



*This month's Aspirations is a bit of a busman's holiday as Dan Houston visits an enthusiast who is lucky enough to have combined his hobby and his job.*

# A referential SYSTEM

*John's listening room also serves as his main living room.*

in the house is the listening room, built as an extension onto the back of the property. It has a light airy atmosphere, with French and picture windows providing views across a wooded valley, and is spacious - measuring some 17 by 25 feet. One of the first things you notice are strategically placed rolls of cardboard covered in pink carpet, positioned so as to take care of standing waves and make the room less acoustically 'live'.

Although visually it looks dominated by hi-fi, with the massive Diamond Acoustic loudspeakers and Ray Lumley Class A valve monoblocks taking up a good deal of the floor space, it is also John and his wife's living room - and therefore a good deal less austere than some of the 'purely listening' rooms we have visited. It was originally designed as a billiards room, John told us. The shape is not classic for hi-fi reproduction; one listens across rather than down the room. And the acoustic is a little hard, though opening the windows helps this.

### **A diamond as big as the Ritz**

However, it is a good room for using the sort of loudspeakers shown here, which demand space to perform well. The Diamond Acoustic is a comparatively new brand, and very controversial, but it already has its aficionados.

Veterans of the hi-fi industry will know John as the original boss of Jeffries Hi-Fi in Albert Parade, Eastbourne. His father had run a radio and electronics shop nearby and he started the hi-fi business in 1973 he remembers. But he sold out in 1978 and started making the *Nightingale* loudspeaker range. He claims that the *Nightingale* had a short life because it was ahead of its time, although he also admits that he spent too much on development and advertising. It flopped and he 'disappeared' from hi-fi view for the best part of a decade.

"By 1986 I had been out of the business for some years and I wanted a new pair of loudspeakers for myself," he says. "I had used *Nightingales* at home but I was amazed when I went out to listen to new speakers and found there wasn't anything better.

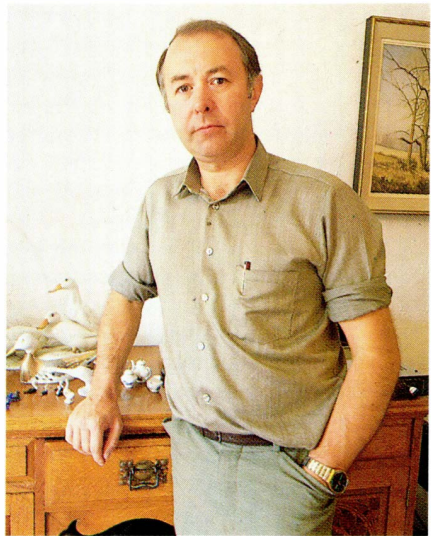
"I came home and decided to have another go. I started by sticking two pairs of *Nightingales* together which created a big stage-like sound, and basically I played

around with the concept. And they started to get quite good. My partner Peter Burfiend who is a technical engineer helped me to take the speaker forward although it was still purely for fun."

Over the period of a few years John says the speaker was refined and improved. By this time he was using the most esoteric amplification he could find with expensive source equipment. By 1989 he felt that he had a good enough product to sell on the market again and christened the loudspeaker the Diamond Acoustic.

### **The more the merrier**

It's an eccentric loudspeaker to say the least. It has attracted attention to itself by merit of having no less than 15 drive units, with tweeters and midrange driv-



*The man behind the system.*

ers mounted on open flying baffles outside the bass and subwoofer enclosures. Jean Hiraga, in a recent report for *L'Audiophile* - the French high end magazine - described the design as the 'concoction of a genie' - but nevertheless praised the sound quality. Even now the speaker is being refined - with a Bandor mid-bass driver replacing the original KEF 139.

Because of the eccentricity of the *Reference 1s* John decided to develop a more down to earth range called the *Reference 2s* and in May this year produced the *Reference 3s*. These promise a similar character to the 1s with Audax tweeters, Bandor mid range units and Volt bass drivers. The baffle is also open on the 2s although the really clever bit is in designing the baffle to keep the array of tweeters in phase.

**T**he visit to John Jeffries' house came about as the result of a recommendation made by recording engineer Dave Ruffell, who we visited for an *Aspirations* piece in issue 98. The person he urged us to see is John Jeffries, the man behind the Sussex based hi-fi company Reference Imports.

The ground floor space of John's Twenties house is devoted to hi-fi. He runs his business from here, and seems to be perpetually on the phone to his overseas suppliers or one of the 20 dealers who sell RI equipment in the UK.

"Things are busy," he says in a way which would please even a realistic Conservative MP. The most impressive room

Developing the loudspeaker range led to the other side of the business, according to John. He had several exotic valve amplifiers from the US and felt that he could distribute the largely unknown brands here. Asked why he preferred the American equipment, John is unequivocal. "I had been through every piece of British equipment I could get my hands on and I found that it wasn't good enough," he comments.

He has ended up with a range of equipment he regards as synergistic, comprising partly of British made, partly American kit. A typical Reference Imports front end might be an American Basis turntable, Graham tonearm and Shinon cartridge from Japan. Amplification would again be a multi-national affair, the American Convergent Audio Technology (CAT) *SL1* preamplifier (see issue 96) partnered to a pair of Lumley (Portsmouth based) valve monoblocks. Cable will be by Cogan Hall of Illinois and speakers are the home grown Diamond Acoustics. But the range is growing.

## A double system

During our visit John was running in a pair of imposing Metaxas electrostatic loudspeakers with the gorgeous-looking Cary Audio *300M* valve power amplifiers. He is intending to run these products alongside those he already offers - which explains why he almost has a second hi-fi



*The Diamond Acoustics have more drivers than your average Grand Prix!*

system at the other end of his room!

