Editor Double Plus

JOHN ATKINSON, THE EDITOR OF LEADING UK AND US HI-FI MAGAZINES FOR NEARLY THIRTY YEARS, TALKS TO STEVE HARRIS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF HI-FI

STEVE HARRIS

John Atkinson chats to Larry Archibald

What is the future of high-end end audio? Does it even have one? Prediction is never easy. But it might be less difficult when you've spent more than 20 years at the helm of America's best audio magazine. When you have a formidable grasp of the technology, as well as an insider's understanding of the business. When you've been both a musician and a recording engineer too.

So, if anyone can tell us what lies ahead, it must be John Atkinson. The Editor of *Stereophile* still has the passion that made him buy his first high-end amplifier 30 years ago, and is now enthused by the potential of high-quality computer audio.

Catching up with JA during his most recent trip to Europe, I asked him if this would really be the salvation of the high end.

"What triggered the growth of the PC as a high-end source was the total commoditisation of the CD. When the CD was introduced 25 years ago, it was similar to an LP: it was an album; you bought it; you put in your collection; you cherished it. And that's gone away. A CD is now worthless in itself.

"We now have some music releases on Blu-ray disc. That suffers from the same problem that SACD had. Who's going to stock them? If audiophiles are a tiny fraction of the general population, people who want to buy music on Blu-ray are a tiny fraction of audiophiles. That's why I think downloads are just going to be the future.

"Computer audio basically got going with MP3 and the use of the *iPod* and *iTunes*, using heavily lossy compression formats which sounded like… shit. But as hard drive space became cheaper and cheaper, there was no need to do lossy compression. Now, with a terabyte selling for $120, there's no need even to do lossless compression.

"So, about five years ago, I started to feel that this was going to be a subject worth exploring in the magazine. And I was already accustomed to using my computer for the music recordings I was making.

"In a sense, I think the magazines have lagged behind the readership when it comes to adopting the computer as a genuine high-end music source. Two or three years ago, I was getting emails from readers, saying "I bought a computer, I bought a Lynx soundcard, I've networked my house… what do you recommend as a jukebox program?" And I'm thinking, well, I use *iTunes*! But these people had already gone beyond that.

"Now, with companies like Linn, HDtracks from the Chesky Brothers (though I don't think they're available in the UK), and 2L from Norway, there's really high quality music available for download. And there are products like *Amarra* and *Pure Music*, which are front ends for *iTunes* and do all the housekeeping for you. So that when you press "Play" on a 96kHz/24-bit file, it is 24-bit and 96kHz data which comes out of the USB or the S/PDIF port, which wouldn't otherwise be the case.

"So, yes, with the appearance of products like that, and really high-quality USB DACs from dCS, Ayre, Wavelength, and internet-connected DACs like