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## VIVA AUDIO

Leo Tolstoy once wrote: "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The same can be said about various technologies used in High End Audio. When they are refined to perfection, they converge in the same ecstatic musical experience. But when the work is incomplete, that is when audio reviewers start to earn their living.

True, each technology has its own specifics, but audio manufacturers' passion and sense of purpose multiplied by their expertise and listening skills eventually bring them all to almost identical sonic bliss. It's like a beautiful photograph, where the type of equipment used becomes secondary to the photographer's sense of purpose, artistic vision and skills.

In some audiophile circles, both horn-loaded speakers and vacuum-tube electronics have a reputation of vintage technologies that belong to the past. Yet, companies like *Viva Audio* from Italy continue to develop and refine the artistic sides of these time-proven technologies.

The art of High End Audio is all about creating audio equipment like musical instruments. Adhering to the traditions of perfect craftsmanship by revered luthiers Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari, manufacturers like *Viva Audio* advance and improve the original ideas of audio giants like De Forest, Klipsch and Villchur. Using new technologies and applying new materials, they make the sound of their equipment to provide the natural bliss of a rapturous and refined musical experience (more information can be found at [www.VIVAAUDIO.COM](http://www.VIVAAUDIO.COM)).



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## KIMBER KABLE

The thing that gets people who come into passing contact with High End Audio the most is that cables can cost many thousands of dollars.

While it is not too difficult to imagine the high cost of something tangible — speakers, amplifiers, etc., — the high price of “accessories” like connecting cables is usually attributed to people “being too well-off for their own good.”

Meanwhile, manufacturing a high-quality cable — as well as the physical processes that are at the heart of the sound quality it reproduces — is not that different from any other manufacturing process. The same goes for both the cost structure and the effort involved.

Nevertheless, even I, with a degree in “Theoretical and Experimental Physics,” therefore, being allegedly somewhat more aware than an average individual of what is currently considered complying with laws of physics and what is not — am forced to admit that an increment of sonic improvement provided by some “passive” audio components, cables included, on the overall sound quality demonstrated by an audio system can be much more significant than I would have ever expected.

One of the most suitable examples of such a product is the “Palladian” power cable from the American company *Kimber Kable*, which can make your jaw drop from the very significant improvements of musical resolution, overall articulation and sonic image focusing, which is fully comparable to the positive impact on the overall audio system sound quality from a substantial upgrade of an “active” component. As they say — “you live and you learn”... (more information can be found at [WWW.KIMBER.COM](http://WWW.KIMBER.COM)).



#18

## MARK SCHIFTER

**Mark Schifter** is one of contemporary High End Audio's most colorful personalities. We are connected by both many years of business relationship and by decades of close friendship. This photo was taken during one of my stay at Mark's house just outside Denver, CO in 2005. An irrepressible energy drove him to extremes — from building some radio transmitters in Africa and participating in implementing the most up to date technologies in audio (as the co-owner of *Audio Alchemy*, *Genesis Loudspeakers*, *Perpetual Technology* and many other ventures) to manufacturing loudspeakers at a former coffin (!) factory in Colombia (!!!). As far as I know, the coffin factory project was the one that eventually "buried" him. While he and his partners were busy reconstructing the factory (to which I once remarked to him: "Why bother? Considering the lengths that speaker manufacturers go to with their boxes' designs, just put the loudspeaker drivers right into the coffins, no one will even notice that anything is wrong!"), the local currency collapsed relative to the dollar, and, as a result of various domino-like perturbations, Mark ended up in court. Having retired for a few years from the industry after that, he was reborn like a phoenix and was back in his beloved audio business. Personally, I see such twists of his fate as the best illustration of a saying that "the road to Hell is paved with good intentions". As I do see behind his various sagas his best intentions first (more information can be found at [www.UNDERWOODHIFI.COM](http://www.UNDERWOODHIFI.COM)).

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## STEINWAY LYNGDORF

Peter Lyngdorfs reputation rests not only on his powerful presence in the High End Audio market in Scandinavia (where his sales network consists of over a hundred of audio “boutiques”), but also his constant development of new and revolutionary technologies constantly implemented in his products. This is why he has always fascinated me. He is involved in a whole range of companies, including: DALI (loudspeakers production), Lyngdorf Audio (incredibly forward-thinking stereo and Home Theater electronics), as well as Steinway Lyngdorf (a joint venture for manufacturing extraordinary stereo and Home Theater systems with the famous grand piano maker).

