



Interview - Bob Stuart, Meridian

The way we listen to music is undergoing revolutionary change. But the way Meridian designs and manufactures its speakers isn't, says the company's co-founder and CTO, Bob Stuart.

"From the beginning, Meridian has only wanted to do one thing," says Bob Stuart. "We wanted to bring great sounding music into people's homes." Stuart is co-founder of the British loudspeaker manufacturing company Meridian. Based in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, their flagship DSP8000 speakers are one of those "once seen never forgotten" products that simply ooze classic design, aesthetics, quality. They're also a "once heard never forgotten" product.

Meridian's 'active' electronics design (essentially the amplifier and signal processing is part of the speaker) means that what comes out of the sumptuous cabinets is, in terms of home audio, about as good as it gets. When you hear a recording of a Steinway on these speakers, it sounds like there's one in the room.

But for Stuart great sounding music has to be "easy to listen to and easy to live with. But there are so many ways of getting that wrong". This deceptively simple idea has informed everything Meridian has done since the company was formed in 1977. "Back then the only really sensible sources of sound were the vinyl LP and FM radio." The top-end hi-fi design ethos of the day was to manufacture amplifiers, pre-amplifiers, receivers and then dangle the best set of speakers you could afford off them.

But Meridian bucked the trend with its very first product: a set of active speakers. "From a theoretical point of view we knew that if you made the audio crossover electronic and not passive you'd get a better result. It's an engineering truth. It's a psychoacoustic truth." And so Meridian became the first manufacturer to produce active speakers for the consumer market. "There were, of course, speakers in the professional audio market that had amplifiers built into the back of them. But that's not really what we mean by active technology. What we're referring to is each driver being powered by its own amplifier. One for the sub-woofer. One for the mid-range. One for the tweeter."

Meridian stuck to their guns even though "in many ways it was harder to do commercially" than what the competition was doing. The rest of the world was designing 'separates' systems. "What a dealer doesn't want to do is always be on the look out for new customers," says Stuart. "He wants to keep selling stuff to the same people. One year the client will buy an amplifier, next year some speakers and so on. What we were finding was that when somebody bought Meridian speakers, they were so pleased with them that we never saw them again. All we can really say to our customers is if you want to buy some more hi-fi then get another room."

Stuart says that the hi-fi separates market was a "boys' toys" market. "The market was 99 per cent male. The guys would ask for a funny invoice so they didn't have to tell their wives how much they'd spent." It was also a captive market, as back in the heady days of the Silver Jubilee we simply didn't have digital photography, laptops or mobiles to give us our daily technology fix. "We had customers who would take their kit home, and if they had a question they'd cycle down to the phone box on the corner of the road, put in their two shillings and phone us up. It was all very different then."

Listening in the new world

One of the ironies of the digital age is that while we're listening to more and more music, we're listening to it on worse and worse playback systems. "The biggest problem we face," says Stuart, "is that we're still only a modestly sized company. The biggest threat to the success of audio companies like us is that Apple has become the world's biggest audio company."

Everyone loves music, and everyone listens to music, says Stuart. But today there is a generation that either doesn't know or care about quality. One of the great things about the golden age of hi-fi was that we at least paid some respect to the quality of the audio. But as we listen to more MP3 files on cheap white earphones, played back from our phones or our laptops, we're not getting the experience that we deserve. This, says Stuart, is a "major, major problem". Music is one of the great social experiences, especially for the young, says Stuart, but they're listening to it on 1in speakers on their iPod docks, "and these people are growing up thinking that this is what music sounds like". For professional people the only time they really listen to music is in the car. Stuart is trying to address the issue by putting Meridian systems into the Range Rover.

Two things happened with Apple: they provided simplicity and convenience. "Those two things take you to the top. They didn't provide excellent sound and complexity, which is what the music industry was trying to do with the CD and DVD-audio format," says Stuart. "The iPod hasn't really helped us with our goal, which is to help people really enjoy music. Of course, along the way a lot of very good things happened and there is some very cool design."

