

Jan. - April 2008  
Volume 7 Issue 1

## Recent and Upcoming Events

Salon HiFi/Home Cinema  
March 14-16, 2008

Paris, France  
Europe Audio Diffusion Display  
Peter McGrath Attending

**March 21, 2008**

Stereo Design  
San Deigo, CA  
Alexandria Series 2  
Dealer Event with John Giolas  
and Jerron Marchant

**Le Festival Son et Image  
April 3 - 6, 2008**

Montreal, Canada  
CDF Audio Display  
Peter McGrath Attending

**April 9 & 10, 2008**

Audio Visions  
Tampa, FL  
Music Matters Event  
with Peter McGrath

**April 14, 2008**

Audio Natali  
Italy  
Alexandria Series 2 Debut  
Dealer Event with Peter McGrath

**April 21 & 22, 2008**

Audiac  
Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Alexandria Series 2 Debut  
Dealer Event with Peter McGrath

**April 26 & 27, 2008**

Dong Thanh Co., Ltd.  
Ho Chi Min City, Viet Nam  
Alexandria Series 2 Debut  
Dealer Event with  
Trent Workman and John Giolas

# WILSON® AUDIOFILES

## Authentic Excellence: The Epiphany

by John Giolas

*"There are a lot of answers in the world – some of them right, some of them wrong."  
–Neil Young*

From an interview of Dave Wilson conducted by Wes Phillips for Stereophile in 1995:

**Phillips:** When you decided to offer it to the public, did you rethink any of your design goals to accommodate the change in end-user?

**Wilson:** No, it stayed very pure. I've found that, as a designer, it's important that my products express my design. I'm not market-driven, per se. I design products that I enjoy, and there are always going to be some people out there who enjoy some of the same things that I enjoy in a loudspeaker—those people constitute our market. So the WATT Series I was exactly the same as the prototype we showed in Las Vegas. Frankly, I was surprised at the market acceptance....

Most of us can trace our passion for reproduced music to a specific transcendent experience. In an instant in time, these experiences, often in the form of an epiphany, have the power to reshape our perceptions. The most powerful of these can cause us to veer in a completely new direction on the road of life. Many people have built careers that began with such moments, and I count myself among them.

I remember my first audio epiphany well. It was the mid-seventies. I had just gotten my driver's license, and while my friends dreamed of getting their own cars, I spent most of my spare time thinking, reading, or listening to music. There was a great high-end audio store I had just discovered – Winterton Audio. The manager of the store was nice enough to let a nerdy, inquisitive sixteen-year-old hang out at the store, gawking and listening, though he knew I couldn't afford much beyond the occasional audiophile record. I loved the gear there, particularly the McIntosh electronics, which sported green, backlit faceplates and big, blue power meters. One Saturday afternoon, while reverently perusing the McIntosh section, I heard a jazz trio playing on the level below. I thought to myself, "Man, that trum-

pet player is good." I had been playing the trumpet since I was eleven, most currently in my high school's stage and jazz bands. I went downstairs to investigate. What I saw ineradicably changed the way I thought of audio from that time forward. Instead of a trio of guys jamming, I saw a pair of large, barn-door-sized panels straddling a rack of audio equipment. Each panel consisted of three subsections linked with what looked like small hinges. No more than one-inch thick, the three panels accorded in a three-foot-wide tri-fold such that they resembled Japanese room dividers. I later discovered that these radical loudspeakers were the invention of a fellow named Jim Winey. He called them "Magneplanars,"

And so it began for me. An adolescent preoccupation was instantly transmuted into a life quest. It wasn't long before I owned a pair of Magneplanars. After I graduated from high school, during my freshman and sophomore years in college, I worked as a salesman in this very store. And when I opened my own store seven years later, Magnepan was prominent in my product lineup. Talk about conversions.

**(Cont. on pg. 2 as "Epiphany")**

## Epiphany (Cont. from pg. 1)

As I look back, it was significant in ways I couldn't have predicted that my next audio epiphany would come at the hands of none other than Dave Wilson. It was now the mid-eighties. I was wandering the halls of the Summer Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago securing product lines for my new audio store. Dave's WAMM had already achieved something like mythical status, and I wanted to see and hear it.