Back in 2009, *StereoPravda*, as the SL distributor in Russia, organized an official presentation for Steinway Lyngdorf at the Moscow International House of Music, during which a Steinway Lyngdorf “Model D” system was on stage along with five (!) concert “Model D” Steinway grand pianos (where the photo was taken). The show’s highlight was the reproduction of Ravel’s “Bolero”, pre-recorded by four musicians on the same spot, that included breaks — during which the same musicians which played on the recording performed the corresponding fragments live. For an additional effect, the musicians kept their hands on the piano’s keyboards while the recording was being reproduced by the SL system. And, as they finished performing all their parts and the recording was still playing through the audio system, they got up and left the stage — creating several minutes of a surrealist feeling of their continuing presence (more information can be found at [WWW.STEINWAYLYNGDORF.COM](http://WWW.STEINWAYLYNGDORF.COM)).



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## “HEART ON SNOW” #1

This photo, taken in the spring of 2002 (left to right: **Marc Almond**, a famous Russian musician, singer and song writer **Boris Grebenshikov**, sound producer **Andrey Samsonov** and myself), depicts us in the studio during the recording of a duet performance — by Marc and Boris — of Akvarium’s “Gosudaryna”, for Marc’s “Russian” *Heart on Snow* album (on which I acted as the co-executive producer, along with **Sergey “Africa” Bugaev** — more information can be found at [WWW.STEREOPRAVDA.COM](http://WWW.STEREOPRAVDA.COM)).

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## "HEART ON SNOW" #2

Among all the musicians who participated in the recording of the *Heart On Snow* album, I had the closest and warmest relationship with **Alla Bayanova** (with whom I worked, as the executive producer, on her *Fly My Song, Fly* album in 1998). In the context of this book, my sudden strong interest in her music was, it seems, inextricably linked to the sonic experience that I had accumulated during my first few years in High End Audio. Had I not possessed it, I don't think that I would have ended up under such a spell of her truly subtle, sincere and patriotic music, the traditions of which she managed to carry unchanged through many decades of forced exile on foreign soil (more information can be found at [WWW.STEREOPRAVDA.COM](http://WWW.STEREOPRAVDA.COM)).



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## GARY REBER

A good indicator of the demand for a magazine is its presence among publications that are sold at airports' newsstands. Back in the heyday of audio, one could buy three audio magazines at most American airports: *Stereophile*, *The Absolute Sound* and *Widescreen Review*. **Gary Reber** has been the publisher and editor-in-chief of the latter for decades. Despite its name, *WSR* has always printed highly accurate and informative audio content, while his independence allowed Gary — without having to ask anyone for permission — to publish some very unorthodox materials that he thought can be very relevant to the magazine's readership as well. Such as, for instance, the lengthy interview with myself on the subject of my earphone project, which, as it happens, additionally instigated me to launch the commercial production of our *StereoPravda* “SPearphone” ear monitors in 2015, a business venture that I only had a very vague notion of at the time. This photo of my close friends — **Gary** and his wife **Marlene Reber** — was taken during one of the “Home Theater Cruises” that they organized for many years aboard the liners in the Caribbean and the Pacific oceans (more information can be found at [WWW.WIDESCREENREVIEW.COM](http://WWW.WIDESCREENREVIEW.COM)).

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## PHIL RAMONE, ALAN PARSONS, AL SCHMITT

“One needs distance to see what is great”... When Gary Reber has been convincing me that I should participate in his “Home Theater” cruises (in 2003 and 2005), and as I was counting every minute until we would get back to ports in Florida, it hadn’t even occurred to me at the time how invaluable the experience that he was offering really was. Back then, sitting at a dinner table with the most extraordinary sound producers of all times, **Phil Ramone**, **Alan Parsons** and **Al Schmitt** (next to EveAnna Manley, front row, left to right), chatting about their studio work with the *Beatles*, Frank Sinatra, Diana Krall and many others, and then listening to their seminars and demonstrations aboard the ship, all while occasionally going ashore and carelessly perusing coastal souvenir shops with them — this was seemingly taken for granted by me. But by now I fully realized how fortunate I actually was...



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## BERNIE GRUNDMAN

In 2017, a remarkable — in terms of her biography and audiophile sound quality ambitions — singer, **Lynn Stanley** (right), invited me to a tour of the studio of one of the most revered contemporary mastering engineers, **Bernie Grundman** (center) located in Hollywood, CA. It suffices to say that Michael Jackson's *Thriller* is among the dozens of his notable mastering works. There, she played her recordings, which Bernie was preparing for release, on his state-of-the-art sound system and sang along “live” in order for the visitors to compare the real sound of her voice with the corresponding pre-mastered version of the material (while Bernie was adjusting the settings on the console, showing us different versions of the final sound).

