

## CES/T.H.E. Expo 2002

### Equipment Lust in Las Vegas: Day One - Monday, January 7

by Greg Weaver

My odyssey began on Monday as I left from South Bend Regional Airport on a Comair Regional Jet bound for Cincinnati on the first leg of my flight to "Sin City." The results of the events of 9/11 have had their impact. This was the first time I've ever had the soles of my shoes scanned. I didn't mind in the least. In fact, it was somewhat comforting to know that everyone was subject to such scrutiny. After the most uneventful and pleasant trip I've ever had to Las Vegas, including a brief layover and plane change at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky airport, I arrived at McCarran airport at about 1:55. I got out of the airport in record time and arrived at the brand new Tuscany Resort, which had just opened their doors to the public the previous Friday, about 3:00.

Checking in was an experience. The main lobby/check in area was not ready for business. The hotel had made arrangements to check in customers in a converted regular hotel room. After finding my beautiful large suite and getting unpacked, I was ready to head out. I have to say that this was the first time I had ever been the first person to ever stay in a hotel room.

Since I had to pick up my badge holder and it was Press Only day from 1-6 at the Alexis Park, the traditional home of the High End C.E.S., off I went. It was just a short 20-minute walk and the weather was magnificent, 62° F versus the 20° F that I had left behind in South Bend that morning.

I collected my badge holder at the check in kiosk and headed south into the heart of the complex. What many of you may not know (which "Tin Ear" Bob pointed out,) is that the exhibits are held in hotel rooms. That's right. Just plain old hotel rooms, sans the bed, dressers and other accoutrements. While some exhibitors, like McIntosh Laboratories and Thiel for instance, may show in large ballrooms, conference or meeting rooms, most manufacturers exhibit in small, hard to set up, 16" by 12" guestrooms.



None of the exhibitors were ready to receive anyone, but I noticed the door to the Music Hall room in Building 23 open and stopped in to see Roy Hall. This year, I was privileged to present Roy with *The Stereo Times Most Wanted Component Award* for the singularly overachieving mmf-7 turntable. The mmf-7 is currently at the top of the mmf line of 'tables and sells for \$999. As I write this, I am listening to this superbly musical device (thank Gawd for laptops, eh?). A full review is in the works. I also felt strongly that Music Hall should receive recognition for Roy's nearly 17 years of bringing highly musical equipment at accessible prices

to the music-loving public. Kudos to Roy Hall and Music Hall - you've earned it. Please keep up the good work

He showed me lots of items, but of particular interest were two single malts - Dram Select and Lagavulin. The first silky smooth, the second, full bodied and with miles character. I could taste charcoal, oak, sea brine and a host of other influences. It was splendid! He and Leland were still trying to whip the room into shape, so I headed on out to see what else might be going on.

While traipsing the campus, I bumped into Barry Kohan of Bright Star Audio. He has a bunch of new products including a new *very affordable* set of anti-vibration feet called ISONODE. It is a set of four half spheres made from a material reminiscent of a super ball. The best part is that the set sells for just \$20! That is even less than the superb Vibrapods from Sam Kennard. Will they do the trick? More as I have time to play with them.

I stopped in to see Jim and Julie Wang of Harmonic Technology. The owner of Connecticut's Goldman Audio, my good friend Jonathon Goldman, who has helped them with their room over the past three years, was also on hand. This year they were using an all MBL system, and it *rocked*. The system was comprised of the mbl 1521 transport (\$6980), the mbl 1511D 24/192 DAC (\$7850), the mbl 5010 preamp (\$5820), the mbl 8011 stereo amplifier (\$8250) driving the mbl 300 D Mk II speakers (\$13100). The entire system was harnessed with Harmonic Technology Magic™ cables. After a bit of speaker repositioning, I used my own compilation CD's to do some listening and I have to say I was very impressed. This was going to be a *good* show!

Next I tried to get into the large record/CD sales area housed in the Parthenon Room to snag some good pre-show deals on music when a large, Nazi-type security guard stopped me. While I tried to explain that Monday from noon till six was set aside as press day, the guard wasn't having any. I was actually asked to prove that it was press day at the Alexis Park. To avoid a conflict, I gave up. I would be back!

By now it was approaching six o'clock, and Jim, Julie and Jonathon been kind enough to invite me to join them for dinner at an authentic Chinese Restaurant, Chang's of Las Vegas, near the north end of the Strip, just opposite the Stardust. The meal was fantastic, as was the company. One of the best things about C.E.S., to this listener at least, is the chance to spend time with friends one only gets to see once a year.

With our sustenance taken care of, it was time to head back to the Tuscany, which was to be the home to this years The Home Entertainment Expo, or T.H.E. Show as it has been come to be known. Mike Maloney has hosted this "renegade" show for four years now, and it has gotten larger and more enjoyable every year. Why? Because many vendors and exhibitors are fed up with the high prices and horrible conditions imposed on them by C.E.S. This year's T.H.E. Expo has an interesting tale to tell.

In past years, T.H.E. Expo has been held at the St. Tropez, the hotel complex directly next door to and east of the Alexis Park Resort. This year, the C.E.S. arranged to procure all the rooms at the St. Tropez, effectively obstructing Mike and the Expo. Why would they do that? To keep people from having the capability of simply walking next door to the competing exhibition? Why do they dislike Mike and T.H.E. Expo enough to do that? Your guess is as good as mine. It occurs to me that it would be best for all parties involved if both shows were close. The winners here in past years have been the show goers themselves. They got to witness products and demonstrations that they would not otherwise get an opportunity to visit by merely walking another 30 yards. But that makes sense. We can't have that now, can we?

This year Mike was going to move his Expo to the Rio Hotel, some miles from both the Alexis and the Las Vegas Convention Center. Now what happened next is a classic example of greed - of the management of the Rio, not Mike. As the show date approached, the Rio used room prices to leverage Mike into a position that would have been economically crushing. They basically held him up! Thank goodness for the American tradition known as the contract. Rather than suffer a drastic financial blow, Mike made a Herculean effort to arrange for the Tuscany to host the Expo, and cancelled on the Rio at the last minute his contract allowed, leaving the Rio in a lurch. Good for you Mike! If there is any justice in the world, I suspect the manager at the

Rio that tried to leverage Mike is standing in an unemployment line somewhere in Clark County.

Now that is not to say that the Tuscany was an absolute joy, far from it. The rooms were not ready, the power was erratic and you couldn't even call room to room yet. Forget about making a long distance call. The restaurant wasn't open and the Casino hadn't even broken ground. Yet the staff of the Tuscany and of the Expo were up to the challenge and pulled together to accomplish an Expo to remember. As the rest of my report will demonstrate, it was an unqualified success.

And the C.E.S. tried to cause even more havoc. Wednesday morning, one of the first of the Expo hired buses to shuttle show goers from the Tuscany to the Alexis was held under threat of being impounded when it pulled into the Alexis Parks drop off area by C.E.S. officials. Had it not been for the licensed security staff of the Alexis Park, the incident could have gotten ridiculous and ugly. Thank goodness cooler heads prevailed. The bus driver was a bit angry at his treatment, but only egos were damaged.

