Dave Gordon of Audio Research

by Alan Sircom

Dave Gordon, Managing Director of Sales and Brand Ambassador for Audio Research is one of the best-known people in the audio business. Every inch the gentleman, he's one of those people who commands near universal respect even among rival brands. Save for a brief sabbatical, he has been working with Audio Research since the late Jurassic Era, and seen the brand go through several key changes. He's better equipped than most in looking back and looking forward.

How did Audio Research begin?

Well, Bill (William Z. Johnson 1922-2011, the founder of Audio Research) had a retail store in Minneapolis called Electronic Industries, that he started in the 1950s. He did TV repair, tube testing, and he sold hi-fi. He sold great lines like Scott and McIntosh. But, he also designed and sold a lot of custom amplifiers, mixing consoles, microphone preamps. and things like that (there's a big music community in Minneapolis). Bill also modified some Dynaco amplifiers during the 1960s and 1970s. He had some patented designs and originally sold all of his products through Electronic Industries, but it kept him busy, so he sold all of his designs and electronics to a small company called Paplow that was buying up other companies at the time (this was probably around 1966-68).

He quickly realised they were doing a miserable job, so he bought all his rights and patents back, and from that he started Audio Research in 1970. There's actually an SP1 preamplifiers from that time in the factory that still has the Electronic Industries front panel, as well as ones with the Audio Research front panels, of course. They were identical except for that panel.

Bill grew up with great tube electronics and at that point everything was turning to solid-state. When he started Audio Research, there were no vacuum tube manufacturers in the US for home hi-fi; just guitar amps. Bill was a pretty serious pianist, and he just didn't believe that solid-state then sounded like real music. But he also believed in wide bandwidth, low distortion, big power supplies, and things like that. So, what he came to market with in those early days was quite different to the established tube amp norms of a decade earlier.

It was a close-knit music and audiophile community in Minnesota: Wendell Diller (now Sales Manager of Magnepan) joined Bill in the early 1970s and was Audio Research's first – or maybe second – Sales Manager. It's funny because Jim Winey of Magnepan was a customer of Bill's and loved KLH9 amps (which he kept blowing up!). This was before he started Magnepan (he was an engineer for 3M at the time and came up with the magneplanar drive unit in his basement in his spare time). Bill loved the original Tympanis so much that he said he'd distribute them, so ARC distributed Magnepan for its first five years, and then Magnepan separated and Wendell went to work for Magnepan around '77. He's still there.

I went in the opposite direction. I got into hi-fi in the 1970s, but I started retail in '82. I joined Magnepan in '85, then transitioned across to Audio Research a few years later.

When did you join Audio Research?

I started in 1989. At that time, the company had already been going for 19 years. It was a fun time, but it was an interesting time because we were having real problems in getting good tubes. Bill had long made solid-state and tube electronics; in fact, in the late 1970s, he thought tubes were on the way out and he didn't think anyone would make them again. When I went to Audio Research, Philips was closing up its US operations and Bill wanted to buy Philips tube manufacturing in the US. And Philips actually said 'no!' Bill could have bought the machines, but the engineers were all retiring, and no-one could make a good tube without those engineers. They were quite honest about it. So, Bill bought 25,000 output tubes and thought that would last him a while... which it did.

What happened when you finally ran out of those US-made tubes?

We began to transition to the Chinese tubes that were just appearing. Some of these could be good, and some could be *terrible*. At that time they were both variable and unreliable; you never knew if you got a tube that would last 200 hours or 2,000 hours, that was the problem.

I actually left Audio Research in '92, and went to Thiel in Lexington, KY. And during that time, in the early 1990s, that's when Audio Research transitioned over to the KT90, which was a really wonderful tube and got them by for quite a while. It was interesting because before I left, Bill always wanted to do a big Reference line of electronics, but he didn't do it because he couldn't get the tubes. However, in 1995, Communism had collapsed, and suddenly Bill had access to the Russian market, and they were still making these great 6550s and other Russian tubes, and that's when he said "I can do this!" about the Reference Series.

He would never use a tube that would be unavailable long-term because Audio Research at that time was able to repair everything it had ever made.

I came back in '96 and that was when we had just come out with the Reference 2 preamp and the CD3 CD player. The Reference products really took off, but they were beasts! They were laid out horizontally, everything was so big, and they had so many cooling fans. But, that's what Bill wanted to do... he always wanted to make a statement!

How was working with Bill?

Bill was an engineer. He was adamant everything had good specifications. If something spec'd out well, that was the foundation for something sounding good. If it spec'd out badly and sounded good, there was something wrong! However, Bill also understood that we can hear things we can't yet measure, and there was always someone listening to every piece before it went out. Nothing has changed in the way ▶

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we manufacturer products really, from 1970 to today. We still design our own boards, we do all of our own engineering in house, we install every part on every board by hand, and hand solder. And that's quite a lot of labour involved.

However, one of the problems that working with an engineer and a perfectionist is products would change mid way through their lifespan. The SP10 was perhaps the best example of this; the product went through eight or nine versions during its lifespan. That makes it really difficult for inventory, and both new sales and resale values. That's changed now. A product like the Foundation series preamp is signed off as a final design, and that design stays fixed until the next version comes along a few years later.

But, not everything changes, and we still listen to everything before it leaves the factory. Our current set of 'ears' belong to Warren Gehl, and it was Jack Helm before that. The best example as to why we do this harks back to the early 2000s. We were producing a Reference CD player, and we were using an R-core transformer that came from Asia and it was really good sounding; we liked the design and the specifications were locked in. Everything was fine, until one day Warren was listening to the Ref CD player and he started rejecting them. Whenever Warren rejects something on sonic terms, it goes back to Quality Control. They tested these players many times to find out what was wrong. It turned out, the manufacturer for those R-core transformers had changed facilities. Everything spec'd up perfectly, but it was the manufacturing. This was something we could hear – blind – but couldn't measure.

We design all our custom caps, but it's kind of like seasoning a dish. You have to taste it along the way!

How does that fit with a world of different environmental standards?
Things like the introduction of RoHS in the EU were really difficult. It took us about a year and a half to fix. We knew what was coming, and rather than wait for the inevitable to happen, we started listening to different materials, different solders: tin, silver, aluminium. We worked with our vendors until we found materials we really liked. But ultimately, it paid off; we thought our overall sound got about five per cent better after we implemented these changes.

How much of that do you think was down to changes in materials, and how much to new circuit layouts and designs?
It's both! You can't do one without involving the other. It's so many different things. For example, with the capacitors, you need to break them in by running a signal through them, but it's also how they react to other materials. We tend to raise critical capacitors off the circuit board because they sound better that way. We've found we can hear differences in tie-down materials – if you compare clear and black tie-downs, they impart different signatures. And that's very hard for some people to believe.

These are things we want everyone to be able to hear. You don't have to know how an engine works to appreciate how it drives. It's kind of clichéd, but even different brands of standard power cords make a difference. We tried five or six different 12-gauge cords all from different factories in China. The cords all look the same, three might sound the same, one will sound significantly better and two will sound worse!

Of all the products made during your time at Audio Research, which ones do you think are the most significant?
Personally, I think it was the Reference 3 preamp, from just when I rejoined the company in 1996. It was the preamp that really changed things, in terms of what could be done, of the way an Audio Research preamplifier could be configured and used. It set out our store for the way almost every Audio Research control product works ever since. And it sounded excellent too. It still does, even if in absolute terms the Foundation LS28 – currently our least expensive preamplifier in the range – sounds better. That's a sign both of how long-lasting our products are, and how they just keep getting better! +