

## AZ AV Club Article

There's nothing like music to cure what ails you. There's no doubt I'm still here on earth for that reason. Sadly, for most in this modern age, music has become one of many distractions, background noise or one of several enhancements for recreational drug use. How many people, especially youngsters, do you know that can sit still for at least ten minutes and do nothing but relax and listen to music? Millions of us did that daily four to five decades ago so why not now?

Those of us in our sixties, some a bit younger, remember a time when that was the norm. The days before audiophilia, digital, smart phones, computers, home theater and TV with more than five channels. The days when mainstream stereo manufacturers cared about sound quality and tasteful industrial design. One could go out with little knowledge and purchase a stereo (turntable, receiver and speakers) that was satisfying. No obsessing about imaging, detail retrieval and frequency extension. The only thought on our minds was what album to buy next...and girls. Freeform FM DJs and not corporations controlled the programming and on any given late night FM session, more great bands were discovered than we could afford to buy.

Many of you probably remember a high school friend that had a rocking stereo and a great bunch of albums. That's where friends would congregate, listen to and discuss music and sex (hey, we were teenage guys). Maybe it was the same home where the local rock band practiced. Of course, every so often you'd hear a parent upstairs yelling, "turn it down!". Sometimes we would sneak upstairs, pour a little bit from each bottle in the "liquor cabinet" into an empty milk bottle, add water to the other bottles, run back downstairs, hold our noses, pound that swill which we called witches brew and crank the music even louder. That basement room, in the small suburb of Wyomissing, PA (now infamous as the home of Taylor Swift) during the late 60s and early 70s was mine, pictured in the 1970 photos. And yes, my parents were saints; how they tolerated years of all that racket is still beyond comprehension. Lafayette and Allied catalogs along with the Whole Earth Catalog were my bibles. And other than that, very little has changed since for me except no more witches brew and a wife that won't tolerate the racket (but is still a saint).

Note, in the bottom photo I'm demonstrating how **not** to store LPs.



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During the decade that followed, many album purchases were made but the stereo remained basically the same: Dual 1219 turntable with Shure V15 cartridge (several iterations over that time), Lafayette LR-1500T stereo receiver (I mowed lawns all summer of 1970 to save up the \$299.95) and locally made Aztec speakers (inexpensive, three way, 12" woofer, very efficient, effortless dynamics, decent tonal accuracy but most important, they rocked). Towards the end of the decade I discovered something called The Audio Critic and it was basically downhill from there for the next couple decades.

What's the state of specialty audio in Phoenix today? Pretty much the same as every major metropolitan area. There's always one store that sells what the industry calls Formula Audio; names most non-audiophile folks recognize through heavy marketing. You end up paying for that marketing in the highly elevated purchase prices. Mostly prestige audio; big, shiny, expensive. Staffed by talented professional salesmen posing as music lovers and/or audiophiles. A great way to make lots of money. Sometimes you will find appliance stores carrying an audiophile brand or two; usually a disaster. There's some stores that focus primarily on home automation and theater. If they carry stereo equipment, the focus is on appearance and prestige. Most of their clients can't tell great sound from only good. These are generally not high value systems. There will be some smaller brick and mortar operations; usually good brands but there's overhead and money must be made to cover that and stay open. I feel for these guys. It's not the way I would want to make a living; too much uncertainty and great risk during economic downturns. It must also be tough in the current, crowded market place and a couple have recently closed. A bit of good news came for the smaller players when in early December the playing field was leveled and mail-order operations had to start collecting sales tax. Hopefully that will reduce the number of strokers; the guys that spend several hours in a shop auditioning gear and then go buy online to save a few bucks.

Some of you may remember early quality audio in the Phoenix area. Starting in the early 80s, I have great memories of listening to music and buying gear at The Listening Post near my home in Tempe. Jim Geiger had a remodeled garage with magical sound qualities. That coupled with Jim's good ear, speaker/listening position setup skills and talent for stocking great, high value products was quality audio sales done right. That's pretty much my standard today. I don't have the magical room but that means I have to work harder to hone my skills since it's what most rooms in most homes are like. Also like Jim, we both had/have other good sources of income so making money wasn't/isn't essential, leaving no incentive to compromise the customer; basically a hobby business to meet and help like minded folks, learn about new music and make new friends. For me, the goal is to hopefully break even one day and give my son Jackson some good, honest business experience. The reward; lots of great stereo music reproduction in my home and the ultimate reward when I give a potential

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customer that aha or OMG moment. It's especially satisfying when it can be done with low to moderate cost components exposing the joys of ultra high fidelity music reproduction to young working folks just starting out, retirees on a fixed income and all the music loving, hardworking folks in between.