The high-end portion of the summer CES that year was held in a decidedly disheveled hotel in the heart of Chicago. After arriving, I immediately set out to find Dave and his WAMM. When I found the Wilson room, I was initially disappointed. Sheryl Lee Wilson explained that the demand to hear the WAMM was so great they were giving out tickets associated with a specific time. I got a ticket admitting me to a show late that afternoon.

The time came, and I made my way back to the Wilson room. I remember feeling an inexplicable anticipatory excitement; the wait itself having created the sense that this was a special event. The WAMM, with its six-foot, praying-mantis-like front arrays and large rear woofer towers, looked exotic, purposeful, strangely beautiful. Dave had thrown two windows open in the vain hope to cool down the positively tropical heat in the room, courtesy of Krell Class A amplifiers and pre-war ventilation.

Dave introduced the demo and spoke about the music he was to play. I was immediately struck by Dave's clarity of thought, his ability to convey his vision. Unlike the inscrutable ramblings of the underground audio writers of that day, who portrayed high-end audio as an ineffable – even mystical – experience impossible to quantify and measure, Dave's style was logical, grounded, and above all, sensible. Dave had a gift, through metaphor, history, and encyclopedic technical knowledge, for articulating (what seemed to me at the time) the arcane science behind his speaker system. It became immediately clear to me that the WAMMs were neither the transitory, whimsical invention of some eccentric tinkerer, nor the cynical product of corporate market research. They were Dave's babies, were an intimate and personal extension of him.

Dave's special gift for presenting the

ostensibly impenetrable concepts behind the speaker's technology did little to prepare me for the experience of hearing music through the WAMM. My previous concept of audio was much like documentary photography – reproduce a realistic facsimile of the live event. Up until that time, audio was largely an intellectual exercise for me. Music and a greater connection to the message and emotion of the performer are often, ironically, subordinated in the audiophile's quest. It is easy to get stuck in a kind of compartmentalizing; to focus on one aspect of the musical event, such as



the soundstage effects or imaging, at the expense of experiencing the emotional gestalt of the music itself. But Dave Wilson's speaker was about music. The WAMM taught that a seemingly inanimate device could convey the heart and soul of music. Don't misunderstand me: the WAMM certainly portrayed the most remarkably believable verisimilitude of the musical event I had yet heard. My brain told me this. But it was my heart that informed me that what the WAMM produced was something more substantial, conveying not just musical notes or soundstage cues, but the flesh and blood, the spirit and emotion – more of the complete essence of the music itself.

Dave and his WAMM taught me something about music that day that fundamentally changed the direction of my audio career. I ultimately carried Wilson's wonderful loudspeakers in my new store, starting with the WATT, and later, its com-

panion woofer, the Puppy. Later still came the X-1 Grand SLAMM. And, of course, the remarkable WAMM – we sold several of these to a lucky half-dozen or so music lovers.

Though I didn't consciously realize this then, my experience with the WAMM would ultimately lead me to where I am today, working with Dave Wilson. Again, talk about life changing epiphanies. What an opportunity it has been for me to work with Dave here at Wilson. Working with and observing Dave all these years, first selling his products successfully at my store, and later more directly here at Wilson, I think I have come to more completely understand Dave and what makes him such a formidable speaker designer. Clearly, along with a gigantic passion for the art of reproduced music as expressed by loudspeakers, he has unique skill sets: He is a talented researcher and has the ability to ask and answer the correct set of questions. He has the insight to know his strengths and the wisdom to augment his weaknesses with complementary personnel. Dave is remarkably disciplined in approaching and creating specific processes that ensure his research is untainted with unwanted variables. And he has this nearly uncanny ability to successfully translate the numinous essence of music as heard in real life into the impersonal realm of cabinet materials, drivers, and crossover components. But it has been my observation that all of these formidable gifts and skills are subordinate in importance to this less obvious factor: Above all is his unwavering courage to build speakers that please him. He has built a company that is true to him. It is therefore, simply stated, authentic.

This seems like a simple formula, but in today's world, this notion is rarely employed in producing products, even in companies that brand themselves as "high-end" or "world class" or "best of breed." And yet it is this simple fact that lies at the heart of Wilson's continued success: Wilson's products are utterly true to the man, and by extension, to the company that builds them.

