

Stan's Safari

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A few weeks ago I was approached by a record company who wanted to re-release an album by a band of which I was a member, to coincide with the anniversary of its first release. Well that put a smile on my face until I realised they were referring to the fortieth anniversary! Anyway it was enough to set me thinking about the meaning of life and some such things.

Like many others of my generation I actually drifted into the hi-fi industry by accident. I was playing in bands by night and earning a crust by day, working with Dave Martin, of Martin Audio, designing sound systems for more successful and richer bands such as Pink Floyd, Genesis and Yes. Inevitably I was exposed to numerous recording sessions from where I would blag a vinyl copy of the final mix. But once home I really wondered why I bothered. The punchy, clean, emotionally fulfilling sound in the control room was replaced by an anaemic pastiche from my Dansette record player.

So being an engineer by profession I set about improving things using those components upon which I could quickly lay my hands. In came another Dansette from which I abstracted the amplifier and my local record retailer, the late Angus McKenzie, sold me one of those new-fangled stereo cartridges. My new bodged up stereo record player was wired to a stack of Phase Linear 300 watt amplifiers which fed a pair of seriously huge 3-way horn loudspeakers; all borrowed from the Floyd's pa system.

Now the sound exploded out of the loudspeakers across the room and down the street so we were getting somewhere but there was, unsurprisingly, quite a lot still wrong with the sounds I heard. At this point I took a disastrous side turning following my discovery of the strange pastime called high-fidelity. I visited a leading retailer in Central London and he sold me a Goldring GL75 turntable; a Leak Stereo 30 transistor amplifier and a pair of Richard Allen Pavane loudspeakers. I remember this list precisely not because I have latent

anorak tendencies but because it was by far the worst sound system I have ever owned in my life and it damned the hi-fi industry in my eyes to being a complete bunch of charlatans. To be fair I later found a dead mouse inside the amplifier which may have been relevant but by then the damage was done.

Now bear with me dear reader because there is a point to this story although it might be a long time coming. Not long afterwards I somehow talked my way into the Revox tape recorder organisation at a surprisingly high level then subsequently jumped ship to become a director of the then young Cambridge Audio company. The rest, as they say, is history but one thing has always remained; that desire to re-create the sound heard in the control room of the studio when the final mix of a piece of music is laid down onto tape or more often these days, onto disk. Not too difficult an ambition to achieve I hear you say. After all if you take a stack of the best high-end equipment and connect it up with the finest and eye-wateringly expensive cables then the end result will be a sound that will be within a gnat's whisker of the original. How can it not be? Surely the CD is a bit-to-bit exact copy of the original recording and the rest of the equipment, as the magazine reviewers never tire of telling us, is as close to perfection as makes no difference.

But then we all know that isn't strictly true don't we? Never mind the audible differences between different amplifiers; CD players and cables; just line up a selection of loudspeakers and switch from one to another and the sound is all over the place. As the boss of a leading loudspeaker manufacturing company once said to me when auditioning the prototypes of a then new high-end loudspeaker design; "Either every other loudspeaker is wrong or these loudspeakers are c**p". Those same new loudspeakers went on to be very successful! But I digress.

No the difference that I'm hearing between the studio and the living room is more than the difference between a 4-star and a 5-star rating; it's more like the difference between Spanish and Mandarin. Unfortunately this is where my engineering background becomes seriously unhinged because this difference in the way the sound is delivered has been a matter of unrelenting frustration

to me throughout my working life. So much so that it has caused me to have to stop and take stock of where the hi-fi industry is going. This epiphany in my life came at about the same time as I completed the renovation of the library in my Victorian home and I began to furnish the room with all the things that are important to me in this unashamedly male-only corner of my residence. First in was a Hammond organ and Leslie speaker followed by a wall of guitars and basses plus a few amplifiers; a few scientific instruments and naturally a stuffed mammal or two. Obviously I needed a sound system and this is where things have ground to a halt. Like most of the writers in this journal I have, from time to time, some very nice equipment pass through my hands and possibly the added benefit of my friend Touraj Moghaddam of Roksan trying to physically throw out my record player so he can substitute something better. But will this equipment deliver what I need?

Well so far at least it hasn't. For me the rot set in a few years ago when I came across some long forgotten professional studio loudspeakers from the 1970s. They were big; had simply superb drive units with Alnico magnets; drive units of a quality we'll never see again. These loudspeakers were incredibly efficient (a loud 100dB output for one watt input) yet could handle prodigious amounts of power. I was intrigued and set them up with separate power amplifiers for the bass, mid and treble sections and coupled them to a CD system. Like my first Dansette-Pink Floyd lash up no particular care was taken with cabling, stands, spikes or any other seemingly essential accoutrements of a hi-fi system; I was not prepared to waste too much time on a system of which I didn't have great expectations.

But from the moment Jackson Browne played the first chord on his piano I knew I was wrong. There was a sense of realism; that elusive 'x factor' that we can't put into words so I won't bore you with superlatives. Over the next few weeks I changed the design of the amplifiers; added some response equalisation and modified the power supplies of the pre-amplifier (efficient loudspeakers reveal every trace of hum) but still didn't get round to messing with the cables and all that other stuff.

Now it just happened that I was to be visited by the then editor of an esteemed hi-fi magazine whilst this interesting diversion was taking place so I sat him down with a stack of good rock music and turned up the volume. An hour or two later he took a break. His opinion? “Well it’s not hi-fi but WoW; it’s brilliant”. Now that was a worrying comment because it summed up exactly what I was thinking. It wasn’t hi-fi because there was a bit of colouration here and there and perhaps the low bass was a little uncontrolled.... Well you know the rest if you’ve ever read a hi-fi review. But as a system for reproducing music? Well, Wow indeed!

Unfortunately I couldn’t keep those loudspeakers so my experiments were curtailed but not before the worm of doubt had burrowed its way into my subconscious. And now faced with a blank canvas for the design of an alternative sound system in my home those doubts have matured into some very clear thoughts on what my sound system needs to deliver and how I might make the equipment deliver what I need. If the editor continues to let me loose on these pages I might expand on these and other thoughts. In the meantime I’m going shopping for some of those Alnico magnet drive units.

c. 2008 Stan Curtis