

The world according to Meridian

➤ INTERVIEW: Paul Messenger

Meridian can line up a very impressive list of technological 'firsts' down the years, from its introduction of radical modular construction techniques and active loudspeakers in the seventies, via



the early CD years and pioneering multiroom systems through the eighties, to the development of the full digital multiroom/channel components and packages that represent its core today.

Chairman Bob Stuart is the only specialist hi-fi representative on the DVD Forum's Working Group 4, which is one reason why Meridian's 800 (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) is the first DVD-Audio player with genuine high-end audiophile pretensions, and the first to feature an 'approved' digital link from disc player to processor. Naturally Bob supports DVD-A rather than SACD, but irrespective of any bias, few can match his knowledge, experience and foresight in both the multichannel sound and digital audio fields.

I'd already been using the 800/861 combo prior to this interview, and had particularly enjoyed the 861's Trifield mode, used for multichannel reproduction from two-channel stereo sources. I asked Bob how the whole surround/multichannel thing got under way.

"Our first surround sound demo was way back in the early 1980s, when we demonstrated Ambisonics and Hafler arrangements at one of the London shows. We were a very early Ambisonics licensee, and worked closely with people like Michael Gerzon and John Wright.

"However, we didn't make a commercial product until the 565 Surround Processor in 1995. That was the first time anyone had done ProLogic in software, without using a Dolby chip, and

it concentrated on music rather than movie replay. It had both Meridian Music mode and Trifield mode, way back in '95, and was very successful because people wanted to play music on their systems.

"Subsequently, a lot of high-end companies did Surround Processors, but most simply used a bypass mode when dealing with stereo music signals. We knew from the Ambisonic work that a centre channel, properly used, could be an extremely powerful tool with stereo signals. It stabilises the image so that you no longer have a sweet spot for good imaging, and listening can be much more of a shared

experience. It also makes room imperfections much less critical, because it's much more robust than a 'phantom' image.

"For many years now I've felt that a Trifield-type approach offers a better way of representing stereo. If you go back to the 1930s, the American studies or Blumlein's work found that three was the minimum number of channels needed to create a proper image. The reason we ended up with two is to fit into the two sides of the record groove.

"We've tried to distinguish between microphone feeds, speaker feeds and recorded channels. Just because there are two channels on a disc, it doesn't necessarily follow that two speakers is the right way to play it back. We could probably convince you that more than 95 per cent of your collection sounds better with a correctly used centre speaker!

I dragged Bob onto the subject of the new 'high band' formats, pointing out that Pioneer got a great reaction to its 'combi' DV-747A player which plays both DVD-A and SACD. Could Meridian do something similar?

"Not in the timescale, and to do SACD replay, we have to be convinced it's worth making the investment, because it may just go nowhere. At the moment, I'm not convinced."

I play Devil's advocate, referring

Past Glories

100-SERIES

The cute and exceptionally compact 100-series consisted of preamp, outboard power supplies, tuner, and monoblock power amps. It introduced modular construction in both the units themselves, and in plug-in modules used to match different cartridges.

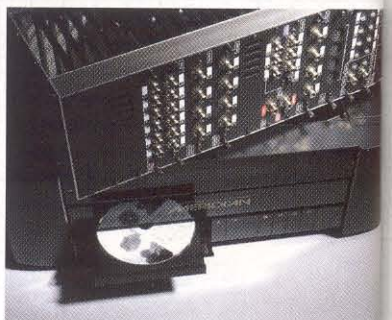
200-SERIES

The 200-series, introduced in 1986, was among the very first in the world to encourage multiroom systems, and also served to pioneer the concept of the separate, outboard DAC.

M2

A hugely influential and compact active speaker, the M2 evolved into the M3 and ultimately the current M33 and DSP33, all based on twin 5.25-inch main drivers mounted above and below a central tweeter.

More software and stronger audiophile approval indicate that SACD may have won the first round of the high resolution audio war with DVD-Audio. But Meridian chairman Bob Stuart has other ideas...



Top: Digital theatre, Meridian style. Above: Reference 800 and 861. Right: Meridian 800 DVD-A player and friends. Below: Optional cards for the 861 digital surround controller (below right with 800)



Industry Profile

"A problem for SACD is that high resolution is simply not enough. In fact, I don't think either SACD or DVD-Audio would survive without DVD-Video."

to the superior number of titles and the excellent press SACD has enjoyed. Bob remains unfazed, and sees SACD essentially as an attempt by Philips and Sony to extend the considerable patent royalties they share from CD. He acknowledges that SACD's launch strategy was much better planned and executed than DVD-A's, but feels that the latter gains considerably from being part of the hugely successful DVD 'family'.

"The real key, I believe, is that the silicon companies and Chinese makers are tooling up to make DVD-Audio rather than anything else. A problem for SACD is that high resolution is simply not enough. In fact, I don't think either format would survive without DVD-V. The fact that many DVD-Audio discs have a video layer compatible with 40 million DVD-Video players out there means you've got a market for the discs that could never have been created just by 'high band' machines.

"DVD-Audio might have had a slow start, but it's an exceptionally flexible platform which is already inspiring original new music from a large number of sources. It also promises all sorts of future possibilities, now that copy protection is in place, and the music industry is getting on side.

"To go back to whether we could make an SACD player, the answer is that of course we could. But building the 800 to be the best at CD, DVD-V and DVD-A was itself an enormous project, and we couldn't have maintained the same standards in a more universal machine, because SACD is so completely different. The two technologies diverge right back at the laser.

"Many of the things we'd want

Current Key Products



507 CD PLAYER £1,195

A new entry-level CD player, it uses 800 series-style de-jittering and buffering techniques at a much more affordable price.

800 £10,805

Modular construction with extensive de-jittering and buffering techniques, this is the first audiophile DVD-Audio player to feature an approved digital link, and delivers no compromise performance with CD and DVD-V too.

DSP 33 £2,595

A very discrete and compact loudspeaker that accepts digital input signals, deriving performance advantages by processing crossover networks and protection circuitry in the digital domain.



to do to create the best possible SACD player would tend to work against best PCM performance. We'd probably opt to make a completely separate machine instead. At the really high end, a universal player is an essentially spurious concept, the more so because SACD doesn't, as far as I know, permit a digital output. And if it did, it would probably use a different encryption system to DVD-A. It all starts to get very complicated indeed...

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Turn the page for a review of Meridian's new 800/861 V3 DVD-A player and digital surround controller.

