon Bridges, but it will not be the last.

Scott McGowan is Sales Director of PS Audio, which is his dream job. His coolest possessions are his Studer Revox A77 reel-to-reel tape deck, and his Technics 1210-MKII turntable. He doesn’t like TV very much. Most nights he stays up too late listening, reading, writing. His favorite author is James Joyce. He lives with his wife in Denver, where he writes fiction, poetry, editorials, and the occasional music review.
Hong Kong Hi-Fi

By Wing Cheung

I live in America now, but grew up in Hong Kong, and have been involved in its high-end audio community for decades. Before I tell you about that fanatical group, you should understand a little about Hong Kong itself.

Hong Kong is a tiny little island of only thirty square miles. That’s even smaller than Manhattan, which is about thirty-six square miles. Adding in the adjacent Kowloon peninsula, Hong Kong has an enormous population of 700 million residents, most of whom live in thousands upon thousands of tightly-packed skyscraper apartments. Locals use an old American term to describe this environment: “the concrete jungle”.

In that “jungle”, typical family living spaces are “birdcage size”, ranging from 400 to 1200 square feet, including the public areas. It’s basically like living in a US-style two-car garage, and many apartments are even smaller than that!

Hong Kong is an energetic modern city, blending Chinese traditions and values with those absorbed from the West. Outside the concrete jungle, there is very little green space remaining for outdoor activities. As a result, there is a focus upon one’s living-space, and owning high-quality material goods. Its duty-free system makes Hong Kong a showcase of the world’s best products, so many locals have very high standards of taste. There is an almost-obsessive interest in owning and collecting jewelry, expensive watches, cameras, antiques, fine wines, prestigious cars—even though the dense traffic prevents them from ever getting up to speed!—and of course, incredible, expensive, over-the-top audio equipment.

Everyday life in Hong Kong is fast-paced and highly stressful, and many people find a release from their daily cares in music and audio. There is still high status attached to owning expensive audio equipment, but it is gratifying that many who begin simply as owners of high-priced, impressive gear come to truly love music, and become serious students of it.

My journey in music began when I was a teen in Hong Kong in the early 1970’s.

I was captivated by the sounds I heard in a neighborhood theater where music was played before the movies. I can never forget that spacious, wide, full-bodied, inviting musical quality. The sound was absolutely effortless, and I’d never heard anything like it before. I wanted that sound at home.

For me, the sound was the goal, not owning equipment...but I quickly learned I couldn’t have one without the other. I also learned that the theater whose sound I loved had classic American tube amps and horn speakers from Western Electric---and unless I owned a room as big as a theater, my goals would be compromised. All the same: my adventure had begun, and will likely never end.
I visited audio stores, because that’s where the equipment was! I met other enthusiasts, and as I visited their homes and heard their impressive Star Wars systems, I was initially overwhelmed and intimidated. I began to develop a critical ear from listening to all those different types of systems, and I even came to appreciate classical music, which was held to be the essential source material for evaluating systems.

It used to be said that worldwide, the high-end audio industry’s most expensive and impressive products were designed to appeal to the taste of Hong Kong audiophiles.

Back in the “glory days” of the early ‘80’s to the mid-1990s, that was likely true, and there was and is a general impression that all Hong Kong audiophiles are very rich. That’s not the case, but many make a firm commitment to their expensive hobby, and just find a way to make their dreams come true.

How crazy-serious are Hong Kong audiophiles? Very serious, and some are just crazy! Let me introduce a few “cases” that I have come across.

Back in the early ‘70’s, I heard an incredible sound system built up by an attorney, Mr. Cheung. His listening room was small, yet bigger than the average HK living room---130 SF with 10’ ceilings---but the sound stage was unbelievably huge. It sucked me into music as though I was on the deck of a luxury liner, cruising in an endless ocean!

Mr. Cheung assembled an intricate system starting with a Technics SP10 turntable with two SME 3012 tonearms and ADC cartridges, running into a custom preamp and five-way electronic crossover with EQ for each section. From there the signal went into FIVE Sony stereo amps, into an amazing speaker system with electrostatic tweeters, a one midrange, the infamous Yamaha “ear” loudspeakers and a horn-loaded 15” paper-cone woofer. Mr. Cheung was fanatical! He had detailed listening notes for every record, and would adjust the EQ, phase and amplitude settings for each individual record, often adjusting them track by track.

The sound was incredible, but also a lot of work! I bought records I heard him play, and could never repeat the magical experiences I had while hearing them on his system. Forty-five years have passed, and even with the help of 10X better equipment, power treatment, and superior cabling, I am still unable to get that kind of sound.

