

*CES 2018 tries to tempt with high-end hi-res music.*

# The Regeneration Game

WILL HI-FI EVER WIN BACK TODAY'S MUSIC LISTENERS?

ANDREW EVERARD RECKONS 'LOUD' MATTERS MORE THAN 'QUALITY'.

As soon as I arrived, I knew something had changed. A house that had previously been inhabited by the squeaky thumps and cracks of 'shoot 'em up' games, was suddenly thumping with the swagger of ersatz disaffected youth from somewhere south of downtown LA: a thumping bass line, lyrics heavy on brand-recognition and profanity, plus the liberal use of that racial epithet that's acceptable only in the mouths of the self-referring.

With a smile, I noted to myself that a resolutely middle-class white Surrey teenager had not only found a style of music that spoke to his life-experience, but also that he was finding a way to enjoy it on what sounded like a reasonable (or at least loud) system. Although it must be noted that the whole urban milieu of guns and drugs and women was somewhat undermined by the occasional just-broken-voice cry of 'Alexa, play me...', swiftly followed by another plaster-rattling bass-line.

OK, so the teen in question is hardly typical, in that one of his parents is 'in the business' and therefore the source of the equipment now shaking the house, but this sudden interest in (sort of) music

played loud and proud, took me back to my own early interests in audio, and into pondering the hi-fi industry's wailings about 'lost generations' that were no longer interested in high-quality sound.

In my case, the first dabblings in things to do with playing music (beyond an early Philips cassette recorder and a fold-up briefcase record player, both gifts from indulgent grandparents) was a radiogram inherited from a relative. At that time you couldn't give those big old mahogany veneered monsters away; these days their Garrard turntables and valve amplification make working examples objects of curiosity for retro collectors.

Anyway, with little care for personal safety (or perhaps a total lack of awareness of the dangers of mains voltages), the radiogram was eviscerated during a summer holiday, and its constituent parts transplanted into home-made enclosures that looked more like the stereo components I saw in the hi-fi magazines that occasionally turned up in the school common rooms.

I'm sure the results weren't great, but there was some sense of achievement in what I'd created (and

ANDREW EVERARD

some gratitude that I hadn't fried myself in the process), such that even now hearing a favourite album from back then brings back memories of how it sounded on that first Frankenstein system.

And it seems I wasn't alone in discovering music on a 'hand me down' system. Talking to a friend, I heard: "I was so happy when I was given my parents' old record player; that's how I got into rock'n'roll, with their old scratched LPs, and it didn't matter that they jumped a bit when I jogged it dancing around. However, it was a bit infuriating when the needle hopped and skipped a song, or jumped back and repeated what I'd just been listening to."

Clearly back then she hadn't heard of the prime tuning tip of the day – the old penny taped to the headshell –, but I understood completely how she would have felt when freed from the living room and having to fit in with the rest of the family: the feeling of liberation when you could play your own music in your own room was not just a luxury, but one of the major 'growing up' experiences.

That's one of the major changes between those of us from the second baby boomer generation – or in my friend's case, those born right at the start of Generation X – and the Generation Z teenagers of today. Whereas we probably discovered at least some music with the encouragement, or endurance, of our parents' tastes, modern kids have grown up in the MP3/iTunes/streaming age, where music has always been available more or less on tap.

After all, the would-be Home Counties gangsta was only three when the *iPhone* first appeared, and is a few years younger than the *iPod*, whereas my earliest memories of music (apart from an aunt and uncle who were heavily into James Last and Bert Kaempfert), were of Beatles EPs and others of the time, courtesy of a neighbour who drove a van for the huge EMI pressing plant a few miles from my childhood home. It seems they never did get the dodgy back door on that vehicle fixed.....

Yet while I, and many of my contemporaries, graduated to simple first time stereo systems, either through Saturday or summer jobs, or with our first student grant cheques (for younger readers, in those days the Government actually gave you money to go to university!), it seems that interest has died out. Though our equivalents of the modern age have long had the potential to be exposed to much more music than we ever did, the interest in the means of playback, of hearing more of the recording, has waned.