Back at the Tuscany, through the ruckus of ongoing landscaping and intermittent power, the Expo moved forward with a purpose that proved men with a mission can achieve what ever they set out to do. They were actually planting full sized trees and running some of the rooms from generators as late as Thursday morning! All things considered, the location turned out to be fantastic, much better to my way of thinking than the Rio would have been, and T.H.E. Expo was an overwhelming victory. It all worked -- and I can't wait for next year. Bravo Mike Maloney and T.H.E. Expo staff.

Not content to just sit in my room at the Tuscany after our meal, Jonathon and I decided to poke around the Hotel complex and see whom else we might know setting up that night. I was quite pleased to run into Dan Wright, of ModWright, who was showing his newly modded, tubed output Sony XA777ES SACD player with Alan Kafton of Audio Excellence AZ. This is the first tubed output SACD device on the planet and just another in a long string of hits from Dan. Jennifer Crock, of Jena Labs, designed the tubed output stage for the device and the modifications include the installation of the Audiocom SuperClock, numerous Bybee high-frequency filters, a custom outboard power supply with a hand-wound, custom-built Electraprint transformer and significant upgrades to the analog circuitry, all done by ModWright. In a word, spectacular!

They were setting up the room with Diapason Speakers, Tenor mono tube amps, utilizing Jennifer Crock's Jena Labs cables, all fronted by Dan's killer modded CD/SACD player. When they first fired it up, I was drawn into the sonics with Stevie Ray Vaughn's "Tin Pan Alley" from the *Couldn't Stand the Weather* release.

Alan Kafton (left) and Dan Wright (right) shown beside the first tubed output SACD player in the world, the ModWright Sony XA777ES



Alan was fussing with cabling, speaker placement and other aspects of system set up, as was everyone else the night before the Expo was to open. He was using a pair of floor standing Diapason speakers called the NUX, which at first listen sounded very nice. In fact, I was so taken with them that I asked to get a set for review. I had actually assumed that they sold for a good deal more than their \$2400 asking price. I have to tell you, it was very alluring. High frequency extension was slightly lacking, as were the lowest registers of bass, but this was a 5 1/4 inch woofer and a 3/4 inch tweeter which sold for well under \$3000. Look for the review later this spring.

After hanging out with Alan and Dan for several hours, playing with cables, chatting and listening to music, I decided to call it a night. As I headed back to my room for the night, exhausted after the day's travel and exploits, I found myself wishing it was already Tuesday morning. I love this job!

## **CES/T.H.E. Expo 2002**

### **Equipment Lust in Las Vegas: Day Two - Tuesday, January 8**

by Greg Weaver

Tuesday morning, I was up at 4:30 Las Vegas time, which was 7:30 to my South Bend body clock. I killed some time looking through my C.E.S. book, watching some TV news and, after a continental breakfast at the Tuscany, decided to plan my day. As neither C.E.S. nor T.H.E. Show opened until 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday, I had some time to chart out my plans.

At about 9:30, I decided to start roaming the Tuscany campus of buildings. My first stop was the second floor of the Tuscany's main building, housing the large Siena, Firenze and Tuscany rooms. These rooms held some of the bigger exhibits for the Expo, including Convergent Audio Technology, Essence Electro Acoustics and Sound Products, Shunyata, Lamm, Kharma, Intuitive Design, Plinius, Nearfield Acoustics, Rockport Technologies, Tenor, etc. Not too surprisingly, I guess, none of these rooms were open.

This is a view of the court yard as you enter the Alexis Park Campus and head south into the traditional home of the high-end C.E.S



Next, I headed into the other buildings, looking for places like the Halcro and [Rosinante/Argent](#) Audio room. I really wanted to get a listen to the Halcro gear, as the word of mouth and reviews had been so overwhelmingly positive. Well by 10:00, even though the Halcro room was open, no demonstrations were being given. I'd have to come back. I made it back to the Rosinante/Argent Audio room and found Ric Cummins joyously demonstrating his superb [Dulcinea](#) loudspeakers with the Audio Art Jota's.

Ric had a liberal array of Argent Room Lenses set up in the L shaped room, and had achieved a very successful room sound. I have to give him credit here. The room sounded sweet, clean, was very detailed, had a very realistic soundstage and an uncanny reality of timbre, especially with stringed instruments. I can see why Clement Perry was so taken with this particular synergy of equipment. The combination of the [Dulcinea/Jota](#) was simply delicious. As I toured more and more rooms over the next several days, one of the most disturbing conditions I regularly ran into was exhibitors placing the primary listening position much too close to the speakers. Not Ric. This room was done very well and was one of the more pleasurable rooms I visited this year.

Ric Cummins proudly shows off the new Rosinante Dulcinea,



driven with the Audio Art Jota behind him on the floor.



Ric received me with an open, friendly reception and we had a great chance to talk and discuss many issues, as the crowds were still very quiet here during the first day of the Expo. After thanking Ric for his marvelous hospitality, I bounded off to see what other rooms I might check out. To my great displeasure, as late as 11:00 am, most rooms were either not opened or there was no music playing in them yet. Slightly discouraged, I hailed a cab and headed for the Alexis Park.

Once there, it was clear that the traditional home of the C.E.S. high-end show was enjoying a fairly busy first day. The courtyard, just inside the main entrance and before the major group of buildings, was beginning to buzz with show goers, most of them industry professionals, judging from their badges.

Tim Wright, left, and Keith Wallan, right, of Greybeard Audio, stand at the business end of the *best sounding room with an analog source at this years C.E.S.*



I made my way into the fray again, and one of the first rooms I had on my list to visit was both close to the front of the compound and was playing some remarkable music to boot. The [Atma-Sphere/Greybeard/Magnan](#) room drew me in with the gravely sound of "Satchmo" Armstrong's voice. As I got into the room, I learned that I was listening to the Classic Records reissue of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington's *Recording Together for the First Time* [Classic/RCA SR-50074]. I sat down and was immediately lost in the music! This was simply a superb sounding room; it had everything - outrageously lifelike recreation of the venue and both the musicians and instruments within that space. Yet life sized, not magnified, not out of proportion. Voices, both human and instrument, were possessed of an unquestionable correctness. Frequency balance was nearly flawless, with no forward or recessed regions. Pitch definition in the lowest registers was detailed, fast and spot on. Treble was detailed and focused, yet not overly analytical or hard. I sat through the rest of that side, and the entire B-side as well.

The reworked Atma-Sphere 208 turntable



When that second side was done, I spent some time talking with Tim Wright of Greybeard. He filled me in on the system. The front end was an revamped Empire Turntable done by Atma-Sphere, the Model 208 (\$2500), the Atma-Sphere MP-3 Preamplifier (\$3800), a pair of M-60 Mk II.2 OTL monoblocks (\$4650/pair) driving the prototype Greybeard KO/5 (approximately \$19000/pair). The system was wired with all Dave Magnan cable, the Silver Bronze balanced interconnects and power cables and the Signature Speaker Cables (approximately \$9000). Little did I know it at the time, but this would be the **best sounding analog fronted system I would hear at this year's event.**

I later got to spend nearly an hour talking to Ralph Karsten of Atma-Sphere, who had some pretty interesting things about our industry in general, and high-end audio publishing in particular. On the equipment front, this spring will mark the introduction of his first new product in some two years, the MA-3 amplifiers. This is going to be a 4 chassis (a power supply and an amplifier per side), 475 Wpc OTL amplifier! The MA-3 will have 42 tubes per amplifier chassis, have a built in power conditioner, a tube tester and be selectable to 1/3, 2/3 and full power. This thing will be a space heater, so running diminished output when possible makes a whole lot of sense. Introductory price -- \$66000! I was salivating - and those of you who know me know how hard it is to get a Pavlovian response from me.

