

Undernourished Ears



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Chuck Hansen was almost shivering with obvious delight as he wrote the following to the editor in a recent e-mail.

My lovely niece, a newly-minted nurse of 1 year and member of the iPod generation, stopped by to see us while I was checking out the Parasound Zamp. I sat her down to listen to my system. Once I explained what to listen for, she could easily pick out the difference in soundstaging, imaging, and frequency response between the Zamp, the Parasound HCA-100A, and my modified Scott 222C. She was quite fascinated with the Scott, since she had never seen or heard tube amplifiers before.

She went out to her car and got her Pearl Jam and Springsteen CDs and happily spent time listening to "her" music. I also played some vinyl for her—she had never really seen that up close before either, having been born about when the CD format came out. Her audio "systems" are her car and her iPod.

It's a real treat when watching as someone of her generation gets her first exposure to high-end audio.

We audiophiles tend to keep the great secret of splendid sound to ourselves. The same tendency seems to pervade the audio industry as well. It is, I believe, an ill-founded form of false modesty—or laziness, or whatever. In audio's earliest days when we talked about high fidelity, there were a few who believed that "hearing is believing" and took the examples to the public.

G.A. Briggs, who started his career as a cloth salesman, delighted in live demonstrations of good sound. He manufactured some fine drivers which were elegant examples of British craftsmanship. He wrote extensively and entertainingly about hearing, audio, music, and sound systems. He brought salesmanship to his passion for good sound.

Peter Walker provided public demonstrations of good sound to the early audio shows of Britain. Significantly,

Walker played saxophone in a local band while building Acoustical Manufacturing and a series of components from amplifiers to electrostatic speakers which have rarely been equaled. Like Briggs, his craft grew out of his enthusiasm for sound, without the benefit of an engineering degree.

The people at Acoustic Research were the first to offer the public an accessible (if you happened to be in New York City) audition booth for your own choice of recorded music. It was surprising how well known that relatively small center became. I suppose the folks at AR had some idea of the traffic to the room over time. It took advantage of the acuity of the human ear to hear the difference in what they were hearing, compared to what was available at home.

These days the whole industry is lying awake nights with the MP3 specter roiling their imaginations. All except the people at Apple, of course. But I believe the time is long past for the audio industry to stir itself to make the obvious benefits of excellent sound available to the generality of the citizenry. Would ten well-managed audition rooms in selected cities of North America be beyond the means of the industry? The magic works.

My nephew visited me the other day. He manages a wire manufacturing facility nearby for a big multinational. He grinned rather sheepishly as he stepped into my listening room. "I have to admit," he said, "that almost all my listening these days is MP3." He was intrigued by my Thor speakers and the Pass amplifiers driving them. Then he sat listening intently for a few minutes. Finally he said, "Those are the best speakers I have ever heard in my life. I thought mine were pretty good, but these are much better."

I hope we will keep in mind that Apple's iPod sets a benchmark for people's ears that can be shellacked by five minutes of auditioning the real McCoy. Convenience is great, but not entirely nourishing, after all. —E.T.D.