

TOTALLY TUBULAR

A quarterly audio newsletter riding the vacuum tube wave. Vol. 1, No. 2. May, 1995

A Conversation with Luke Manley of VTL

TT. What's new at VTL?

LM. Firstly, we've done quite a lot of work in output transformers. They're much improved, with much better coupling – the Signature Series of output transformers. And we'll put them into some of the higher models of our amplifiers – the 300 and 600 – maybe the 225's. *I've made a lot of improvements...in resourcing the transformers, and we now get full power frequency response from 20Hz clear out to 40kHz!* This is the first time I've publicized this. We're able to test this using the industry-standard Audio Precision system, and we pack the test results in with each unit. Secondly, I'm intrigued by the home theater thing. We're using tubes in a home theater system here (at The Stereophile Show) because I wanted to experiment to see how tubes can handle the tremendous transients in a home theater environment.

TT. How are they handling it?

LM. Very well! The whole forte of tubes is their superior transient handling – *real* good transient handling and good acceleration. When they clip they don't clip as harshly as transistors. There are lots of reason why tubes can work really well in home theater. And I think the home theater phenomenon is something that will really get lots of new people into the business.

TT. How about a 5-channel tube amp?

LM. That's doable, but perhaps not practical. We make monoblocks, of course. One can buy five 100-watt monoblocks quite easily. But I haven't thought much about a 5-channel amp. It would weigh a lot and be pretty difficult to do. It wouldn't be a big seller. But I think monoblocks would be more feasible. You can match your gains. It's important, especially with AC-3, to have equal gain in each of the channels.

TT. What speakers are you using in your room here?

LM. We're running the new NHT VT2.5s. They launched them at CES. And these are the VT2s in the back and center. We have the SW-3 powered sub, and we're going to put a pair of subs in the back too and get a little more kick out of the room.

TT. It sounds great!

LM. Yeah. Thanks. It does doesn't it? It's quite loud, but it's *clean*.

TT. How did VTL get started? In England, wasn't it?

LM. Yeah. My dad saw a niche for simple circuits that gave better reliability and purer sound, and started the brand in England.

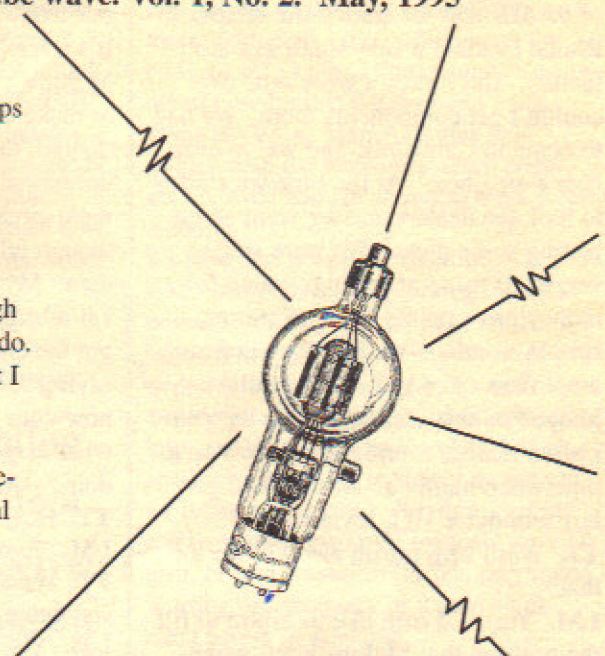
TT. How long was it there?

LM. A little over seven years.

TT. Was it pretty successful?

LM. He was moderately successful. He didn't achieve a lot of penetration in the UK dealer market, or in the press, so we started in about '86 to try to import it into the U.S. market.

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TT. How did you get into this business?