Moving further into the burgeoning campus, I looked up Israel Blume and EveAnna Manley, who were exhibiting together. [Coincident Speaker Technologies](#) was showing the new Total Victory (\$11500), a very detailed and dynamic loudspeaker. The Total Victory is a deeper, taller version of the standard Victory (\$4599). It is comprised of a highly sensitive Kapton film isodynamic planar tweeter and two 3" low-mass, fabric midrange domes in a D'Apollito alignment. Two treated paper 6.5" woofers do all the low frequency work in the Victory. In the new Total Victory, the 6.5" woofers are relieved of the lowest registers, those duties being handled by four 8" woofers per cabinet. The result? One tremendously detailed and lifelike speaker with some serious SLAM!

[Manley Labs](#) electronics were fronted with both digital and analog, which was routed to the Steelhead phono preamplifier (\$7200). All signals were then routed to the Wave 24/96 DAC/Preamp Combo (\$7500). The Wave fed the new 100 Wpc Manley Snapper monoblocks (\$4250/pair). The Snapper is a fully balanced, ultra-linear amplifier utilizing a true 19 section output transformer that took over 3 months and 18 prototypes to develop. I can say that the results were worth it. Israel was kind enough to put on a couple of old standards, *James Newton Howard & Friends* [Sheffield Lab 23] and John Klemmer's *Touch* [MFSL 1-006]. I have heard both of these records on literally hundreds of systems over the years, and I know them intimately. Though I will apologize for the titles, I will not apologize for the sonics. The Grand Victory/Manley combination was superb. Outrageous bloom, excellent resolve and blinding transients.

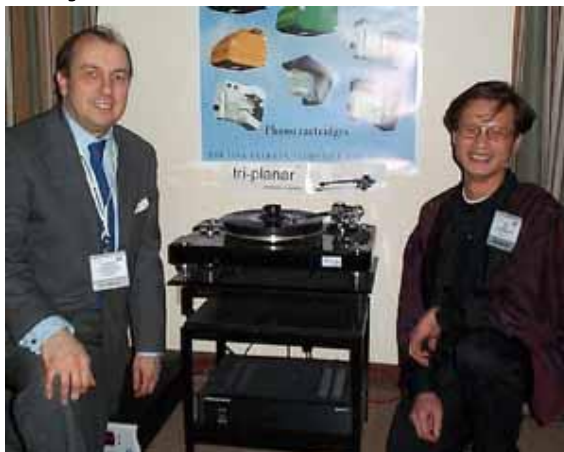
Israel Blume, left, and EveAnna Manley, right, show off two brand new products, the Coincident Total Victory Loudspeaker and the Manley Labs Snapper monoblock amplifiers.



One of the people I had wanted to look up was phono cartridge guru, A. J. van den Hul. His room was set up for a very interesting five-point-one channel music demonstration. Playing some of his own recordings and some other very good multi-channel recordings, he was showing off the promise of multi-channel systems for music rather than movies. While there was a great sense of space at some points, this system still was not able to get the hall space just right. More often than not, percussion or cymbal queues pulled to and called attention to themselves in the rear channels rather obviously. As much as I respect A.J., this multi-channel music system had a good way to go to compete with a really good two-channel music system.

Next, sticking with the van den Hul theme, I stopped by the [Stanalog](#) room, hosted by George Stanwick of Stanalog Audio Imports and Dung Tri Mai, the new owner of [tir-planar](#). Young Dung has taken the heritage of Herbert Papier and the original Wheaton Decoupled Arm, originally introduced back in 1981, and infused his enthusiasm and passion to take the new tri-planar to new heights. He is nothing if not exuberant about analog, and most urgently wants to keep the younger generation involved in the joys of analog playback. After just 20 minutes of talking with him, I found him to be a very serious and engrossing young man.

George Stanwick, left, of Stanalog Audio Imports, Inc. and Dung Tri Mai, right, the new driving force behind the latest iteration of the Tri-Planar tone arm.



What was fascinating about the demo in this room was the use of 'regular', not audiophile, records. Using Sugden equipment, ProAc Tablettes and featuring a van den

Hul cart, the room just sang. The equipment was good, but not outrageous. The music was lifelike and involving, not anemic or boring. I have spoken with Dung and am hopeful of having a full review of the current iteration of the tri-planar sometime in the near future.

It was mid afternoon, and after a quick and less than satisfying lunch in the Alexis Park courtyard and a stop by the press room to use their online computers, I was beginning to feel the length of my day and the three hour time differential. I decided to head back to the Tuscany and grabbed a cab. After a quick pit stop in my room, I was off to hear the Halcro demonstration.

Entering the [Halcro](#) Super Fidelity amplifier room with a demo in progress, I sat down near the back and listened. As people filtered out, I moved to the front-and-center position, giving me a chance to hear the room from many differing locations.

The Halcro dm58 Super Fidelity monoblocks



This system was costly. Fronted by a Nagra D digital tape machine (\$28000) using original recordings by Peter McGrath, as well as both the Marantz SA-1 (\$7500) and Sony XA 777ES (\$3000) SACD players, the sound in this room was something unique. All sources fed the Halcro dm10 preamplifier (\$15000) that in turn fed the Halcro dm58 monoblocks (\$25000). The amps drove the Wilson MAXX Loudspeakers (\$40000). All cables were the Reference XL series and Shunyata Research provided all power cables and conditioning. Stands were from Townshend and all equipment was isolated further with Aurios Pro isolation bearings.

To me, and on several occasions, the sound in this room approached tedious. Why? Well, I didn't know any of the source material, and even many of the other listeners were questioning those unknowns. Some of the classical recordings offered bordered on boxed in sounding. While I found much to like in the room, while I was there, I was also wishing that there were more choices of known material to gauge what the system was doing, or not doing, instead of having to wonder about the recording.

Nonetheless, some aspects of the performance were simply superb. The soundstage, for the most part, was wide, tall and very deep - with such a tremendous sense of the space of the recording. Timber was so honest sounding that several times I was convinced that I had never heard stringed instruments reproduced so faithfully. Piano took on all its true duality of both the impact of a percussion instrument and the nuance and subtlety of all its harmonics and overtones. This was a very impressive, if occasionally disconcerting, room. So much so that, during our Stereo Times staff get together and meal Thursday evening, some of my colleagues thought I was somewhat too harsh in my estimation of the rooms overall sonics.