Another magical system from the ‘70’s came as a total surprise to me, and to many others. Ivan Lee had the first pair of Magneplanar Tympani 1s in Hong Kong---a big, flat panel speaker that looked exactly like a room-divider. Ivan was able to afford a huge apartment with an impressive listening room of over 400 SF. After weeks of listening he had separated the panels and found a way to produce incredible bass; Ivan said the bass kick drum now has its kick-butt punch!

He kept tweaking and improving the speakers: steel braces behind them to improve image accuracy, more acoustically-transparent grille cloths, a big Phase Linear amp for the bass. After that work was done, the Maggies conveyed more information than any speakers I’d ever heard, other than the complicated five-way speakers Mr.Cheung had. With his huge speakers and big room, Ivan
had the bigger audio picture.

Another fanatical audiophile was G.P.Tong---a rich guy, and a very nice host. Visiting him was always a joyful trip; not only did I enjoy his high-end toys, but also his delicious homemade food. He believed that all LPs are not equal, even if they come from the same company, shipment or batch. He used to hunt for the first arrivals of newly-released LPs, purchase two or three copies for each title, then audition and compare them carefully. He often found that the record quality varied tremendously, and only one would be the very best of all. The “loser” albums were then sold to friends at a discounted price, and I purchased a couple from him like that.

Oh, yes--- I could hear the differences between my “leftovers” and the one he picked. I bought the leftovers because by the time I knew of the recordings, the “first shipment copies” would be long gone, even the seconds. I may have been purchasing the “not so good” sounding LPs from him, but it was still better than buying it from the street!

G.P.’s audio system has changed frequently. Equipment is replaced by new units from every two weeks to a few months, keeping him very busy all the time. We may be envious of his ability to buy new gear, but we do feel sorry for him. Often, after he has put in new audio components, the sound hasn’t improved, but has lost some elusive magic.

I learned a lot from these dedicated and creative Hong Kong pioneer audiophiles. They influenced my path to high-end audio in big way. To this day, I still regard them highly.

Today, there are hundreds of high-end audio stores in Hong Kong. Real estate here is extremely pricey: rental of a 200 square-foot space in a business district can cost US$ 40,000 a month! In spite of that, many audio stores are able to stay in business, and make at least some profit. Hong Kong is an amazing city---especially for audiophiles!

Wing Cheung has been an audio reviewer for quite some years. He is a retired Boeing engineer working in their Concept Center. As a seven years old, Wing fell in love with music from a full tube Philips table top radio. At seventeen he stepped into true hi-fi audio, and never turned back.
Audio Products Are Luxury Products

By Ken Kessler

Welcome to a new series of blogs, with a twist: instead of the blogger – in this case, me – simply grinding his own axes (many of which would land me in court), I will be offered a topic every month, suggested by someone with other axes to grind. If it happens to be one I feel I can discuss with any authority or wisdom, as immodest as that sounds, I shall do so with vigor. Conveniently, the first is one so close to my heart that I could have proffered it myself: “Whether you believe it or not, audio products are luxury products.”

You need to ask two things before I can proceed. The first is: Why even mention this in the first place – as in: “Isn’t it blindingly obvious?” The second is: How is Kessler qualified to tackle the subject?

Regarding the first, and why you would be right to assume that it is stating the obvious, is because high-end audio components are sufficiently expensive as to be “luxury products” by both definition and default. And yet ... the majority of audio reviewers, especially the American and Italian audio critics, are Bernie Sanders/Jeremy Corbyn/Karl Marx wannabees who despise wealth – and the wealthy. They are in denial about their passion and enthusiasm, like ‘vegetarians’ who eat chicken or fish.

This begs the most vexing question of all, which such reviewers ALWAYS refuse to address like grown-ups, instead preferring to act like those idiots at British universities who accused liberals---including Germaine Greer---of sexism. And that question is: How can such hypocrites rave about $100,000 tube amps and $250,000 speakers, and then preach socialism off-stage? Surely, if that’s the case, they should be content with old NAD 3020 integrated amps and give the rest of their money to “worthy” causes?

As for the second need-to-know element (not counting my 40 years in the audio business, plus the 10 before that as a civilian audiophile), I have worked as a journalist covering high-end cars, watches, and other goods that do not masquerade as anything other than luxury products. Trust me: Rubinacci, Goyard and Ruinart never apologize for being exclusive. Nor should they.

As a result of this contact, I have first-hand experience of such diverse elements of the luxury sector as the Ferrari test track and the Cartier restoration workshop, the Hermès museum and Patek Philippe’s factories. I know that world’s clients, retailers, CEOs. To the best of my knowledge, none carry Mao’s Little Red Book and none have a loathing for those who work hard, make some money and want to reward themselves with luxury treats.