HB. I was born into it. Music was always played in the house. There is a report out that when the fetus is inside the womb and music is played continuously it has positive effects. And music was definitely in the house, and still is. And I grew up listening to music of all kinds. And after I was born my father was working for the David Bogen Company. He was a product engineer, and worked there for four years. The audio business was booming and at that time Harman-Kardon was in dire need of field service on the west coast and H-K moved the entire family out to the west coast. And for six years my father was instrumental in saving Harman-Kardon's financial life because there was about a 30% failure rate of their product line. So he managed to save the company and do some modifications of their product line and take care of the customers on the west coast. And growing up I wasn't interested baseball – but give me a radio or some other electronics item and that was my joy. And growing up going to some of the old hi-fi shows at the Ambassador Hotel was, for me, better than going to Disneyland.

TT. It's interesting that someone who's made a life out of repairing equipment got into it through the music end.

HB. I loved both music and electronics and I mixed both of them together.

TT. That's a rare combination. So when did you start your business?

HB. I started the business in July of '78. I started it in my parent's garage. Before it became a registered type of business my first bench was my bedroom dresser. I knew at a young age that I wanted to have my own business in electronics. I felt that working for somebody was just like a machine. But having your own business you do the work, it's your business, you deal with the public – I like human contact also.

TT. What's your speciality?

HB. My speciality is audio, and restoring and repairing the older hi-fi audio equip-

ment, because it was a quality product, quality manufactured, and it was made in this country.

And the designers of that era, I feel, were more music lovers than they were designers of electronics – where I feel we have a reversal now.

We have better design engineers now, but I feel a lot of them are not exposed enough to live music – live, *unamplified* music – which is the reference tool in designing a piece of equipment.

TT. Do you feel they're trying to make their equipment sound like someone else's piece of equipment more than like the real, live event?

HB. It's possible. You know they're even going to styling, but also, in general, there is tremendous nostalgia resurgence in most everything, because I feel life in general has gotten so fast-paced, and so complicated, that people who are baby-boomers, like myself, look back to a time when we were kids and didn't have any worries or problems – when life was a little simpler.

TT. Music's a great escape.

HB. For me it's a *tremendous* escape.

TT. I notice you have a Citation II in the booth. Are you a H-K lover, with your dad working for them?

HB. Well, I'm a Citation-lover more than I am H-K. But the Citation II was, I would say, my learning basis of amplified technology and circuitry. And also, the designer, Stewart Hegeman, was my mentor. He was an eccentric man but he truly had *golden ears*, and I was intimidated by him – but I would be with him because he was such a giant. And his designs were time-proven, and are more in demand now than when he was alive – just like the conductor Fritz Reiner. His recordings are more in demand now that he's dead than when he was alive.

TT. Unfortunately this is the case with many people.

HB. Yes, but I feel that Stewart did not receive enough credit for what his designs have accomplished. And other manufacturers have taken on his style of designing certain pieces of equipment. And I felt it was also an item that was, at times, way ahead of its time, and that could have

been some of the marketing demise of some of those pieces of equipment. It's nice to see a smile that is brought back to so many people's faces when they see a Citation II. It makes me feel good because I feel I can help perpetuate the man's memory.

TT. What about the tubes of today?

HB. Tubes are basically whatever you can get. If they are of any quality you grab them.

TT. How do you know what's quality?

HB. Well, basically you know of your own experience or by asking somebody like me, who has been able to test certain brands of tubes. Like when I tested certain brands of Chinese tubes and had very bad luck with them – the customers come back to me not satisfied because their amplifier went out again. So I eat it and try a different brand. And if I have better luck with it then fine, and that's how I know. It's a gamble that I take but that's how I find out. Right now, for example, with the 6550s, I find that GE is the best that is available. Some people disagree with me, but I'm only speaking from my experience and I'm not saying that it's dogma, but just from my experience.

I've had very good luck with the Tesla EL34s . In Sovtek, I've had very good luck with the low level stages – the 12AX, the 6922s – but I've had very bad luck with their 6550s.

But that's just my experience.

You've got to shop around; ask around. And hopefully the person that you ask is giving you the honest truth, which in this business is *very rare*.

TT. When is your service center open?

HB. The hours for my service center are 9 to 5, Monday through Thursday, and 9 to 3 on Friday. I'm closed on the weekends. But do call first before you come because in August I should be in a new location. But my phone number will be the same.