I had seen many other rooms, but this pretty much sums up the highlights of my Tuesday. By now it was almost 6:00 p.m., 9:00 p.m. back in my home time zone, and I was really feeling the effects of the coast shifting. I headed back to my room, called off my plans for the evening, and fell asleep while watching TV. I found myself wishing that I hadn't been so cavalier in my trying to get to the events of this day the previous evening. And I knew Wednesday was going to be a big day.



## CES/T.H.E. Expo 2002

### Equipment Lust in Las Vegas: Day Three - Wednesday, January 9

by Greg Weaver

Up early again even though my body clock had stabilized somewhat, I opted for two breakfasts; the continental offered by the Tuscan, then an hour later, I tried the buffet at Terrible's Casino, just across Flamingo Road. It was not terrible.

Mornings had been more successful at the Alexis, so after stopping back by my room to pick up my camera, music and notebook, I grabbed the Expo bus to the Alexis. The gentleman driving this shuttle was somewhat agitated. He was only too happy to relate his story to a member of the press. It seems that on his first trip to the Alexis that morning, as he pulled into their loading zone, several C.E.S. types had very angrily tried to get him off his bus. They insisted that he had no right to drive up to the drop off point at their lobby, informed him that he was on private property and was trespassing. They were shouting and threatening to impound his shuttle. They insisted that he wait for the police, who they had just called, to take him into custody. It seems that was enough for him. He asked them to step away from his vehicle and he drove back to the Tuscan, shaken and angry.

It seems that our poor driver had not been given one key piece of information. He was to have dropped his passengers across the street from the Alexis, and was to pick up riders there as well. Since no one had mentioned this to him, and the Expo employees with their signs were not on site yet, this had been a harrowing experience for him. Thought he seemed calmer while I was speaking with him, I could see that the event had rattled him. No one, and when he repeated it he emphasized that, *NO ONE*, took his bus away from him while he was working. With his tale complete, he dropped my traveling companions and me across the street from the Alexis, and I began my third day of covering the event.

One of the first rooms I entered was the [Axiss Distribution](#) room. These guys don't mess around. They import some high-ticket items from companies like Accuphase, Air Tight, Acrotec, German Physiks, Odeon and Transrotor. It was no surprise that the room was loaded with some great turntables from German manufacturer Transrotor. The most intriguing by far was the Transrotor Tourbilcon (\$22000). Capable of supporting three separate arms, weighing in at 180 pounds and driven by three synchronous Pabst motors, it was a visual as well as sonic treat. Axiss was also showing the Transrotor Leonardo, a single motor unit with a 40 mm platter and a modified Rega RB250 arm (\$2000). Quite impressive.

The TransRotor Tourbilcon (left) and Leonardo (right)



As it is always a treat, I made my way into the room by German manufacturer [MBL](#) for a lengthy stay. This year, they were showing a system that could drive a three or five, as well as traditional two channel, system. While I have to say that I have not being taken by any five channel (including 5.1) music system I've yet heard, the MBL room went a long way to convince me it was a valid idea.

However, the two-channel demonstration was just superb. The 66 pound mbl 1621 transport (\$15500) played red book CD's and fed it's stream of ones and zeros to the mbl 1611D (\$16915) 24 bit/192 kHz DAC. Preamplification was handled by the mbl

6010D (\$13800), which sent the signal to the mbl 9010C amps (\$21,790 each), all configured for mono operation. The latest iteration of the Radialstrahler, the mbl 101D (\$35800 pair) speakers, converted the two channel material sound. There was a sense of space and reality that goes beyond just about any other system I can recall encountering with the mbl set up. Granted, it is not cheap, but what it does manage to do is give the listener a sense of being IN the music, not just hearing it played back. Timbre, dynamics, ease, pace, image specificity and soundstage recreation were breath taking.

The new Radialstrahler



In the three and five channel modes, the new mbl 111B System II speaker (\$16700 pair) took on the duties of creating the center channel and the rears. Besides the remarkably realistic sense of life they create, the mbl speakers are visually unique and, to my eye, graceful and stunning looking as well.

The new mbl111D, for center and rear channels



I had been to the [Eggleston Works](#) Andra II room on Tuesday night briefly, but set-up problems had kept the room staff too busy for a real listen. Today, I was going to get a good listen. One of the other nice things about this room was that it was powered with the Pass Labs X600 amps. A Marantz SA1251 SACD player fronted the room and fed a Pass Labs X0.2 preamp. Cables were by Jeff Smith of Silversmith and the Grand Prix Audio Stands supported the equipment.

The sound was exceptional. The skin tones from drums and the blat and the dynamics of brass instruments on Gordon Goodwin's *Big Phat Band* [Silverline 82002-2] was exceptional. The swing of the music was communicated with both the timing necessary to get you moving and the pulse that closely mimicked the real thing. Rich timbres, wonderful scale, superb dynamics, deep, wide and realistically high stage, this was a great sounding room - period.

Having heard very good things, but never having heard the Eros electrostatics, I next headed to hear Roger Sanders [InnerSound](#) creations. The source was a Sony PCM-R500, feeding the InnerSound Line Stage Preamp (\$2995). The Monobloc Electrostatic Amplifier (\$2995) drove both the Eros Mk II (\$5995) and the Passive Eros (\$3995). Roger had his new Kilowatt Monobloc amps (\$6995) on display as well. There are some things ESL's just get right, and the Eros is a shining example of those qualities. Superb midrange clarity, holographic soundstaging, smooth and detailed treble and blinding speed. Roger has put together some real magic with his system approach to the amp/speaker synergy, as this was one terribly musical room. I'm hopeful that we will get a chance to listen to these products in the near future and bring you a full report.

Roger Sanders between the Eros Mk II (left) and the Isis (right)



One of the other brands that enjoy the highest of praise is Germany's Burmester. Priced rather in the stratosphere than for mere mortals, the Burmester room was nevertheless a true treat. Using the 969 Reference CD Transport (\$27930) to feed the 007 surround sound processor (Price TBA), signal was then routed to the 911 Mk 3 Mono Power Amps (\$18710). The B97 Reference Speakers took on the task of converting electrical to acoustical with aplomb. All cables were of Burmester design as well as was the 948 Power Conditioner (\$5620).

The always pleasing Burmester products from Germany



This room had both the feel of real music and the sense of immediacy that many so called high-end systems lack. Music was the result here, not hi-fi. It was remarkable transparent in its presentation, without that antiseptic feeling some high-end gear



often imparts. While I can't believe that such expenditure should be necessary, I can understand why this equipment has been so highly thought of by those who have gotten to know its secrets.

Stopping by the [Dunlavy](#) room, the biggest news was that Keny Whitright, owner of Wybron, Inc., a professional lighting manufacturing firm located adjacent to Dunlavy Audio Labs in Colorado Springs, Colorado, had, on November 19 2001, purchased Dunlavy Audio Labs, Inc. John Dunlavy has been retained as the principal engineer for new product design and development.

Keny said of John, "If John Dunlavy were as good at managing and marketing a business as he is at speaker design, he'd be Donald Trump." The buzz in the room was more about business than it was about sound. Let's hope that the tradition continues.