But there’s something else the hypocrites ignore, as they flip the middle finger at some guy driving
by in an Aston Martin: the luxury sector also employs hundreds of thousands of individuals (away from the slave labor making designer T-shirts, etc, but that’s another topic entirely). This is a fact that these New York Times-worshiping ideologues never acknowledge: wealthy people keep hi-fi manufacturers in business. Because ... POOR FOLKS DON’T BUY HIGH-END AUDIO GEAR!!!! D’oh!!

It’s not just the press with this anti-luxury attitude: far too many of the retailers and even the manufacturers themselves are as deluded as the Hillary-fantasizing press. Most “high-end” stores are veritable toilets, hardly conducive to inspiring confidence in someone from whom they wish to wrest five figures. Compare pretty much any high-end store (with a few exceptions like the Townhouse in Manhattan) to any BMW dealership or Montblanc boutique.

Why this tirade? Because this hypocrisy, incompatible with promoting or selling or reviewing quality, has hamstrung high-end audio for 50 years, ever since hi-fi first became affordable and populist in the 1960s, by which time it wasn’t only doctors, dentists and lawyers buying audio separates. But prices soon dissipated any populism acquired back in the days of Tech Hi-Fi.

Clearly, the roots of this malignancy can be found in the very same subsoil where modern high-end audio was first seeded: university campuses. Their axis is the Left Coast and the Northeast, just like the hotbeds of asshole-radical colleges. And as current student behavior proves, e.g. BDS, there are no ideologues less informed, more misguided, and hateful and psychotically-vehement than students.

Alas, too many in the high-end industry today act (and dress) like it’s 1969 and they’re juniors studying philosophy. So, how can these buffoons possibly exhibit the skills, qualities or presence needed to encourage well-to-do clients to invest the same amount of money that would pay for a fully-loaded E-Class Mercedes-Benz in high-end audio? Does some slovenly sub-hipster, Che Guevara-T-shirt-wearing, Yippee aspirant convey what high-end audio is all about? That it’s “the best” of something? That it is capable of making music that would cause the gods to weep?


Ken Kessler. After working as Assistant Editor for the short-lived Stereo-The Magazine, Ken joined Hi-Fi News & Record Review in 1983, where he still serves. Ken is the author of Quad: The Closest Approach and McIntosh ... For The Love Of Music, and co-author of Sound Bites and KEF: Innovators In Sound. He is in all likelihood the world’s most widely-published hi-fi writer.
Mr. Magoo Goes to the Grammys

By WL Woodward

As a lifelong amateur musician and dirtbag performance snob, I haven’t paid attention to the Grammy Awards since 1969, when Crosby Stills & Nash won Best New Artist, over Led Zeppelin. In my defense, I was 14... and those were angry days.

I’ve watched partial shows over the years, always amazed at how degraded the spectacle had become, as each year turned. I don’t believe I’ve watched the thing much in 20 years. My wife watches, and I’ll happen through the living room, troll a minute, then shuffle away in my slippers shaking my head and mumbling about the loss of true greatness. Yeah, I’m that guy.

Currently I work for a high end audio manufacturer. We had an ad in the Grammy Awards program, and that sent me looking through it. I decided I owed it to myself, and the industry I now work for, to look closer this year.

The Recording Academy has outdone itself over the years in congratulating itself. The current crop of nominations takes up 30 pages in small type in the program. Blockbusters like Best Compilation Soundtrack for Visual Media, Best Boxed Or Special Limited Edition Package, and Best Spoken Word Album (Includes Poetry, Audio Books and Storytelling) still have everyone holding their collective breath. Jimmy Carter won that last category this year. Grammys wouldn’t be Grammys without Jimmy Carter in them...

There was Best Yahoo in a Tux with Weird Hair that went to the Weeknd. Seriously, dude ...you looked like you got your hair done at Dairy Queen. Not to be outdone, Adele won Best Live Performance Ruined When a Mike Fell Into the Piano and She Forgot How To Sing. Singing on pitch, live, apparently is a lost art, but listening to Adele, a voice I actually admire, was like slowly inserting a knife into my kneecap.

Speaking of mikes falling into pianos, there was a genuine problem with production of the show in general. During Ed Sheeran’s acceptance speech he thanked his parents, who had been coming to the Grammys for 4 years, waiting to see him get the prize. The camera panned to the beaming, clapping, and obviously proud older couple. We found out later, oops, not his parents. But credit the camera man for finding an old couple on such short notice.