What does the future hold for Meridian? How does Stuart feel when a footballer pays '35,000 for a pair of his DSP8000 loudspeakers only to plug his iPod into it? "Well it's a start. Maybe that listener will realise the limitations of the playback device and the file format, and will move up to something better. We still think we can make a difference. But the problem the industry will have to solve is that of music itself being distributed in a damaged form."

Stuart is active in political-engineering, lobbying for better quality audio. One of his major successes was MLP (Meridian Lossless Packing), which was adopted as the standard compression method for DVD-Audio and is now at the heart of the Blu-ray disc.

The Cambridge audio set

From an early age Stuart wanted to design audio equipment. While studying in London he met David Southward, co-founder of Cambridge Consultants, whose aim was to put the technology literate brains of the ancient university at the disposal of British industry. In 1972 the company sold out and became part of the large American management consultancy, Arthur D Little. Southward left with the intention of starting an audio company to build amplifiers. Stuart was brought in on the technical side and Allen Boothroyd was recruited to take care of industrial design.

The emergent company was Lecson, part of a corporate reshuffle that also bequeathed such legendary audio brands as Cambridge Audio, Mission, Arcam and Meridian. "Loudspeaker design was my hobby and I'd studied psychoacoustics. At that time it wasn't common for tech companies to care about how their products looked. And so to have a company whose ethos was great sound and industrial design - with two founders with complementary skills - was unusual."

Lecson came up with the groundbreaking Lecson AC1 preamplifier and AP1 power amplifier. These products won the 1974 Design Council Award and went on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The story is told in greater depth in a new book called 'The Cambridge Phenomenon' by Kate Kirk and Charles Cotton.

The amplifiers are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington, in the British Design 1948-2012 exhibition. The event is being staged to coincide with the Diamond Jubilee and the Olympic games. Says Stuart: "It's the only piece of audio equipment there."

Almost as extraordinary as being in a history book and a museum at the same time? "I have to admit," he says, "that I was starting to wonder what was going on."

The Meridian line

"Allen and I consulted in a variety of areas after Lecson. But in 1977 we started Meridian." Boothroyd has stayed with the company throughout its 35 years and "every major design is his design. The appearance, the aesthetic. That's his skill", says Stuart. So with his background in electronics, was it simply a case of Stuart deciding what goes in the box, while Boothroyd decided what the box looks like

"It doesn't work like that. Although what's interesting about that statement is that this is exactly how most companies design. But Allen and I have always had this interactive way of working where we could usually ended up with something slightly surprising, but perfect in terms of form and function."

Boothroyd's career as a designer is the stuff of legend, coming up with the BBC Micro computer, the Acorn System 2 and Pioneer's surround sound speaker system. As Meridian's design director he's not tied to the company, but Stuart on the other hand has opted to concentrate on Meridian alone. "I wanted to build a brand with core ideas. A beautiful looking product, great ergonomics and a great sound.

"We do set a lot of store by how our speakers look. I think that the DSP8000 is the perfect synthesis of sculpture and design for function. There's a separate head and there's a reason for that. The fact that the woofers are on the side - there's a reason for that, too. So it's an engineered product. But it's all coming from a love of music. And it's got to sound right. If a piano doesn't sound like a piano, the speaker doesn't go out of the door."

Everything Stuart does comes from a passion for music and this is clearly evident in his conversation. Most industry professionals use the jargon, talking about signals and audio playback. He talks about music and pianos, which seems to keep him close to the reason for designing his speakers in the first place. "There is this threat to music from people listening to it on earbuds. Not listening to CD, or even MP3, but Spotify. And so the potential to be musical is being driven out."

It almost sounds as if Stuart feels sorry for the MP3 generation. He seems to be concerned for young people who will never really connect with music if they can't listen to it properly. For Bob Stuart, part of the answer is to soldier on. "We have to make the best equipment we can make. We have to make a system that we can take to someone like Alfred Brendel and say 'what do you think of that?'" *

To find out more about Meridian, visit www.meridian-audio.com