By now it was late afternoon, and I decided to stop by the Press Room and check in, electronically speaking. There were only two on line machines in the pressroom, and as I walked up to the vacant one, I noticed R. Clark Johnsen, author of the now classic 1988 book, *The Wood Effect* working on the other. Though I had spoken with Clark during my days when I wrote for *Positive Feedback*, this was the first time we had a chance to meet face to face.

Now Clark is one of those guys who is always interesting to chat with. He was very excited about a newly developed product he was showing to people, silver-plated and cryogenically treated fuse blocks (\$4) and wall sockets (\$40). Treated by Jena labs, these things were both affordable and make sense. If you've not heard the difference that cryo-treatment can make, don't dismiss the ideas too rapidly. The difference is audible, and for the better. I'm going to look into these soon.

After chatting for a period, I decided to head back to the Tuscany. Making my way to the Rogue Bus Stop, I caught the shuttle and stopped back by my room to drop off some things I'd collected and headed out again.

Making my way to the third floor of the G building, getting off the elevator, I heard some very impressive Stevie Ray Vaughn emanating from the Audio Aero/Acapella room. [Globe Audio Marketing](#) had teamed with [Tri-Cell Enterprises](#), both of Canada, to put together one show stopping room. Stepping in, I was simply captivated by what I was hearing.

It is no secret to those of you who know me that I've never heard a horn speaker that I've ever really liked - until now. The near eight foot tall Acapella Campanile (\$32000) is a sealed 3.5-way loudspeaker system. Four 25 cm (10") woofers are working in separate chambers and cannot influence each other. Fine adjustments to the ion tweeter and the midrange horn unit can be made in order to adapt the loudspeaker to every acoustical environment.

The large and compelling Acapella Campanile



The Audio Aero Capitole 24/192 CD Player (\$6895) sourced these enormous loudspeakers. This is one sweet playback device. Its output was fed directly to the Capitole Power Amp (\$8695), a 50 Wpc stereo amp with Audio Aero's exclusive triode/pentode Tube Relay Amplification Concept (TRAC) using 6SN7GTs, EL34's and KT88's.

The beautiful Audio Aero Capitole Power stereo amplifier



This was one of the best sounding rooms I've ever walked into in show conditions. Though I have to admit that the soundstage was a bit larger than life, everything else was superb. The dynamics offered by the horns were breathtaking, yet never aggressive or "in your face" like so many other expensive and well-respected horns. Brass instruments were conveyed with the "blat" that you normally only get in concert. Stings were rich and alive, with a remarkable sense of their overtones, again reminding one of the concert hall. Timbre was spot on. Vocals were so liquid and breathy that it took my breath away when playing the Choral Fourth Movement of my Solti/LSO *9th Symphony* by Beethoven. Folks, this was the real deal, and I was swept off my feet. This was the room that would get my nod for Best Sound at CES with a digital front end.

During the rest of the show, I found myself wandering back to this room repeatedly. Every time I walked back in over the next three days, Jody Hickson of Globe Audio Marketing gave me that knowing smile. He knows this is some great sounding

equipment. The good news is that Jody was very agreeable to letting The Stereo Times examine the Audio Aero line more closely.

Well, there were other rooms, but none that stood out enough for me to take up any more space here. It was time to meet friends for dinner at one of my favorite places in Las Vegas, Gordon Biersch Brewery. Good food, and very good beer. Till Thursday!

## **CES/T.H.E. Expo 2002**

### **Equipment Lust in Las Vegas: Day Four - Thursday, January 10**

by Greg Weaver

Thursday had promised to be a very good day, so after getting up at a normal time for the first day since I had arrived, it was off for a traditional breakfast at Denny's. I spent the morning on the Tuscany campus and made many uneventful stops and visits. However, by lunchtime, things began to jump.

Standing in front of the G building, who should walk out and run directly into me? None other than Stereo Times publisher, Clement Perry. We spent a few minutes talking about what we had seen and what we still needed to cover, and got the necessary "business" taken care of before moving on to more enjoyable topics of conversation, when my cell phone rang. It was Dusty Vawter, who was just some one hundred feet away when he had phoned. That is one of the many ironies one encounters at a show this large. You call someone you've been looking for unsuccessfully and they turn out to be standing right behind you!

Many of you know Dusty was with Audio Alchemy, and has been busy working with Greg Shug with [Monolithic Sound](#), but his emphasis is now on his own company [Channel Islands Audio](#). Dusty had been doing some repairs on "Tin Ear's" DAC and besides returning it to me here at C.E.S., brought me two of his new products to examine. Some how it seemed terribly fitting, even though he was not exhibiting here this year, as that is what this show has always been about, the introduction of new products.

The [CIAudio](#) VPC-1 (\$249) and the VDA-1 (\$349) are new and Dusty is very proud of them. No, those prices are NOT misprints. Dusty has long been a champion of the belief that audio heaven be affordable.

In accordance with his no nonsense design theories, both new units are housed in a diminutive 4.40"W x 2.65"H x 4.40"D chassis, which also keeps production and machining costs down. The new VDA-1 24/96 DAC is designed as the perfect upgrade for anyone out there with a CD or DVD based system with a digital audio output. It will accept word lengths of 16 to 24 bit at 44.1, 48 or 96 kHz, but does no upsampling, - the unit only receives what your device outputs. Careful design layout and short signal paths are used to perfection here. Inputs are via Toslink optical or RCA coaxial. The input signal is fed to a Burr Brown DIR1701 low jitter input receiver, then on to a Burr Brown PCM1716 digital to analog converter. The analog output is routed through a Class A output stage utilizing the Burr Brown OPA2132 opamp. All signal path resistors are Vishay metal film types with polystyrene filter capacitors and the unit is powered by an external 14 VAC power supply. My preliminary listening at this point has left me astounded. I will have a more complete look at this unassuming little DAC very soon.

Dusty Vawter, of CIAudio, proudly shows off his new VDA-1 24/96 DAC. Retail - just \$349!

Audio purists have long espoused the advantages of the use of a passive preamp. With today's signal sources, especially most outboard DAC's and Phono preamps, there is plenty of signal to drive an amplifier directly, without passing through another active gain stage, which increases the potential to increase distortion and coloration.

The CIAudio VPC-1 is a supremely simple device offering just 2 pair of input jacks, a single pair of output jacks, a custom volume control potentiometer, and an input selector/mute switch. Careful design layout and short signal paths once again prove successful here. The VPC-1 uses a precision Alps potentiometer constructed with a double-screened resistive material and a beryllium wiper intended to offer exceptional channel-to-channel tracking and long life. For the input section, a single 3-position front panel switch toggles from "Input 1" to "Mute" and on to "Input 2." To afford level matching of widely disparate sources, Dusty has included Vishay metal film resistors and bypass jumpers. All jacks, switches, and jumpers are of exceedingly high quality have gold plated contacts.

I have to tell you that in the three weeks I've been using the VPC-1, this little passive is simply astounding. To this point, it has clearly surpassed the Monolithic PA-1 (\$499) powered by the Monolithic HC-1 Power supply (\$249), especially in terms of transparency and dynamics. That is nothing to sneeze at, considering the Monolithic Dynamic Duo had previously bested and thereby replaced a big name \$4000 tube preamp. Look for a full report on the VPC-1 soon. This is one VERY interesting product. Thank you Dusty, for such eloquent execution of your vision of musical truth at realistic pricing.