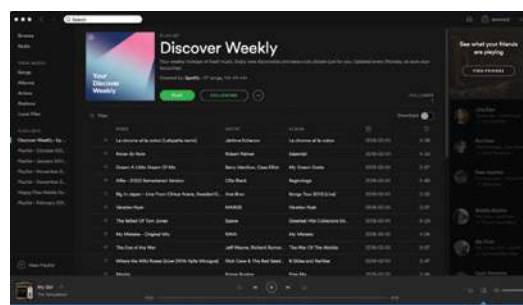
Which causes much hand-wringing among those I talk to in the industry. Yes, everyone knows there's a huge untapped market out there, as is evidenced by the fact just about every new piece of



*High End 2018 will be running a Can Jam headphone event alongside the main Munich show.*

equipment that possibly can come with Bluetooth onboard, ready to receive music without wires from handheld devices and computers. Yet it seems the only products attracting any kind of mass-market interest are Bluetooth speakers and headphones, not hi-fi systems, amplifiers or receivers. As a German colleague put it in typically forthright manner: "They don't want the really good cutting-edge stuff we as an industry make so well, but rather the bland, joyless plastic crap."

His view is that the industry has now polarised completely. On one hand is the sort of product, sold in large, brightly-coloured quantities in the big electrical sheds and online, but hardly worthy of attention by anyone truly interested in good sound. On the other is the ever more ambitiously-priced high-end, likely to sell in very small numbers, but designed to offset the relatively small quantities sold by those big tickets. Where, he wonders, is the middle ground, impressive enough to pull in newcomers to hi-fi, and priced to make it attractive to that market, too? And how do we even spark an awareness that such products exist, among consumers below whose radar hi-fi currently sits?



*Forget hi-res – Spotify rules. As when SACD took on the iPods, for most modern listeners, quantity wins out over quality every time.*



*Giving them what they want: Sony lures the 'iPhone generation' with big, loud, party systems, complete with club lighting effects. And yes, you can daisy-chain them for an even more room-shaking sound.*



The answer to the first of those questions is that, although we have seen a hollowing out of the midrange of the hi-fi market. Gone are the days when the number of stereo amplifiers in the sub-£1000 market ran comfortably into three figures. But there's still plenty of equipment out there perfectly capable of making the music from an *iPhone* or tablet sound very impressive indeed.

The answer to the second question: the problem of bringing together the music-streaming generation and the world of hi-fi, is rather more 'Hmmm, good one. Not too sure...'. Or at least that's the impression I get when speaking to manufacturers and others involved in the industry.

The thing is, the 'just-a-teenager' I mentioned at the beginning of this piece has shown how simple it can be. All you need is a hi-fi amplifier, a pair of speakers and a simple 3.5mm-jack-to-two-phonos lead to connect just about any portable device to the system. OK, so Apple has muddied those waters a bit with its decision to drop the regular headphone socket from its most recent phones (ostensibly to allow the products to be slimmed down but also conveniently driving more users to buy its wireless earphones).

But there are ways round this, not least with the 'in the box' Lightning-to-3.5mm adapter. This allows conventional headphones to be connected to the latest devices, although it also means you can't charge your phone and listen at the same time. (For that you need to buy an aftermarket 'dongle' with both a headphone socket and another Lightning socket for your charging cable.) And of course once you have a 3.5mm analogue output, you can connect to any line-in on any amplifier, and play music stored on your phone (or indeed any streaming content to which you're connected), through the hi-fi system.

Connecting in this way means you can now use any analogue cable you want, from an Amazon

cheapy, where a quick look suggests less than £1.50 will get you a 3m lead, all the way up to the rarified offerings of the specialist audio cable manufacturers. For example, £130 will buy an Audioquest *Big Sur* cable to connect a smartphone to an amplifier, and I'm sure there are ways of spending even more without too much effort!

This is the way my inspirational teenager does it, although it must be admitted he's gone way beyond using his smartphone for this purpose. After all, he needs to talk on his phone, while playing a game, while listening to music. Instead, he uses an Amazon Echo Dot, bought in the pre-Christmas sale for £30 or so, as the source for his system. It's connected to the household Amazon account, giving access to the company's Prime membership and putting a couple of million tracks no further away than an: "Alexa, play...".

Or of course he could upgrade to Amazon Music Unlimited, at just under £120 a year (£80 on top of the existing Amazon Prime subscription), which already brings free parcel delivery, TV streaming services and so on, and gets access to no fewer than 40m tracks, which will be available to every Echo device in the house, and his mobile phone on the move...

