Peter Thomas, PMC

The boss of the well-known British speaker manufacturer talks about his early career at the BBC, how Robbie Williams appeared in an advert for free, and his company's almost accidental move into making domestic loudspeakers alongside monitors used in studios around the world

Peter Thomas, co-founder and now managing director of the Professional Monitor Company Ltd — better known simply as speaker manufacturer PMC — is the real-deal: an audio industry heavyweight with an engineering and broadcast background who's a genuine and life-long lover of music, rather than an accountant with an in-the-minute faux 'passion' for this or that.

The latecomer of the family, with two much older siblings, Thomas was born into a household in Ramsgate where music had an important role. His father never performed publicly but was a piano player of some accomplishment who encouraged his children to learn. "He could sight read," says Thomas. "You could put any piece of music in front of him and he could play it. I learned piano until I was 10, but then my teacher became ill and I didn't keep it up. I don't have many regrets but that's one of them."

He acknowledges a gift as the primary spur for his career in audio. "My paternal grandfather gave me a gramophone and a big pile of 78s and it fascinated me because it wasn't electric, it was wind-up, and all-acoustic. I still love that music and still collect 78s: I love the sense of immediacy, the fact that they had three minutes to cut it, live and without mistakes – sometimes you can hear the band speed up towards the end to fit it all in. Once you get into the 1920s the recording quality isn't all that bad."

At Chatham House School Thomas excelled at engineering subjects including electronics. "I was always more comfortable with practical subjects: I really wanted to work in audio, but there were no local companies and my father was unwell so I didn't want to leave the area to work or to go to university. When I left school I did an electronics Higher National Certificate with Racal Marine, a local company that specialised in radio communications. The project I eventually got involved with, and really loved, was a back-pack radio for the army. It was very advanced, the first to use a CMOS 4000 integrated circuit-based synthesised tuner. It turned out I was the only person there who could work on them – by pure chance I'd studied IC theory during my HNC."

Thomas's HNC study sessions were at Canterbury Technical College and, while on a lunch break there, he happened upon a BBC pop-up recruitment booth in the high street. The BBC had taken on a lot of staff immediately after the end of the war, and many of them were coming up to retirement. "The BBC suddenly realised it had to recruit a new generation very quickly. I made a complete hash of the interview — I genuinely did the classic of trying to walk out through the broom cupboard — but by some miracle they gave me a job as a music studio service maintenance engineer."

It was the making of Thomas the audio man. "I was part of the new wave, all jeans and long hair, and that was quite a clash of culture with the old BBC suits and ties. But the training was the best in the world: in four months you were taught how to maintain everything in the broadcast chain from microphones through transmitters to the tuner in the home. I loved it: it gave you this perspective of the whole audio world and your place in it."

With the retirement of the 'old guard', Thomas and his fellow young joiners were rapidly propelled into positions of responsibility; by the age of 30 he was running a team of 50 people, and not just maintaining equipment but designing it too.

At that time, the BBC's Maida Vale music studios were using Tannoy and JBL large monitors during recordings of live music performances, having tried and failed to find an alternative with the measurement and voicing characteristics of the BBC-designed miniature LS3/5A while being genuinely full-range and able to handle very high SPLs.

"When you're recording a live band you're balancing it without any compression and seeing peak loudness of 120 dB. That'd fry most hi-fi speakers, so you've got to build a very resilient monitor to cope with it — not just robust, but accurate too. The studio couldn't buy what they wanted, knew that my colleague Adrian Loader and I we were hi fi enthusiasts as well as engineers, and they challenged us to design something at home."

The result was the BB (Big Box) series of transmission line prototypes. Thomas and Loader put a 15" woofer, a three inch dome midrange and a one

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