Next up, another cell phone call put me in contact with Rich Hollis, of Hollis Audio Labs in Calloway Maryland. Many of you may know Rich as HAL, the anagram for his beta testing and development company, in all my writing.

Rich wanted to meet with me to show me something that had piqued his interest, a Computer Aided Room Acoustics application, CARA from [RhinTek](#). He felt that it was something that I should be alerted to as it had so much to offer. After powering up his laptop in my room, he plugged in his portable headphones and played for me an acoustical representation of his listening room, sans room treatment. It was quite an interesting look into the Room/Loudspeaker interface. Once I got back from the show, I was in contact with Rainer McCown, and after expressing my interest in familiarizing our readers with what this \$50 piece of software had to offer, a copy showed up in my mailbox. More on this digital tool soon.

It had been a great morning and early afternoon of camaraderie, which is one of the added benefits of attending these events, but it was time to get back to the business at hand, equipment lust!

I jumped on the shuttle and headed for the Alexis. I stopped briefly at the Clark County Library on Flamingo Road and Escondida St., where Wisdom was showing their One Million Dollar system. This was something to see and hear. It was one of the most unique and excessive things I've ever seen.

Robert Smith, dwarfed by the Wisdom/Rowland/  
Synergistic project - The Infinite Wisdom Grande.  
Price tag? A cool one million bucks!

Fronted by a Sony XACD source, signal was sent to the Jeff Rowland One Coherence Pre Amplifier. From there, it got nuts. The Rowland One Coherence fed sixteen Rowland Model 10 and two Rowland Model 8Ti Hi current amps. Using a conglomeration of cables, the likes of which are typically seen ONLY at a top drawing rock concert, the amps drove the 14' tall [Infinite Wisdom Grande](#) Line Source Loudspeakers. This system break down is \$200,000 in amplification, \$220,000 in cabling and \$600,000 in loudspeakers. In a word, OUTRAGEOUS!

As I walked in, I have to admit, I had no idea what to expect. The system was set up on a stage in the library. This threw a wrench into the works in that the original home of this killer system was to be a much smaller room in the Rio Hotel. This had the effect of putting the system something like three feet off the floor, causing the "sweet spot" to be much higher than was planned. After talking with Robert Smith, lead manufacturing engineer of Wisdom, I moved up into the theater and took a seat in row G, dead center. The sound was very surprising. I think that I was expecting something like a Public Address system. That was nowhere near the fact. It sounded



VERY good. Top end was not overly bright, bass was tight, well articulated and very deep, and the midrange was surprisingly inviting, given the venue.

Looking more like a rock concert than a high-end audio expo, here is the mass of Synergistic cabling needed to make the Million Dollar System sing

To top it all off, they actually SOLD one to a Disney representative. Who would have thought that anyone would actually BUY a system of this cost and size. According to Robert Smith, this system is built for a room no smaller than 25' x 45' x 15', which pretty much rules out the listening rooms of most audiophiles I know. My guess is that it was done just to prove it could be done, and in that sense, it was a true success.

Back on the Shuttle, I soon arrived at the Alexis still shaking my head at the excesses of the Wisdom demonstration. I was soon brought back to reality in Brian Cheney's room where he was showing a new \$4500 [VMPS](#) Ribbon speaker driven by the [Ampzilla 2000](#), James Bongiorno's latest. Brian has been in this game since the late seventies, and I had grown familiar with his VMPS Super Towers, as those enormous speakers take up some serious space and are the speaker of choice in the Gallo-Meisters listening room in Southern Maryland.

James Bongiorno is also not a new name to this industry. Remember the Great American Sound, Co., GAS, back in the early seventies? James worked at Dynaco and was the designer of the famous Dynaco 400. He served as director of engineering at S.A.E. and then went on to found GAS. As it says on his web page, the rest is history.

Thought the music being played in this room during my stay was not my style, the sound was exceptional. Brian has been a stalwart icon in the industry for some time, with a strong devotion to the music, and his new designs, besides not being refrigerator sized, are exceptional sounding. I am hoping that he will favor the Stereo Times with a pair for audition sometime soon.

I also managed to spend some time with Jeff Smith, the drive behind the SilverSmith cables. His ideas are, to me, very correct. He believes in minimum involvement at the termination of both his speaker cables and interconnects. The speaker cables are flat, and rather than use a crimped, soldered or pressure fit spade, he simply notches the end of the cable, allowing for a highly effective connection to today's prevalent 5-way binding posts. His RCA terminations on interconnects are low mass and not complexly plated, making a solid yet low involvement connection. Simple, purest and effective. Reviews of his products are in the works.

Having heard so much about Don Heglund and Granite Audio, I deliberately made my way to his room. Don was showing all his own products, source to cables to speakers. The source was his Sony based Model #657 CD Player (\$2900), which in turn fed his Model #770 preamplifier (\$4900). His gorgeous looking and sounding Model #860 DECO (\$24700) amps have a full Granite enclosure and were driving his 3-way Model #280 Loudspeakers (\$15,700). All cables were Don's designs as well. I finally was able to see what all the fuss was about. This room sounded wonderful.

Don Heglund, of Granite Audio, stands by his all-granite encased DECO amps and Model #280 loudspeakers

One mishap, entirely of my doing, occurred while I was in Don's superb room. When he asked me if I would like to hear something I brought along, I jumped at the chance. Shortly after my music started, I noticed a "spitty" noise predominantly coming from the left loudspeaker and, when I pointed this out to all in the room, the first thought was that something may have been amiss with the left channel amp. After taking the time and effort to change the left amp, the noise was still there. It turned out that the CD player was having problems with my CD-R! This was embarrassing to me, but as I explained to Don, it had not happened anywhere else. As it turned out, ONLY Sony based machines had any trouble with my discs. Feeling quite humbled, I apologized, and we continued to listen to some rich, wonderful sound. Don has much to be proud of, and his entire system approach also has much

to be said for it. If you get the chance, go out of your way to give this equipment a listen. You won't be sorry.

After a wonderful experience with the Granite products, I made my way to Albert Von Schweikert's room. It was my honor this year to present Albert with the Most Wanted Component Award for his superb [VR-4 Generation III loudspeakers](#). This year Albert introduced the dB-99 loudspeakers, a product designed specifically for use with low powered amps, like those of the highly popular SET variety.

Albert Von Schweikert, left, and I as he receives his Most Wanted Component Award for the sensational VR-4 Generation III loudspeaker

My first exposure to Albert's speakers came at HAL's dedicated listening room where I heard the original VR-4. It was an event for me, not dissimilar to that of hearing the original Dahlquist DQ-10s some decades before. I have since lived with the Gen II's and Gen III's, have heard the VR-4.5, an upgraded VR-4.5 with components of the VR-6's (which I affectionately christened the VR 5.3's), the VR-5 Hovland SE's, the VR-6, the VR-7 and was able to spend a good deal of time with the VR-8, which now reside in HAL's listening room. Albert is quite simply one very gifted loudspeaker designer, and it was my privilege to award him with this accolade.

