



## Stan's Safari 50

STAN CURTIS TAKES A STAND ON STREAMING – OR AT LEAST EXPENSIVE NETWORK AUDIO HARDWARE – SIMPLY BECAUSE HE'S NOT CONVINCED IT OFFERS SUFFICIENT RETURN ON THE INVESTMENT. WHY? HE ENDEAVOURS TO FIND OUT, AND OFFERS HIS VIEW ON A NEW EDITION OF AN AMPLIFIER DESIGN MANUAL

**There's one subject I've tended to steer away from in my essays because it increasingly represents a dividing line between the traditional hi-fi enthusiast and the tech-savvy, multi-platform loving enthusiast. I refer of course to music streaming, and I'm a long way from being a convert.**

That said, I do use streaming on my smart phone and laptop, finding it incredibly convenient and, for the most part, of acceptable fidelity – even though my early 1960s favourites sounded so much better played back on a Wurlitzer jukebox. I'm much less comfortable with the entry of streaming into high-end audio: I can hear a difference between the performance of some such systems and my exceptionally low-cost laptop system, but am disturbed by the clear differences I hear between those expensive systems I've auditioned because, faced with the attached price tags, I fail to justify a meaningful "Return On Investment".

Is there as much difference between the results of £250 streaming hardware and a £6000 high-end model, compared to the difference between two similarly separated CD players? If you think so, fine, but as yet I can't and that worries me, as does the fact I find the sound from such hardware to be significantly different; something not to be expected if digital audio were approaching perfection. There are reasons for this which lead me to ponder both

the fragility of digital transmission and the ease with which it can be turned from something into something else.

My starting point is the amazing resilience of analogue recordings, which can suffer no end of corruption and still bring a smile. Think about it for a moment – you change your amplifier boasting 0.005% distortion for a valve amplifier producing nearly 1% of musically natural even harmonic distortion and, if anything, the sound improves. Change the source to a record player, adding colourations from the platter and associated parts and still more from the body of the cartridge, and is the sound significantly degraded? Many would claim the complete opposite.

What about quite large changes to the frequency response? Well, a switch to another pair of speakers will bring significant changes to the frequency response of the system but is the sound worse? No; it will be different but your view of the better choice comes down to personal preference.

If you want a definitive example of how tolerant analogue audio is let me tell you about