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Two crucial hi-fi events have happened in the three months since my last Editorial. First we should note and mourn the passing of Harry Pearson (*aka* HP), who as the founder and editor of the ‘underground’ magazine *The Absolute Sound* (*aka* *TAS*) was for four decades one of the most influential figures in hi-fi, from its foundation in the early 1970s until he formally retired in 2012. Arguably more than any other individual, his subjective approach and ‘absolute’ idealism was responsible for the growth of ‘High End’ hi-fi (a term he allegedly invented).

I never actually met HP, nor visited his home in Sea Cliff, New York, nor read much of his writings. I’m therefore entirely unqualified to write any sort of obituary, and would therefore urge interested readers to check out Jonathan Valin’s excellent tribute on the *TAS* website. But I was always aware of HP’s considerable presence. He – along with the late J. Gordon Holt (the founder of *Stereophile*, and somebody I did meet) – were the two giants of journalism that put the US ‘high end’ firmly onto the global hi-fi map.

The other essential news this issue is that Meridian’s Bob Stuart might, finally, have solved the digital dilemma – the reason why digital audio never seems to sound quite as good as theory might have one believe. Like most people I’ve been forced to use CD throughout most of the last thirty years, but have always remained sceptical of its sound quality, feeling that digital audio was failing to live up to its promise.

Hope was sitting alongside scepticism when Stuart came out to address the assembled hi-fi press in early December. He first pointed out that if one takes the long view, what might be termed ‘progress’ in audio formats has been all to do with increasing convenience, often at the expense of quality.

He then went on to explain that time was a far more important ingredient than frequency in evolutionary (survival) terms, Fourier transform notwithstanding, and that a key problem with the filters used in digital audio is the way they interfere with musical timing. He then went on to describe a digital encoding technique called MQA (Master Quality Authenticated) which avoids any heavy filtering, and has also adopted a ‘fold back’ or ‘origami’ technique to preserve a wide signal bandwidth with far more economical data rates.

The intention is to use this MQA technique to create files that actually capture all the relevant information on the original master recordings, and it’s apparently actually possible to package a complete album in a file that’s small enough for downloading or even streaming. He claimed that MQA coding enabled material equivalent to HD quality to be streamed at just 1Mb/s (*ie* no higher than standard CD rates).

Using Meridian *DSP8000* speakers, Stuart played us three tracks remastered on the MQA format, including Bob Dylan’s *Don’t Think Twice It’s All Right* (from his early classic album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*). This dem was already very convincing, and was reinforced in an anteroom by a series of headphone dems comparing different coding techniques.

I think it’s very likely that Stuart may well have cracked the problem of digital audio’s failure hitherto to achieve its potential, but the implications may well be dramatic. Can the big beasts of the music industry (notably Universal, Sony and Warner) be persuaded to re-master in MQA (at maybe £2,000 per album)? Will current hi-res download operations survive?

Only time will tell – more MQA coverage next issue.

Paul Messenger
Editor