This year, Albert put on a serious group of demos, using a host of associated equipment to show just how good his new products were. His source was superb: all master tapes created by 30-year recording veteran Mike Pappas, played back on the Meitner/Genelex DSD Master Recording System (\$20,000). A Linn CD-12 was on hand for playing the material show-goers brought with them for evaluation. The near universally praised Hovland HP-100 tube preamplifier (\$6,500) fed a bevy of amplifiers over the course of the week including the 5 watt Wavelength Gemini monos (\$6,000/pr), both the 10 watt Wavac 300B (\$7995) and the exotic 100 watt HE-833 (\$47,500 pr). One of the combos that really floored me was the use of John Ulrick's new Spectron Musician II, which so impressed me in the Spectron room at the Tuscany (using VSA VR-5 HSE's) that a new, improved version of the Musician II is bound for my listening room soon (More on this in the Friday report).

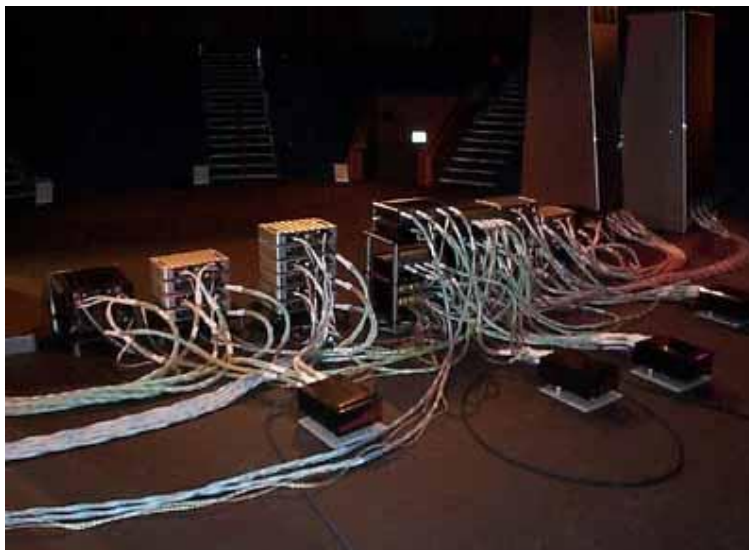
Albert paired all this gear with both the latest iteration of the VR-4, the [Generation III](#) (\$4795), and his superb new dB-99 (\$6,995 in Piano Black), which the Stereo Times will be examining soon. He used a variety of cabling from LAT to Analysis Plus to Acoustic Zen. The room simple sounded outstanding, regardless of equipment or cable pairings and it is no surprise that VSA components are on the Stereo Times Most Wanted Components listing.

Thursday night was the Press night at the VSA room. There were over 30 members of the press, talking and carrying on, all waiting to hear who would win the raffle. Albert was having a random drawing to award one member of the press their choice of either a pair of the new dB-99's or a pair of VR-4 Generation III's. When the drawing came, the winner was Ruby Kuegeman of the Long Beach Audio Society, and I have been told she chose the VR-4 Gen III, which will be a Hovland Special Edition pair. Congratulations Ruby!

After the party, I met Clement and his wife, and several of the other Stereo Times Gang, in the lobby of the Alexis. I met Jim Merod and Leon Rivkin for the first time, and both were fascinating characters. We all walked to the Bahama Breeze, a restaurant just a block from the Alexis. Dinner was fabulous, an engaging mix of food, beverage and camaraderie. We spoke of many issues, mostly things audio and the show in particular. Opinions were exchanged, some in agreement and many others debated. This was good conversation. When the meal was over and it was time for us all to go our separate ways back to our respective hotels, Jim and I opted for a walk, mostly as our hotel was in sight from the restaurant and partly because the wait for cabs was ridiculous. So it went, day four in Las Vegas.

'Da Stereo Times Gang (Clem Perry, Me, Jim Merod, and Leon Rivkin) hooks up at 'da Bahama Breeze for a staff meeting and good conversation









## **CES/T.H.E. Expo 2002**

### **Equipment Lust in Las Vegas: Day Five - Friday, January 11**

by Greg Weaver

By now, fully adjusted to the time difference, I was getting up at a normal hour, but was very into the eating two breakfasts to compensate. I love breakfast!

There were a number of rooms I had wanted to visit again, and some that I had yet to visit that were on my list, so I broke the list up - by venue, and I started on the Tuscany Campus.

When I wandered into the [Spectron](#) room, John Ulrick was busy discussing some of the theory and design that went into the new Musician II (\$3497/\$3997 with Direct Digital Input) and Troubadour (\$1197/\$1497 with Direct Digital Input). Given both John's background in weapons system design and what I had heard from the original Spectron 1KW amplifier, I was looking forward to this particular visit.

John Ulrick of Spectron beside the new Musician II Class D amplifier. This room tied for my choice of "best sound with a digital front end" at this years event



I was met by Toni Decker, Spectron's Marketing and Sales manager, and was rapidly brought up to speed on what had taken place since I had last checked in with the full Class D amplifier category. Because of the way a digital amplifier works, typical sources of distortion, coloration and delay are said to be all but eliminated. And this new breed of Spectron was spectacular.

Using a simple Marantz CP player as source, the Musician II was driving the Von Schwiekert Audio VR-5 Hovland Special Editions (\$9,500). Talk about a straightforward setup! John was kind enough to play some of my test material, compiled especially for this years show, and the results grabbed everyone in the room. I had met up with Rich Hollis and Bob Gallo once again as the C.E.S. is about the only time I get to see them these days, and the three of us were left with enormous smiles on our faces. As we all have somewhat differing biases, this can ONLY be seen as very good thing.

I must tell you, I cannot recall hearing a better recreation of the bow/rosin on string synergy anywhere during the entire 2002 event - period! Voices were liquid, breathy and had solid form. This was one killer combination. The sound was so good in this room I had to rethink my award of best sound of the show from a digital source, which up to now, had singularly been held by the Audio Aero/Acapella room. No, that award would have to be shared, as this room, with its simplistic system, had simply raised so many hairs on the back of my neck and given me such a realistic recreation of the music it was fed. Don't worry dear readers, Toni and John have already promised me a Musician II in the immediate future. But as to their rooms sound at this years event, the Spectron room was a tie for my award of the "*best sound of the show with a digital source.*"

Next up was a company I had heard much about but not much from, [Buggtussel](#). Buggtussel has been around, more or less, since 1979 and is the brain-child of Dr. Kevin Blair, also known for the Vinylzyme record cleaner. Located in Portage, Michigan, less than an hour and a half from my home in South Bend, I had been on a mission to get to know more about this company and its products. I'm glad I did.

Kara Chaffee, designer of the deHavilland amps,  
and Dr. Kevin Blair, designer at Buggtussel



They were driving their Lemniscus Speaker (\$6,900) with a pair the [deHavilland Electric Amplifier Company's](#) GM-70 SET amplifiers (\$10,000 per pair). Designer Kara Chaffee was on hand to explain that the GM-70 is a 30 Wpc mono amp based on the Ulyanov GM-70 300B tube. Pre driver is the 12SN7 GTSA/B and the whole lovely looking amp sits in a 12" x 18" x 10", 60 pound chassis.