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## STEPHEN AMBROSE, KENNY SCHAFFER

“Birds of a feather flock together,” and this photo — taken at the dedicated portable audio *CanJam NYC-2018* show in New York — depicts me with two “hardcore” inventors: **Stephen Ambrose** (*left*) and **Kenny Schaffer** (*centre*). Stephen, of *Asius Technologies*, who I’ve been collaborating with for several years on implementing his solutions in my earphone products, holds a number of patents for inventions in the field of various aspects of the ear monitor design as well as inflatable tips for them. What’s more, he claims that, long before Jerry Harvey, as Ambrose was working as Stevie Wonder’s sound engineer, he was the first to invent the very idea of ear monitors for professional musicians’ use (initially, for warning Stevie while he was moving around so he wouldn’t fall off stage).

Kenny’s insatiable strive for inventing constantly threw him in different directions: from inventing the wireless “SVDS” guitar pedal (for instance, the sound of *AC/DC*’s Angus Young’s guitar is inseparable from Kenny’s guitar pedal) and the wireless principle for microphones to the release of the Russia’s biggest rock singer-songwriter Boris Grebenshikov’s *Radio Silence* album in the West and joint projects with the Soviet space program.

The syringe in the photo has no relation to their troubled youth and has an entirely innocent purpose: at the show in New York, Stephen demonstrated the remarkable effect from using his inflatable tips on ear monitors’ sound quality (more information can be found at [WWW.ASIUSTECHNOLOGIES.COM](http://WWW.ASIUSTECHNOLOGIES.COM)).



## MEAD KILLION

In early 1992, the *Etymotic Research* “ER-4S” earphones caught my attention by being the most expensive “ear monitors” in the whole world — worth as much as \$349! Considering my nomadic lifestyle, and in spite of my continuous ascent to the “highest peaks” of home audio, “portable” version of it has always been one of my primary interests. When I put “ER-4S” into my ear canals soon after, I was speechless at their sound quality just after the first split second of their auditioning, when, figuratively speaking, the singers just opened their mouths to start their part.

I later visited the *Etymotic Research* “factory”, located not far from the O’Hare airport in Chicago and resembling more of a research laboratory than a manufacturing facility, with its own anechoic chamber and other advanced equipment, several times. During one of my visits to the facility, I interviewed the company’s founder, **Mead Killion**, for *Audiomagazin*. As much as I tried to get him to “spill the beans” as to what was inside the “ER-4S” during it, I never managed to find out his secret. Mead’s constant elusiveness on this subject, in the context of the ubiquitous use of “Balanced Armature” drivers in ear monitors today, now strikes me as amusing... (more information can be found at [www.ETYMOTIC.COM](http://www.ETYMOTIC.COM)).

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## SMYTH RESEARCH

My interest in High End Audio began to skew entirely from home audio towards its portable version after Gary Reber told me of a new revolutionary technology of reproducing multi-channel sound through regular headphones or earphones by *Smyth Research* in 2009. It required the used transducers calibration and the listener to go through a procedure of individual calibration with the purpose of taking his personal “sonic mold” of the sound of an audio system in the listening space used as an acoustic field reference that would later be reproduced through the transducers.

In one day, I went through three such calibrations for my own *Smyth Research* “Realizer” in Los Angeles — at the historic *Egyptian Theater* in Hollywood, and two multi-channel recording and mastering studios: Robert Margouleff’s *Mi Casa Multimedia* (where I pictured with **Lorr Kramer** of *Smyth Research*), located in the house of a once-famous actor Bela Lugosi, as well as Mark Waldrep’s *AIX*.

Considering the stunning results from using this technology, my future plans include integrating it with our own *StereoPravda* “SPearphone” ear monitors (more information can be found at [WWW.SMYTH-RESEARCH.COM](http://WWW.SMYTH-RESEARCH.COM)).



## DEQX

In recent years, a range of innovative technologies (primarily digital) started to be used in High End Audio, which gives us every reason to hope for its brighter future. One of these is the technology by the Australian company DEQX, specifically designed for application in audiophile home systems for achieving dynamic phase coherence between loudspeakers' drivers operating in a three-way "active" mode. In addition, DEQX' layer of "room correction" processing allows to significantly reduce the negative impact of the listening room's acoustics on the sound produced by the loudspeakers, which is the biggest obstacle on the way to achieve "the best it can be" sound quality at home.

