

# Bob Stuart Interview: Meridian Co-Founder; On Why Buying Speakers Should Be Like Buying A Piano

**Huffington Post UK** By; Michael Rundle Posted: 11/07/2012 10:57 Updated: 11/07/2012 11:15



Bob Stuart is the co-founder of Meridian Audio, one of the great British success stories in high-end consumer tech.

An electronics and audio engineer by trade, Stuart founded Meridian with industrial design legend Allen Boothroyd in 1977 after working on early products for other companies. Basing the company in Cambridgeshire - where it still remains - Meridian has gone on to build some of the most highly-regarded premium audio products on the market.

Over 35 years the company has won more than 165 awards, including three Design Council Awards, and still builds its products by hand in the UK.

But in a world now dominated by audio products aiming for convenience over quality, Meridian has had to adapt.

Not only has it broadened its pitch to an increasingly global market - more than 75% of its sales are exported outside Britain to places like China, Japan and Kuwait - it has also expanded into premium in-car audio and digital media.

Its systems have appeared in the McLaren MP4-12C, the Range Rover Evoque and the Jaguar XK Ultimate saloon, its recent M6 loudspeakers are tuned for digital music, and Meridian has also released an app for the iPad to control its Digital Media System music library products - which are, again, aimed very much at the high end.

*When HuffPost spoke to Stuart we touched on everything from the rise of the iPod, Spotify and Kevlar headphones.*

*But first we had to ask a question that bugs us when writing about audio - isn't it impossible to describe without actually hearing it?*

**How does Meridian explain the benefits of high quality audio without resorting to wordy descriptions or stat-heavy tech specs?**

You've put your finger on something fundamental. The big communication problem that the whole industry has is getting people to understand that reproduced sound can be like live sound. And it truly can.

With a high quality system you can invite the musicians into your room. The sound can be real and you get so much more out of the music. It's not to do with the sound, it's to do with communication at all sorts of levels - understanding the musician, the composer, the interpretation, all the emotional connection that comes with that. So when we get a chance to talk to people our reference is live sound and that's what we're trying to bring you.

We see this in young people. Even musicians happily will often listen to little iPod docks until you play them a real system, when you play them the live speaker and they suddenly think "Ah!" They hadn't even thought that it was possible. You can't solve that with superlatives. You can't say it's got more bass or more treble or it's sweeter. First it's about *communicating* music.



**Above: The Meridian M6 digital loudspeaker**

**HuffPost reviewed a pair of very expensive earphones by another company recently that - among other things - were made partly of Kevlar, as if to justify the price. Is that emphasis on design over form something that bothers you?**

We use design and we have done from the very beginning. We started the company 35 years ago and the two founding partners were myself – electronics and acoustics – and Alan Boothroyd, an industrial designer.

Nowadays it's quite common – people are used to Apple making nice looking products, and you expect a degree of design. But back then there was nothing. Audio didn't look special. We've always tried to synthesise designs where the appearance and the function are together.

In other words, form follows function and everything we do in the appearance there's a reason for it, and everything we do on the inside there's a reason for it. So we wouldn't make a cynical product like that.

You might make a headphone out of a particular material to give it the right mass or to make it look attractive. That's okay but to overcharge because the cable is made of Kevlar is nothing to do with the sound. In fact it's quite likely to destroy the sound if it's got the wrong dielectric. Like in anything, expensive doesn't mean good.

**Has the iPod and the MP3 killed high-end audio?**

It's kept music in people's experience. It's made it easier for them to listen to it, and that's obviously good because music is very, very important to people.

But you're right, the last almost two decades – since the beginning of MP3 – convenience has won over quality. Unfortunately in the history of audio and in the history of many things in consumer space this is true, that if you give the consumer in general the choice between convenience and quality he'll pick convenience. And some format decisions have followed that.

But if you're a true audiophile you know where to get high quality ... and we see tremendous interest among artists and music labels to want to deliver the higher quality. It's just a matter of that becoming real.

But to do that you have to communicate almost the same message which is that you hear more of the music. The music is better at an emotional level, an understanding level. It's better if it's higher quality.



**Above: the Meridian HQ in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, which employs more than 100 people**

**Is that where your work with car audio systems comes in - in that a Range Rover is one place where it's convenient to listen to very high quality audio?**

If in your daily life you can't find anywhere to listen to music at home and you don't want to do it on headphones the car's a good place.

It was true decades before in Japan, that for many people the best hi-fi system they had was in their car, which is kind of sad. But it gives us an opportunity to communicate, because the biggest problem we have now and the biggest problem I believe that those of us who really understand what good audio can do for music is to communicate that, is for it to be appreciated.

**Why isn't it appreciated?**

What's interesting about humans is that they don't trust their hearing as well as they trust their eyes.

Very often if I'm talking to someone who doesn't know about audio but for some reason I've got to be engaged with them and they say, "I'm not sure if my ears are good enough." I say, "Well actually they are." Everyone's ears are actually good enough because you can discriminate very fine details of inflection, voices and so on without realising it. It's just that you don't feel you can trust it.

Then you give them a demo and they hear then musically. Everyone thinks they have to have some kind of golden ears whereas nearly everybody feels confident to walk into John Lewis and comment about the difference between the pictures on three different screens. They don't have that confidence about sound.

**What do you find most interesting about what you do now?**

Improving the audio process. We still work at the cutting edge of making the sound better and trying to join together the route from the recording to the playback, through the archive.

So what we do as a company, what's our core, is we make these extraordinary digital loudspeakers and we make signal processing and we try to bring solutions to bring good sound to people. And we're continuing to innovate there.



**Above: The Meridian Control 15 digital media system**

**Do you ever go back and listen to music on some of the first products you made? If you do, what do they sound like?**

Yes we do. We try to have working units of everything that we've made but sometimes its fun to go back.

I'll give you an example: The very first loudspeaker we made, our first product in 1977, was a loudspeaker, it was an active speaker called M1. Very recently we had a couple contact us saying, "We're moving to a smaller house and would you like these back?" We didn't have a

working pair of those and so we happily bought them back from them... It's quite extraordinary how right we got it because now we've got a source which is so much better but yet the speaker gives you the result. It doesn't sound old fashioned at all.

That's the most interesting thing that goes on, is taking a modern recording – like a high resolution recording, say – and playing it back on a system that was designed when the best thing you had was FM.

**That's the nice thing about audio equipment though, isn't it? Most tech ages badly, but good audio equipment often gets better.**

We draw the parallel of a piano. The kind of work that goes into building a Steinway goes into building our speaker. If you buy it you've got it for a generation. You have to have the speakers now because you can't wait.

People say sometimes, "I need to wait till I've got more money or save up or wait till my kids leave home." I say no, you have to have them now because your kids need to benefit from them and these speakers will be working perfectly in 25 years' time.