Stan's Safari *40*

STAN IS INSPIRED BY ENCOUNTERS WITH THE REMARKABLE ENID LUMLEY

A few weeks ago in conversation, a colleague mentioned the late Enid Lumley; a woman who was described as 'deranged' or a 'fantasist' in some of the milder comments made during the 1980s. Enid wrote for American high-end magazines *The Absolute Sound* and *International Audio Review*, and not only took a lot of stick for being a woman in a man's world, but also expounded some views which were considered quite extraordinary at the time, but have become generally acceptable today. I grew to like Enid and whenever we met she gave me some new challenging thoughts. She was a very perceptive listener, even though a lack of formal engineering knowledge often led her to attribute changes in sound quality to the wrong causes. It was a sad day when, frustrated by the abuse, she climbed onto a bus and rode out of the hi-fi world.

So what were these views? Well I'll give you a flavour of her thinking by just picking on a few. She announced that the sound of her system became clearer if she suspended all the cables from wooden blocks on the floor so her speaker cables traversed the room like a miniature suspension bridge. Better still when they were suspended from the ceiling by a series of cotton threads. Crazy? Well actually she was hearing the low-level microphony in the cables of the day.

Then she took to putting a dish with damp muslin under the cover of her record player; a treatment which she claimed made the sound more consistent. Actually she was controlling the humidity of the area around the pickup cartridge, thus limiting the changes in the compliance of the stylus. She mounted the cartridge in the arm using brass screws at a time when manufacturers used steel screws. The latter seems like madness now.

Indeed Enid had great suspicions about steel and liked to demonstrate how an amplifier in an aluminium case could be affected by the addition of a steel plate – and this was years before some manufacturers "discovered" the benefits of the copper chassis. Then she suggested putting heavy bricks on top of loudspeakers; something we'd all understand these days. She was less successful in convincing me of the influence of the routing of water pipes in the home on the sound reproduction, but there may well have been something in it. Certainly her hearing was exceptionally acute, and she could consistently detect changes that passed me by.

Experimentation

The thing is we were all living in an era of experimentation where none of us fully understood what factors influenced sound quality, and where anybody could contribute to the debate provided that they had a half decent sound system; a good pair of ears; plenty of free time; and tolerant neighbours. The whole world of hi-fi had its roots in the hobbyists and experimenters who could wield a screwdriver and maybe a soldering iron.

In the 1960s and even in the early 1970s many enthusiasts built their own loudspeakers using drive units and cabinet plans provided by loudspeaker companies such as Wharfedale and subsequently KEF. A significant minority also built their own amplifiers using circuits published in *Wireless World* or similar publications. This was a successful route because many of the first commercial transistor amplifiers also had their origins in those same articles. (Even our Editor's beloved Naim amplifiers had their origins in a book of amplifier designs published by RCA!) So I think it is fair to say that everyone; both enthusiasts and manufacturers, were feeling their way to an understanding of what made for good sound.

When I first entered the audio world in the late 1960s the ground rules had largely been set by engineers working for the BBC and the Post Office. And they generally subscribed to a view that audio equipment should have a response from 50 Hz to 15 kHz and have harmonic distortion below 1%; there was no audible benefit to be had from improving on those figures. As for record players, well you just needed low rumble and Wow & Flutter and all would be fine. This way of thinking persisted for some time.

Indeed I remember a leading hi-fi manufacturer launching an expensive amplifier in the late 1970s with quite appalling high-frequency distortion. There was no admission that perhaps the design could be improved – only the interesting statement that the upper limit of human hearing was about 16kHz and that the second harmonic of 10kHz (the distortion)