Even more cost-effective for a pocket-money listener, Amazon offers Music Unlimited on what it calls the Echo Plan (restricted to just one Echo device, but then what more does a teenager need?) for just £3.99 a month. Four quid, to have what is effectively all the music you'd ever want instantly available, and constantly updated, has got to be a good deal when you're 13. I was paying that much for a single LP when I was not much older!

OK, let's park the 'no wonder kids today think music has no value – in my day every album was a considered purchase' thing, and address some of the more obvious 'yes, buts' of this situation. Yes, but connecting the phone (or indeed the Alexa whatever) to an amplifier means you are limited by the quality of the DAC and the output electronics in the device in question. And yes, but the music is only ever going to be the MP3 or AAC quality used by the streaming services, and we all know how nasty they sound, don't we?

The answer to those is another 'yes, but'. Yes, but aren't we missing the point when it comes to enticing the *iPhone* generation into the world of great hi-fi we all know and love? We all know what a fine system can bring to the enjoyment of music, or we wouldn't have such systems, search out prized recordings, or indeed be reading this magazine. But what we need to communicate to these new listeners is not just the finer points of music appreciation *via* decent



*Technics, too, goes for loud, proud and illuminated in its Bluetooth range.*

equipment, but the gut feeling of pleasure they get when they hear their tunes of the moment pounding out of a pair speakers at serious levels.

After all, wasn't that what got quite a lot of us into hi-fi in the first place? I know I can still remember the thrill of being able to play the latest album – almost inevitably prog at the time, which dates me even more precisely – at the kind of levels I only ever tried when the parents were out and I could let the system rip. That I was getting my kicks because the bass and the drums and those synths were being reproduced more cleanly, and with more impact, than they could be by the small, tinny speakers on which I had been listening, is something I only appreciated later. What I knew at the time was that playing the music loud gave it more physical impact, and made it more fun.

At the CES 2018 in Las Vegas at the beginning of the year, that polarisation I mentioned earlier was much in evidence: the high-end audio section was squirreled away on the upper floors of one of the massive hotels, albeit in much-depleted form, while down on the main show floors of the convention was a high resolution exhibit, aimed much more at the mass-market, and with events and demonstrations of music on personal players, DAC/amps and headphones.

That hi-res thing is something which the organisers of the show have been banging away about for some years now, heralding it as a sales breakthrough on the same scale as the adoption of higher-definition TV standards, immersive surround technologies, 3D TV and – oh, hang on, 3D really didn't work very well, did it?

What the consumer electronics industry needs to learn is that yes, 'If you build it, they will come', but only if you are building what they want. And just as the great 'beyond CD' revolution of SACD and DVD-Audio faltered, with consumers voting with their wallets for more music in lower quality on their iPods or mobile phones, so pushing hi-res

music again as the way to bridge the gap between the *iPhone* generations and the world of hi-fi seems to be missing the point.

The High End event in Munich this year is trying a different approach, with a 'CanJam' for headphone enthusiasts running alongside the main show. With one ticket admitting to both shows, the intention is to entice some headphone fans over to the world of high end hi-fi next door, allowing them to discover what can be done with today's state of the art systems. Good plan, unless it means that those headphone fans who previously came to the main show will instead stick to the parallel event, and never set foot in the world of big valves and even bigger horns.

Or perhaps it's trying to run before you can walk. You see, those of us with expensive, highly developed audio systems may be interested in those 'beyond CD' formats, or perhaps just getting the best of out of our existing CDs and LPs. But tell the average teenager that you have just downloaded a DSD256 album running to 7GB or more and you're likely to be met with a blank stare or (as in my case when I tried) the question: "Yes, but what's in it for me?"

Simply, today's listeners aren't complaining about the quality of the sound they're getting from their phones or whatever. Instead, just as they want 40m tracks instantly available, they want more of their music in terms of impact and volume, not the niceties of timbral accuracy, nor the ability to hear the tube trains running under the recording venue. And even if they can be lured through the doors of the average hi-fi show, they're unlikely to be seduced by the musical selections on offer – I'm not sure that African trains, Californian hotels, or breathy jazz will do much for them.

Give them the 'more music' they're after – what they want to hear, but with a bigger, thumpier, louder sound that's simply more fun, and you'll have them hooked. *Then* we can start working on all the hi-fi stuff...



*Bridging the gap between personal audio and hi-fi: Audioquest's Golden Gate interconnect comes in 3.5mm-to-two-phonos versions, starting from around £65*