Because Eddy went a little long in his speech, the show cut to an unannounced overhead video of an old guy talking incoherently about something, interrupted before he finished by some unannounced band doing an old song. If you were older than 55, you recognized the late Glenn Frey, then the Eagles doing a special tribute to him including Jackson Browne and early Eagles’ guitarist Bernie Leadon... who stumbled through the easiest electric lick in pop history with guitar god Joe Walsh standing there with an acoustic guitar.

Anyone younger than 55 looked at each other and said, “What the hell was THAT?” I get that the
show is live, and it’s hard to cram all that preening into 4 hours. But come on guys, this is your annual moment. Cut out the stupid Geico commercial and give them their money back.

OK, enough old guy whining. Kendrick Lamar’s performance of ‘The Blacker the Berry’ was amazing. With all that fire on stage I anticipated a possible ‘King Kong’ theatre moment, which could’ve been really cool— but alas, no one died. That piece was special. When Rap/Hip Hop first arrived I thought the possibilities of real street poetry about the shit in the streets was inevitable, pregnant, and a real revolution. That genre degenerated quickly into a racist and violent affirmation of young men’s obscenity. Guys like Lamar speak to the obscenity of those streets and attitudes with real loss, a passion for someone who can’t go home because he lost his job and doesn’t know how to tell his family the lights won’t work tomorrow.

There were some great moments, like Alabama Shakes, who showed that you don’t have to be a Beyonce/Lady Gaga copy to make a great record and get noticed. John Legend (!) blew me away with the start of the Lionel Ritchie tribute. Bonnie Raitt came out and spoke to the death of The King (BB, not Elvis. Don’t get me started.). Then she joined Chris Stapleton and Gary Clark Jr. (!!!) in a perfect rendition of The Thrill is Gone. Wow. Thanks, BB. And thanks to the Academy.

When Ed Sheeran won Best Song, which Taylor Swift was nominated for, Swift jumped up in real joy, celebrating the golden moment of a friend. She was genuinely thrilled and touched. That’s good stuff.

All-in-all the experience was like falling asleep in the back of your parents’ station wagon at the drive-in during The Sound of Music. If you caught the right moment, you held that memory, and showed your kids someday. If you went for popcorn at the wrong time, it was all about Nazis.

To place a marker on this industry, this show, this weird attempt to give medals to art, artisans, and ankle bracelets, Paul McCartney won a Grammy for Best Rap Song and couldn’t get into rapper Tyga’s after-Grammy party... because no one knew who he was.

I’d say, “for the Times They Are A Changin”.

**W L Woodward** is the Director of Operations at PS Audio. He has been married since 1974 to his high school sweetheart and should practice his guitar more.
In my Room

By Desmond Fretz

Now approaching fifty years as an audiophile, I’ll recount my quest for a system that fully satisfies.

Long ago I discovered a high-end stereo shop in the suburbs of Philadelphia where I grew up. It was called “Music & Sound” and what I experienced there led me to become a “high-end” audiophile. The store name says it all about our hobby which involves a passion about these two things.

In the beginning, for me, it was mostly about the sound. I was attracted to playback that I felt sounded like musicians were actually in the room. It didn’t much matter what was playing, so for years I was obsessed with “demo discs” (it was all LPs back then), recordings that sounded real. Of course much depended on what equipment was being used and in this shop, then, it was the exotic and expensive gear (Magnepan, Audio Research) that sounded most realistic to me.

Obtaining all the components of such systems became the quest. And I sought out the demo discs to show mine off to friends and to myself. Music appreciation took me a lot longer. I grew into it, helped by audiophile friends who shared their music knowledge and discoveries. I found the genres and artists that appealed to me and learned more about the music and musicians. Today, music and sound are twin obsessions, with one or the other holding sway at different times. I need and demand the best of both.
There is a rich vocabulary to describe the sound quality (SQ) of playback systems. Much of it was codified in the 60s by Gordon Holt, an early pioneer audiophile who published a then ad-free magazine called Stereophile. One important attribute is called “imaging” or “sound-staging” and I’ve doggedly pursued its improvement in the systems I’ve put together over the years. It is that three-dimensional character of SQ that adds to realism—that allows me to “place” each instrument and voice in space (in the room) in front of me as I listen from the “sweet spot”.

My transition from analog to digital, from LPs to CDs, took ten years and involved a lot of overlap, listening to both for quite some time. In recent years I’ve moved almost exclusively to ripped and downloaded digital files.