This photo was taken in 2008 at the *New Coliseum* audio salon in Saint Petersburg during Kim Ryrie's, the head of DEQX, training session for the DEQX' Russian dealers/installers. In it, prior to room measurements that focus on bass, Kim is taking "near-field" (anechoic) measurements of the speaker's midrange and high frequency "Impulse-Response" to enable restoration of phase/timing coherence (group-delay) accuracy of the loudspeaker's drivers' joint sound radiation (more information can be found at [www.DEQX.COM](http://www.DEQX.COM)).

A high-end integrated amplifier, model #30, is shown from a front-three-quarter perspective. It has a light grey, minimalist design with a digital display showing the number '70' and a single control knob. The device is mounted on a four-legged, adjustable height metal stand with a circular base.

#30

## MSB TECHNOLOGY

Conceptually, the highest level of a solution can be achieved when it is done “from scratch.”

While, in general, the significant number of even the most expensive audio equipment uses the “off-the-shelf” parts and “OEM” components, just a handful of companies are capable of manufacturing all the principal elements of their designs “from scratch.”

The American *MSB Technology* is one of them. As its founder, **Larry Gullman**, once told me, they even “cut the crystals for their clocks themselves,” not to mention all the other elements of their Digital-to-Analog Converters — input interfaces and receivers, digital filters, power supplies, and, most importantly, the highly accurate discrete multibit DAC modules, which are the “heart” of such devices — are all proprietary designs and made “from scratch.”

The reason why *MSB*’s products has such unique sonic capabilities is related to the background of its founders, who started their professional careers at the Integrated Chips’ manufacturer *National Semiconductors* (which, as rumor has it, built a special listening room — equipped with *Wilson Audio* “Watt Puppies” speakers — in order to assess the quality of the audio ICs that company produced). Therefore, as opposed to “regular” manufacturers, who only have a very vague idea of how digital devices function at their topology’s level, *MSB*’s experience and knowledge base allows it to provide solutions at the most fundamental level of research and development.

Which allows the company to always remain at the cutting edge of the latest advances in their field — a field in which products not just age, but almost become obsolete, on their way from a store to the customer’s house (more information can be found at [WWW.MSBTECHNOLOGY.COM](http://WWW.MSBTECHNOLOGY.COM)).



## VERY FINE SOLUTIONS

In a sense, you can say that the audio salons are like small music temples, where the audio dealers are like priests worshipping their music Gods at the altars of their finely tuned audio systems.

Yes, I am aware that some readers of this book can find such eulogy to High End Audio as overexaggerated, citing in more prosaic terms its benefits of improving quality of life, connecting family members and friends, and bringing to passionate audiophile music lovers a strong relief after a stressful day at work.

Nevertheless, descending on our sinful earth, I still have no choice but to re-iterate the importance of using proper instruments to find your way to the most transparent communication with “serious” music via the most appropriate audio equipment, namely, “the question is not which exact gear to buy but where (from whom) to buy it.”

**Frank Vermeylen**’s *Very Fine Solutions* audio boutique in Antwerp (Belgium) is a very good illustration of this concept. Frank’s uniquely acute auditioning skills, his many years of experience in the industry and his musician’s solid background make every visit to this place’s precisely tuned acoustically listening rooms a Revelation.

By the way, “birds of a feather flock together,” and *Very Fine Solutions* does not even try to superficially attract new customers with constantly expanding list of brands it represents; the company’s relatively small portfolio include only likeminded manufacturers from the same sonic confession, for instance, VFS is the *MSB Technology Corp.*’s “Headquarters for Europe” (more information can be found at [WWW.VERYFINESOLUTIONS.COM](http://WWW.VERYFINESOLUTIONS.COM)).

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## PAUL McGOWAN

It is difficult to find a larger and more successful company that makes high performance audio equipment today than Paul McGowan's (pictured) *PS Audio*. I think that there are several reasons for his success, but the main one is his extreme "political correctness" in everything he does lately: in the way he deals with people, in the precise alignment of his business activities with the corresponding waves of demand and, finally, in the lack of excessive onslaught engineering methods to design and to manufacturer his products. He recently published a memoir with a telling title — "99% True" — in which he describes, among other things, his almost half-a-century long journey in audio and reflects on some of the reasons behind his involvement in High End Audio and the industry's modus operandi. As for the latter, let me say, half-jokingly yet half-seriously: this *StereoPravda* (sic!) book — as an absolutely "politically incorrect" one — adds that "last one percent of truth" on top of his ninety-nine ones (more information can be found at [www.psaudio.com](http://www.psaudio.com)).