The Lemniscus is a three way design utilizing a Viscous-Gold damped metal 1" dome dipolic tweeter and a pair of 4" cantilevered Kevlar<sup>®</sup> midrange drivers in a classic D'Appolito configuration. The woofer is a 10" Kevlar<sup>®</sup> driver in a q-TSAL (quasi-Thiele/Small Actuated Labyrinth) transmission line enclosure. A Rega P9 handed off to a conrad-johnson Premier Fifteen (\$5,000) phono stage. The preamplifier was the Verve, also by deHaviland (\$1,200). Cabling was the Cardas Golden Reference.

This room was wonderful; dynamic, vibrant, involving. I was very impressed with the overall musical feel of this room and asked Doug Knudsen, Buggtussel's business manager, if I might take a closer look at these products. Just last Monday night, Doug and Kevin arrived at my house with the very same pair of speakers that had been on display in their room at the Tuscany. And, I'm going to be visiting their plant in Portage in the near future as well. This is a company that deserves a MUCH closer look.

It was time for lunch, and after a quick bite and the short shuttle ride to the Alexis, I next found myself in Peter Bizlewicz's [Symposium Acoustics](#) room. What an impressive room - and demo! This year, Peter was using equipment from 47 Labs, BAT and Verity Audio with exceptional results. The 47 Lab PiTracer transport (\$25,000) and Progression DAC (\$2,700) converted ones and zeros to music, then sent them to the Balanced Audio Technology VK-50SE pre amplifier (\$7,000), which fed the BAT VK-75SE amplifier (\$8,500). Cabling was from Siltech and speaker cables were from Kimber, which hitched the system to the Quebec based Verity Audio's Parsifal loudspeakers (\$14,000).

Peter Bizlewicz of Symposium Acoustics. Lots of fun in this room.



In use in the room were the Double Stack Rollerball 2 systems (\$349 for a set of 3, \$449 for a set of 4) incorporating the new Grade 3 Superballs, the Point Pods (set of 3 is \$99 or 4 for \$129), the Quantum Stainless platforms (\$1199 or \$1599 dependant on size) and the unique Precision Rack (no price listed). Peter explained the difference in the bearings available for the Rollerblocks as consisting of 3 grades. Grade 100 (standard), Grade 25 (\$25 more per bearing) and the new Tungsten Carbide Grade 3 (\$119 more per bearing), with the Grade number representing the tolerance in parts per million. The Grade 3 bearings are said to be perfectly round within a tolerance of 0.0000015 inches!

This room was a treat - crisp, clean, detailed and highly involving. As a special treat, Peter played some special Steve Hoffman remasters he had on hand of some Peggy Lee and John Lennon material that will hopefully be available soon, as they were just exquisite recordings. All in all, a very inviting and well balanced room, no doubt due to the liberal application of all the Symposium Acoustics' products, which all make real sense through the application of the laws of physics.

I found myself going out of my way to find the Kora/Gershman Acoustics room, given what our own Leon Rivkin had to say about the Kora amps. Kora's Hermes DAC (\$2,600) fed their Eclipse preamp (\$3,750). Amplification was handled by the Cosmos Reference Monoblocks (\$7,850), a 100 Wpc triode monoblock based on the 6AS7G output tube, which drove the Gershman Model Opera Sauvage (\$16,000) loudspeakers. These are visually gorgeous amps, and were very liquid sounding. On the downside, the room sounded a bit two dimensional, with front to back staging somewhat flattened, and the bass, though deep, was a bit fat and slow sounding. It could well have been the room inflicting these problems on the overall sound, but the equipment match up in this room spoke of strong potential.

The beautiful Kora Cosmos Reference and Gershman Opera Sauvage.





After several trips back to the CTC Builders/TG Audio/DDR Manufacturing room, (the room was closed on my first visit - seems they thought they should go eat once in a while!), I finally got a chance to hear the highly praised Parasound JC-1 amps designed by John Curl. None other than Bob Crump was on hand to receive visitors, and he was kind enough to offer to play some of my music. CTC builders is a partnering of John Curl, Carl Thompson and Bob Crump; now if that isn't a list of likely suspects, I don't know what is! For the record, Bob was the *first and only* person at the entire show - some six days in at this point - to ask me about the polarity setting on the music I was giving him for playback. Go figure! Hey, at least someone understands, right?

This room used the DDR Digital System Prototype (\$12,500) and the CTC Blowtorch Line stage preamp (\$12,500). The digital front end and preamp sat on a unique stand using a floating counter weight from [Machina Dynamica](#). The Wisdom Audio M-50 loudspeakers (\$23,500) were driven by four of the previously mentioned Parasound JC-1 amps (\$3,000 each). Cables and interconnects were all from TG Audio.

Bob Crump stands at the front of the CTC Builders room. Bob was the ONLY person at this years event to even mention polarity of CD's



Bob apologized for the sound of the room, saying that most all the equipment had been "green", or brand new, at the beginning of the show. Even so, there was something coming together there that indicated you should keep an eye, or more correctly, and ear, on this group in the future.

As the day was winding down, I decided to head back to the Tuscany. I had been hearing a lot about the Edge Audio room, and decided to check them out. This room was showing their DC powered Signature 1 preamp (\$8,950) and the NL Signature 1 400 Wpc Monoblocks (\$31,000 a pair). Thought the room sounded very good, it just wasn't all "there." Several other listeners who heard the room shared my opinion. I still feel this is a company to watch, or listen to, quite closely.

I was somewhat disappointed with the [Talon Audio](#) room, and I felt most if it was due to perhaps a poor pairing of the Khorus X to amplification. I have heard the standard Talons sound much better, and can only attribute it to matching of the [Electrocompaniet](#) Nemo amps, which were originally designed to drive the B&W 801 Nautilus. Though a very cute name, since it was Captain Nemo who piloted the submarine Nautilus in Jules Vern's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the 600 watt behemoths just didn't pull off the magic I've heard from them before. While the room may have had something to do with it as well, the synergy just wasn't there. At least not as I've heard it before, with the Khorus mated to the Jeff Rowland Model 12 mono's. Now there was a match!

The [Marsh Sound Design](#) room was a treat. Technician Cole Johnson was on hand to do the demo's and it was a very impressive room. Richard Marsh's P2000b balanced design preamp (\$1,195) got its music from a Sony DVP-S900, one of the only other players at this years show which could *not* play my CD-R music. It *only* happened with Sony based playback machines. The Nearfield PipeDreams 15's (\$30,000-\$35,000 depending on finish) were driven to exciting levels by the 450 Wpc Marsh A450m monoblocks (\$4,995 each). A single A400s (\$2,295) 200 Wpc stereo amp drove the PipeDreams subs. This room was fast, powerful and extremely detailed, but not overly so. Richard Marsh has been around for a long time, and it is no surprise that he is building some wonderful sounding products.

Cole Johnson, of Marsh, proudly shows off the Marsh electronics



There were a lot of other rooms that were good and deserve mentioning, like all the main rooms in the Tuscany, but I had set aside Saturday morning for those, as they would likely be less crowded. Alas, this is where my report must end...