IMHO, the number one mistake music lovers make with their selection of gear is picking the wrong speaker for their tastes and application. Couple that with an inability to optimize the speaker and listening positions, whether that be lack of skills, tools, flexibility in the room or other factors and you have what the industry and most dealers consider the perfect profit storm; an endless cycle of rotating other gear, magic tweaks, expensive wire, power conditioners and so on trying to solve an unsolvable problem; changing the basic character of the speaker which, of course, is unchangeable. I see this constantly. You don't pick the right speaker for your tastes by reading reviews and finding the best deal online, new or used. You often end up spending more in the long run and, like many, you might throw your hands in the air in frustration and sell it all. You have to listen to speakers in an environment similar to yours until you find the right one for your room and your tastes. Often folks have little flexibility in positioning the speakers and probably not the skills to do so even if the flexibility exists. That's why we're the only dealer in town that carries speakers designed to go right against the front wall. No speaker setup skills required, no muss, no fuss. Especially for a non-audiophile music lover without a dedicated music room, this can open the door to a lifetime of musical enjoyment.

That's just one example of my philosophy. I plan to blog regularly on our website, [www.bigearstereo.com](http://www.bigearstereo.com), starting soon after I get all my product pages sorted out. My articles will contain what I've learned over the years, tips, record reviews (music, not sound quality), local events, recommendations like **join the Arizona Audio Video Club**, favorite local charities and other stereo and music related topics.

But hey, I'm not the be all end all audio dealer. What I'm doing reflects my tastes and experience. Music and sound quality tastes are very personal, unique to each one of us. You may share my tastes or you may not. That's okay. All I can do is to be honest and treat folks with respect. Find someone you like working with, who's tastes match yours, who's products offer value, are in your price range and Bob's your uncle.

To give you a brief idea of my sonic priorities, I strive for three things which I feel most characterize the sound of live instruments and voices; effortless dynamics, presence and tonal accuracy. A large segment of modern high end values ultra high resolution, ultra transparency, pinpoint imaging and maximum frequency extension. I will not compromise the former to get the latter. Most audio shops

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and manufacturers do the opposite, primary because it's what most in the industry and audio press are promoting, attempting to justify ridiculous price tags. That doesn't mean my components and systems don't do the latter, just not as much and certainly not at the expense of the former. Decide what your priorities, goals and budget are. Then your chances of making a costly mistake will be minimized.

Which brings me to audio mistake number two.

Don't let anyone tell you what you should like or what you should be hearing. So often folks don't trust their ears. Audiophile marketing wants us not to. Like only the guys with the super ears, training, experience, blah, blah, blah can do it. Makes it easier for the salesman to manipulate you. Believe me, when you find the speaker that evokes the goosebump quality from your favorite tunes, you'll know it. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Just one more story. My dad Wally and I would spend countless hours listening to and discussing music together, both live and in my home. We especially enjoyed the Mosaic jazz box sets (vinyl, of course). Great booklets in each that would spark good discussion about each artist represented. Long story short; Wally was deaf in one ear and had severe damage in the other. He could just hear midrange in one ear so no imaging obsession (lucky him). The point is, he could almost always hear the quality of the recording or a change in speakers and would let me know if it effected his enjoyment one way or the other. He trusted his ears or should I say ear. So should you. Both of them.

BTW, Wally had big ears. Only one of them worked. Hence the name of the business. He was a cool guy, I miss him but he lives on through this business. His life philosophy was simple; be honest and treat **all** people with respect. It's been passed though me to my sons.

A lot of club members have the room, the skills and years of experience in the hobby. I'm not addressing you guys because that's where I often hear some of the best sound quality and learn new things. You guys have been through what I have over the years, have come to many of the same conclusions and more. But the vast majority of music lovers don't fall into that category and sadly are at the mercy of marketing (audio magazines, online nonsense, etc) and profit motivated dealers. Or they fall into the cheap home theater marketing trap and end up at Walt's, Spencer's or Best Buy. No wonder no one can sit still and enjoy music for more than ten minutes anymore.

The best thing of all is that we all share a passion, whether it be gear, music, playing an instrument or a combination of the three. That's our greatest blessing and one of the main things that makes life worth living. Countless folks go

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through life without a passion and therefore a life partially unfulfilled. Let's all count our blessings.

And that's all I have to say. For now...

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