So, in this cynical, market-driven world, how does one recognize authentic greatness?

**(Cont. on pg. 3 as "Greatness")**

## Greatness (Cont. from pg. 2)

All great ideas are born from a brighter discontent of the status quo. They begin as seeds planted in the soil of an inquisitive mind, and if tended with vigilance and care, bloom into a dream. Whatever the endeavor – exploration or science, literature or art – authentic greatness can always be traced back lineally to the visionary who dares to act on his dream.

While it's easy to romanticize the gifted inventor and the search in which he engages, anyone who has been involved in the pursuit of excellence knows that it is mostly a lot of hard work. For each incremental step forward there are hundreds of obstacles and dead ends. In the quest to answer a larger question, the explorer creates a subset of additional questions. In order to succeed in the endeavor, the discoverer must gain an understanding of the right questions to ask in the first place. A correct answer is useless to the quest if it is in answer to an irrelevant question. Even after the correct set of questions has been determined, the researcher must create and engage in a disciplined process that correctly answers the questions. And then, with perseverance and long suffering, the indomitable explorer is rewarded with an answer. Often, the answer is one that wasn't expected or isn't helpful in furthering the project. So the process begins anew. Frustrating, time consuming, daunting, even dispiriting. It is easy to understand why even great explorers are sometimes sidelined with self-doubt.

Greatness is rewarded only to those who remain true to themselves and to their dreams. For there are rare instances, when the combination of asking the right questions and being in the right place at the right time come together, an answer comes in the form of an epiphany. Sometimes it's in the shape of an idea. Other times an experience sheds light on the endeavor in entirely new and unforeseen ways. In any event, the epiphanies come in an unbidden flash, pure, whole, and nearly fully formed. This is not to say that epiphanies are the result of good luck, but the recipient does well to

recognize the new idea for what it is: a gift in return for an open mind and hard labor.

Many of you who have heard the story surrounding the development of Alexandria Series 2 know that much of the technological development blossomed from a single, epiphanic moment Dave was given while in Vienna, Austria.

In the spring of 2006, Dave and Sheryl Lee Wilson were fortunate enough to attend a rehearsal of the Mahler Symphony #2 (The Resurrection) in the famed concert hall, the Musikverein. During the second movement of the Mahler dominated by



pizzicato strings, where the instruments are plucked instead of bowed, Dave was suddenly struck by what he was hearing. The music seemed to jump from the stage with an effortless alacrity, the dynamic shadings of attack and decay palpably defined. Despite a perceived sense of lightness and airiness, the plucked strings remained tonally rich and harmonically complete. In tandem, he could hear the utterly seductive and inviting ambience that is the hallmark of the Musikverein. Dave particularly focused on the tiny time gap between the original sounds generated by the orchestra itself and the subsequent earliest reflections of the hall. He knew that even the great Alexandria could not resolve this gap well enough to convey the overwhelming beauty of the music he heard in that moment in this hall. He turned to Sheryl Lee and said, "That's what the new Alexandria needs to sound like. I know how to do it." And he did know.

He knew because of a vast investment in accumulated experience. He knew be-

cause he has spent his life pursuing answers to such questions. Without this core idea born of Dave's dream and passion for live music, the Alexandria Series 2 would simply not exist in its current, wonderful form. If Dave were in Vienna conducting market research, he would not have been open to the epiphanic moment.

As high-end audio has grown, many ideas, such as the artisan designer, are now seen as quaint and old-fashioned. Many companies founded by great visionaries have fallen prey to the notion that in order to grow, they need broader market appeal.

So these companies resort to corporate stratagems such as market-research-driven product development. Or they leverage their brand equity, marketing cheaper products – often manufactured in China – that pretend to be junior versions of their more legitimate offerings. Wilson has remained true to its original premise: we are a company that builds products we, together with Dave, would want to own. The notion is more than a core philosophy: It has become a discipline. Each discovery leads to another, accumulating until each successive product is an accrual of many years of research and ideas.

Another potential pitfall that plagues many a designer or discoverer is supercilious fundamentalism. These designers confuse the importance of being true to oneself with being right. Once the designer assumes his approach and ideas are right, and by extension, others are wrong, he closes himself down to a myriad of possibilities. He instead sets out, through his various endeavors – researching, testing, and designing, to prove that his particular dogma is the correct one, even when it ironically no longer fully resonates with what he perceives. *A priori* assumptions supplant research into technologies that conflict with the designer's dogma; preconceived suppositions supersede serious consideration of significant variables.