With guidance from a high-fidelity consultant, my early system included a Linn LP-12 ‘table, Paoli tube preamp, ARC D-150 tube amp, Fulton Gold speaker wires, and Fulton J Modular speakers. It served me for 40 years, but had such a low “wife acceptance factor” that it and I were banished to the garage after I got married. I worked with what I had, even employing our two cars in room treatment :)

My wife enlists me in putting on elaborate Halloween productions for neighborhood kids and parents. Garage doors open, my system plays appropriate music and sound effects out into the street. Two years ago I’d recorded effects that included a closely-miked whoopee cushion. In the heat of the event my wife kept yelling, “Turn it up!”. There was soon a great ripping sound as the pulses laid waste to all midrange drivers.

I’d nursed the J’s along for decades from a cache of spare parts. Now there were no more. I asked a trusted audiophile friend for speaker suggestions and chose Triton Ones from the three offered. Within two days the Tritons were installed :) and the J’s hauled away :( Thus began my journey to a new system—and a new understanding—that are hugely satisfying and fulfilling.

We recently moved into a larger home and I was granted the empty living room(!) for listening. It’s 13 x 34 x 8-10 feet high with a peaked ceiling—solid and with great acoustic potential.

I had read The Audio Expert by Ethan Winer and finally begun to understand the full potential of acoustic room treatment. Over the past eight months I implemented a reflection free zone and bass trapping in consultation with folks at RealTraps, the company Winer founded. No investment has returned more than these in terms of a fully-rendered sound-stage that is infused with “live” qualities.

But there were several that delivered all the information required for that rendering, with all its quiet subtleties: ARC SP-14 tube preamp, Mac Pro with LaCie Thunderbolt 2 solid state drive, Amarral/iTunes and NAD M51 DAC (for stereo PCM files); Sony HAP-Z1ES (for stereo DSD files); WyWires Blue speaker wires ($350!); and Oppo BDP-105 (for multi-channel DSD files, SACDs and DVD-A). I use an FMI 80 for center and NHT Super Zero speakers in the rear, driven by two Musical Fidelity Class D amps for multi-channel playback.

After being rebuilt a few years ago, the ARC D-150 amp carried over to drive the Tritons. All was
sweet and good until its right channel failed. I swapped it out with an AVA 600R hybrid amp that I’d used with Maggies in a second system (a whole ‘nother story). At first I was disappointed in its midrange reproduction (“I knew D-150, and you’re no D-150!”) but grew to appreciate its character there and throughout the range.

So here I am in the “living” room with the best sound in my experience. And the best music, as hi-res audio pours forth for easy purchase and download. Especially now I realize that we can’t do this alone. We reach out to other audiophiles in communities like this one and get help.

It’s a new day for both music and sound and their power to enrich our lives. The real hi-res audio revolution is about awareness, opening the doors of perception, and practicing the art of listening.

I have come to enjoy a wide range of music that includes jazz, blues, folk, classical, rock, electronic and alternative. The best recordings in my collection have a quality I call “release” which means clarity, effortless dynamics and naturalness—as if unattached or unable to be ascribed to any component in the chain. They present a pristine stereo image that’s just there—the very meaning of “stereo” which is “solid”. And they come through almost any decent system. But all my work has been to fully release these presentations at home, and the tears of joy or sadness they can generate. Room treatment has enabled it. The reflection free zone is where I most want to be and, when the mid-bass is controlled, it all blossoms.

In recent weeks I’ve had the privilege of experiencing MQA decoding in my system. I bought Meridian’s Explorer 2 DAC and downloaded free tracks from 2L’s HiRes Test Bench page.

Initially I was unable to get the blue light to come on, indicating playback of Master Quality Authenticated, but the new DAC offered such improved SQ with other files through Amarra that I sold my NAD M51.

I succeeded in decoding the MQA files using Audirvana as my player and “it was on”—sound quality beyond anything I’ve heard here before. Of course the provenance of the 2L music is impeccable but the imaging and presentation proved astonishing. Larger, higher, extending farther forward to include the listening position, and with unrestricted dynamics and utter clarity. “Deblurred” describes it nicely.

If you came over for a listen, I’d play these files for you:

“You’ll Never Know” by David Elias from his Rare To Go CD

“Sisters of Mercy” by Cameron Carpenter from his If You Could Read My Mind CD

“Walkin’ Blues” by Keith Brown from Hellhound On My Trail—The Songs of Robert Johnson CD

“Bach-Concerto for Two Violins BWV 1043-Largo ma non tanto” played by Rachel Podger (DSD)

“Magnificat” from 2L (MQA)
The nose knows
Paris France  Canon 5D
Paul McGowan

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