TT. What were the killer brands when you were growing up – that just knocked your socks off?

HB. That would be the Citation line from Harman-Kardon, the McIntosh line, and the Marantz line.

(Continued on next page)

7 And in restoration dollar figures the unit that would be the most expensive to restore properly would be the Citation, because of the quality of the components that they used, which were very very inferior. There was a lot of heat damage from the resistors; the tube sockets that they used were inferior so you have to gut that out, whereas Marantz and McIntosh definitely used better quality components and the tube sockets were of a better grade.

TT. What is the biggest problem with McIntosh and Marantz?

HB. The biggest problem with McIntosh is that their chrome chassis will pit and rust. You know, each brand of amplifiers had their own little peculiarities. Citation was the quality of their components. McIntosh was rust and pitting from the chrome chassis. And I'll tell you something, what always comes to my mind with Marantz – for example, the Model 7 (such a fine preamp) – but when you would get a Model 7 with a cabinet, they used the cheapest screws to hold that heavy preamp in a very thin piece of plywood, so you would always strip the holes out of it.

**“If it's made good,
but it sounds
bad...it's bad!”**

Ed. Note: Sigmund Bardach, Howard's father, and a true audio pioneer, showed up. He was an electronic engineer and servicer in the early fifties at the threshold of the hi-fi business, rubbing elbows with pioneers like Abe Cohen, Victor Brociner, Rudy Bozak, Stew Hegeman, Edgar Villchur, Paul Klipsch, Joe Grado, David Bogen, Bernie Kardon and Sidney Harman. In 1957 he was working for David Bogen Company in quality control in New York and was relocated by Harman-Kardon to California to head the only warranty department on the west coast.

TT. How did you get started in the audio business, Sir... in your career?

SB. Through Hitler.

TT. Really! How did that happen?

SB. Alright. I was born in Vienna, Austria. And there was very little chance for someone like me, who wasn't an intellectual, going to school and studying, or

to get a job in the university, or something like that. And to go to America you have to have a trade, or a profession. So what was my profession? – to become an electronic technician. That sounded pretty good. So I went in there and I met two Hungarian engineers and we sat down a few days and they briefed me and then I got two magazines that they used, and got started and also became acquainted with a man by the name of A.C. Chaney. Have you heard of a company called H.Griffin?

TT. No I haven't.

SB. Well that was A.C.Chaney. He was a designer, and a pretty good one. And I got to know him, and did a little work with him. And then I went on my own, and got a job in a place called Radio Ham Shack, and I worked there as a radar technician until the job played out, because we were under contract with Viet Nam ...or actually it was a French company ...Indochina. And the contract was over and the guy said “I can't employ you, I have no work”. So I put an ad in the paper and it was picked up by the David Bogen Co. You've heard of it?

TT. Oh, sure.

SB. And I applied for a job there, and Al Zuckerman was the chief engineer there and you've heard of him, no? And then he gave me a test and I passed it. And then I went to meet the boss, David Bogen and found we had a lot of things in common. And I stayed there for four years. And together with Charlie Wilkins and Al Zuckerman I designed a few amplifiers for the company. As a matter of fact, when my term was over I got a nice bonus, and my wife bought a dress of something (laughter from his wife). And that was the end of the job. And then I found another job but it didn't last too long. And then I was home, and all of a sudden I get a call – “would you like to go to California?” – I was in New York you know. Not really, I said, but my wife said “I would like to go because my sister lives there.” So I said, “Alright, let's talk about it.” So we talked about it and we decided to go, but first I had to know how much was it worth, and I needed two more requirements: I had to bring my father, and also, no working on the sabbath. Okay, it was accepted, and I worked for them for six years. And after that I got my own business going, for four years. And after that he (Howard) started to grow up and took over my job, more or less.

TT. Talk about Harman-Kardon a little bit.

SB. What do you want to know about Harman-Kardon?

TT. Well, I hear that you're a Harman-Kardon fan.

SB. Why do you think that?

TT. Because Howard told me you were.