Conversely, the most insightful artisans approach their craft with deep humil-

**(Cont. on pg. 4 as "Artisans")**

## Artisans (Cont. from pg. 3)

ity. They are perfectionists that understand that perfection doesn't exist. I have seen this humility in Dave Wilson. It manifests itself in many ways. He is a man of great talent and knowledge of speaker design, and yet Dave knows that there are others who are better trained to do certain things. To augment his considerable strengths, Dave assembled one of the most talented loudspeaker design teams in the industry. Perhaps most surprising and remarkable is Dave's attitude toward his fellow speaker designers. He realizes that his approach, his artistic signature, is not for everyone and that a prospective buyer may legitimately prefer a competing product to his. He knows he can't please everyone, and so is contented with pleasing one of the most demanding critics of all: himself. Perhaps the greatest measure of Dave's humility is the genuine surprise he felt when he discovered that the market not only "accepted" his loudspeakers but demanded them.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the WAMM I first heard over two decades ago was the physical result of a great amount of work that began with a dream -- Dave's dream. What is perhaps more surprising is Dave's courage to remain true and committed to designing and building loudspeakers that are utterly congruent with his vision. Dave understands that in order to be true to those who would purchase our loudspeakers, we must first be true to ourselves.

It's largely what we mean by Authentic Excellence.

**Wilson Audio  
WATT/Puppy  
System 8**  
**"Outstanding Loudspeaker  
of the Year 2007-2008"**  
**Super AV**  
(A Mainland Chinese Hi Fi Magazine)



Wilson Audio's static CES display included the first showing of the new Thor's Hammer subwoofer.

Translated and excerpted with permission from Germany's *Stereo* magazine.

## "A World of Its Own"

by Matthias Boede

"...*Stereo* now auditions the next largest model, the MAXX 2. And it is nothing less than sensational.

"...And within this lightly-occupied realm, Wilson Audio has a special position. This American manufacturer based in Provo, Utah is effectively *the* maker of high-end speakers worldwide....

"...There is no sense beating around the bush: this speaker performs in another sphere, so to speak, in a world of its own, and imparts to us music and listening experiences without equal.

"...we look upon it as the new 'first in its class' among the free standing speakers for its test....you only need to play 'Keep It to Yourself,' a fully natural recording done with two microphones, which is part of the *True Stereo* sampler on the Naim label. What you hear could easily be taken for a live presentation, as though you were barely four meters from the front of the stage.

"It's as though the soloist were stand-

ing, life-size, between the 160 cm high speakers, with the accompanying instruments grouped around her - the sound is so exactly like that experienced in a live performance that there arises a type of unspoken, breathtaking communication which you can only label as 'effortless energy.'

"...The various levels of sound reproduction appear to be limited more by the power of the amplifiers and the capabilities of the listeners than by the apparently almost unlimited possibilities of the MAXX 2.

"...This system controls everything perfectly. And then we feel it with 'Rocky Point Holiday' from Reference Recording's *Tutti Sampler*. Insane dynamic peaks drop back into nothing; the orchestra stands there as giant as a mountain. The listeners' applause begins in the last tones of the quaking drum finale. Magnificent!

"...Technical finesse, sound quality and musical 'maturity' come together here

at the highest level.

"...For it is anything but a 'rowdy speaker;' rather it is a master of delicate shadings, 'space presentation' and tonal unity. Velvety, shining strings arise from the depth of the room, possessing sensitive charm and a natural portion of 'tangy' melodiousness. Voices of both men and women are more authentic than we have ever heard before.

"...Whether in the 140 square meter hall of the Dortmund Congress Center, or in our 45 square meter listening room - the Wilson proves itself as brilliant as it is sensitive on the set, unites power and manners in an exemplary way, allows no 'patchwork,' and offers gripping experiences.

"our ascent in the Wilson program ends with an announced sensation: the MAXX 2 distances itself from its top competitors and sets itself at the peak. There the Americans can only beat themselves: with their top model, the Alexandria Series 2."