While we were visiting John was not using a Basis turntable, but had a Townshend Rock *Reference* playing. "The Basis is my best line, I've just sold my last one," he explained. The Rock was playing into the CAT via a Tesseract step up transformer for a moving coil cartridge.

At a mere £1,995, the step up may seem just a trifle dear, but John says the component cost alone amounts to more than £500, and it's the best thing he's ever heard.

The two other sources in his system are the Arcam *Delta* CD player with a Wadia digital to analogue convertor, and an analogue tuner from Canada - the Dynalab *Etude*. Of the latter John is adamant that it is the most real sounding FM tuner in the world. Not surprisingly, this may well be the next addition to his range of imported brands.

## An odd combination

The Wadia and Arcam *Delta* seem the system oddity. "I only listen to CD about two per cent of the time," John said. "And so I am not going to invest in a high end CD transport until Basis develops its own system, which is coming shortly. Expecting a dyed in the wool vinyl user, I was surprised to hear him say vinyl was not yet perfect, but would be "absolutely brilliant in a few years' time".

"The Basis turntables are streets ahead of most CD players," he adds, "and at the top end of the market you can still get more involvement with the music from a turntable. I feel that every time I listen to a CD player I am listening to a piece of equipment. And even though with a turntable you get the cracks and the pops in the background, you can still listen through them, to the music itself.

## The supporting cast

Having said that, audiophiles do listen to the sound of their equipment, from the components to the very isolation furniture itself. John has developed his own clear perspex-legged isolation turntable for the Basis which he claims (a little predictably) is the most acoustically dead support available.

Elsewhere, his CD player combination is housed in a target stand which he has filled with lead shot - tapping the stand results in a deafening thud. The humble pellets had resulted in a 30 per cent increase in sound quality, he swears. He has tried other isolating supports, and was serving tea on a Mana Acoustics *Sound Table* - which I felt was a little scant of respect. The uncharted science of isolation makes a tremendous difference, he relates.

"I invited a few dealers round to listen to something I had discovered by accident. I put a curtain in front of the system so they could not see what I was doing. We played some records and I then merely changed the cones under the CAT - which has to be isolated on its Slate Audio stand anyway because it won't work on its own four feet. The difference in sound was incredible - and no-one would have believed it possible. I had been using Vecteur cones but I had substituted them for some Tip Toes, and that really opened everything up. Since then I have found that the Goldring *Audio Selection* cone also works well, but what was so incredible was how different types of similar-looking cones could make such a difference."



*The Basis Ovation - John had sold this one just before our visit.*



The CAT preamplifier takes pride of place next to the Wadia 3200 DAC, Arcam CD player and a Dynalab Etude tuner.

One of the older designs in the system is Raymond Lumley's class A monoblok - which John has dubbed *Reference 500* and is intending to relaunch for the designer. The amps aren't exactly the nicest things to look at, the tubes being hidden away behind the massive transformers. They're certainly not a patch on the pretty Cary Audio models at the other end of the room. But they have bags of power in reserve and after listening to them I found that they certainly had the ability to drive the Diamonds to their limit, although whether everyone will wish to do so remains open to question.

### The vinyl experience

The first record John played was the excellent Harry Connick Junior album *We Are In Love* (only let down by the drippingly sticky title). Apart from the good brown tones of Harry's all American voice, the sounds to hold you are from Branford Marsalis' tenor saxophone, which were reproduced faithfully, if a little brightly here. The system certainly had an immediate appeal, proclaiming its high end status by projecting the recording situation into the listening room.

But with a UHQ Mobile Fidelity vinyl recording of Respighi's *Feste Romane*

it seemed to fall over itself somewhat with the speakers helplessly handing out distortion. "The record is distorted anyway," John claimed by way of excuse, and backed it up with a beautiful rendition of Shostakovich *Symphony No 15* recorded on the eminent Russian Melodiya label. And a 1959 Decca SKL of Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore* by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company put the seal on things, showing us a stage and empty theatre with astounding vocal clarity on both sung and spoken passages.

Certainly the vagaries of the recording situation are pulled off the vinyl and faithfully carried through to the speakers. I also felt that such a system, with its obvious character, would need time to attune to. "You should come and listen after 11.00 at night. I get a 15 or 20 per cent improvement as the power supply improves," John said.

### A matter of image

The system is designed to be wide imaging; the tweeters and Bandor units are arrayed for directionality, but I felt most comfortable sitting on axis to the speakers - at which point the sound came out of the box, and spread across the stage as it were.

John says his own home system was always changing until recently - the mark of an audiophile questing for and then finding his sonic chalice. But in the last few months he says that, while he has tried different components, they have always come out of the system again. This is the surest sign that, for his ears, he has arrived at the best solution.

No system is for everyone, but this, and especially the quaint design of the loudspeakers, is bound to find firm friends.

#### The System:

Basis <i>Debut Gold Standard</i> .....	£6,500
Graham tonearm .....	£2,350
Shinon <i>Red</i> cartridge .....	£900
Reference Imports table .....	£950
Arcam <i>Delta</i> CD player .....	£620
Wadia 3200 D/A convertor ....	£1,995
Dynalab <i>Etude</i> tuner .....	£995
The CAT <i>SL1</i> preamplifier .....	£4,750
Lumley <i>Reference 500</i> monobloks .....	£10,000 per pair
Diamond Acoustics <i>Reference 1</i> loudspeakers .....	£6,000
Cogan Hall <i>EM</i> interconnect, Cogan Hall <i>Fullrange</i> and <i>Alto</i> speaker cable, Sonic Link mains cable .....	£1,500