SB. I'm not a Harman-Kardon fan. I happened to know the president and the vice-president, who happens to be dead by now – Bernie Kardon's dead. He died about a year ago. And I know Sidney Harman very well, who's the president. Sidney Harman, and another fellow, asked me to come out to California and that's

what I did. **Harman-Kardon, when it came out, of course, made nothing but junk – BAD!**

Except for the first four years they made the D1000 – a D1100. That was pretty good. But they were following pre-existing designs, like ultra-linear, and so forth. But when they came up with their own designs it was a mess. So Sidney Harman said “can you help us out?” “How can I help you out? You've got a piece of junk there! What do you want me to do?” Sidney said “see what you can do.”

“Okay Sidney” I said, and I sat down to see what was wrong. And I saw what was wrong and said “Sidney, I can't rework the whole damn thing. It will cost too much money. I'll just do what I think can be done.” And that's what I did, and after about a half a year or so I designed the first amp that was satisfactory.

TT. What product was that?

SB. That was a product called the TA1040, and the TA120, the A-140 and T120 and so forth.

TT. How did the Citation series come about?

SB. The Citation is a different story, *altogether*. The Citation was developed by a good friend of ours, Stewart Hegeman, I don't know if you've heard of him.

TT. Of course.

SB. Well, I got to know him through Bogen also. Stewart was told by Sydney Harman to design a line that will equal Marantz. (continued on page 13)

13 Sigmund Bardach (continued)...

Marantz was then the leader – still is, I think. And it took Stew about a half a year, or a year, and he made a beautiful Citation. There was the Citation I...II, ...the III, the tuner, actually he did not design – it was a piece of junk. But the I, II... and that's it. And then someone else designed the IV and the V, which was a poor amplifier in my opinion. And that's about the size of it as far as Harman-Kardon's concerned. And I was already in California, and there was a company called I.R. Stern – they were reps for Harman-Kardon and other companies, so I worked there, and after six years I got canned

TT. You got what?

SB. I got canned – *fired!* You know what that is?

TT. I sure do. (pause) What do you think of the designers today?

SB. I don't know much *about* the designers of today. Because today it's almost all solid-state, practically. And I haven't much experience with solid-state, as compared to tubes. I've never heard a solid-state amplifier equal tubes in sound, in my opinion.

TT. Have you listened to some of the new tube equipment?

SB. Yeah. Some of it is good, others are not.

TT. What makes the difference?

SB. The difference is whether it sounds musical. The amplifier can sound good on the spec sheet, but like C.J. Label said, "if it's made good, but it sounds bad...it's bad!" And he's right – 100% right! #

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Dennis Had (continued)

TT. What about safety of tube products?

DH. We're going to be AC- interlocked and high voltage. You take the bottom off and the top off and it not only turns the AC- off but it shorts the plug. But in a specialized area like tubes the assumption is that the consumer is better educated.

FM. But I'm not sure that's an assumption that I would want to risk, personally.

DH. The liability insurance for our particular products is very very small. And you have to also take into account that the high voltage becomes DC, and DC is a voltage that will *repel* a human being. The killer is the AC- voltage. Now if somebody got a hold of a secondary AC- off the power transformer, that would be far more serious than getting 1200-volts, or 900-volts DC.

FM. Out of curiosity, what would you think if somebody brought out one pair of tubes that did the same job as, say six KT88s or 6550As? And what if they did it in a version that was essentially a triode? Do you think think it would sell?

DH. Absolutely. That's what an amp should be. A high power amp should be a pair of 12AUs driving a pair of 300Bs, and the 300Bs driving a pair of 845s. That's what a high power amp should be – two tubes in push-pull.

FM. I agree. But that's a minority of the marketplace.

DH. People just don't understand how to operate and work with high-power tubes.

FM. Right. I'm a big fan of the fewer the devices in the circuit the better its got to sound. To me its got to sound better using a pair of tubes than using six or eight or ten or twelve. I mean, it's gotten way out of hand. It's become like it was in the 60s, a horsepower race and personally I think they're going about it the wrong way.

DH. The amps that break are the ones that have a gazillion tubes all in parallel. I mean, there's just no question about it. #