

Audiophile is the new black or Why is it great time to be audio reseller today

It used to be pretty much given that audiophiles' blissful hours were reserved to retrofitted cellars and "study rooms" with meticulous sound isolation, marble turntables, speakers as large as kitchen cabinets - and amplifiers the look and size of small space heaters.

Children and spouses were told that daddy/mommy was working in his study and none other than more-or-less occasional thud of bass (depending on music played) or treble spike was heard on such evenings ever again.

Audio personalized

Wow! It can fit one hundred of MP3s inside my pocket! That is several albums easily! And it has rechargeable battery!

I remember the days when I bought my first ever MP3 player - they were long days before they would be called "DAPs". The farthest acronym you would get was PMP - Personal Media Player. But still, MP3 players were the name of the game, often struck up in conversations among both mainstream users (which was me as a high-school boy back then), and as FLAC gained popularity, even open-minded audiophiles.

I also remember being torn between my shiny new Teac MP3 player (4 gigabytes of storage!) and my trusty old Sony portable Discman, which could still be taken on road trips and vacations alongside with stack of favourite CDs (funny how today we argue if brick third the size of it is still "transportable" - of course excepting those "Do you even brick, bro?" stacks).

Even with my meager Porta Pro headphones at the time, I could tell the Sony played better - the dynamics, separation and PRaT were almost on par with some of today's finer players.

Both portable players suited my vision of musical Wild West cowpoke, where you would just wander through the everlasting landscape on and on.

Teac I would meticulously reload via USB port every other night. Sony CDs left my palms imprinted with mind-reading (or media reading) memory, so I was able to change albums even in pitch black night by memory, which happened more often than not.

I had memorized the order of my stack of CDs, so I knew that third discs from the top of the stack would put my mood to brood over KoRn's Issues electric guitarwork and flawless bass lines, and seventh CD conjured feelings of cool alienation with Slovak hip-hop scene, which was somehow strong, somehow underground even back in the 2000s.

This blindfolded track slinging caught interest of my then-classmates on our school trip to Slovakia mountains (the hip-hop on my CDs was not coincidental). We used to sit on the veranda of mountain cottage, flipping through tunes as heavy rains tapping on the veranda glass cancelled our class' mountain hiking plans.

"You have System of a Down there? Do you have the album where - what? Whole discography? How cool is that!"

"Can you play Mobb Deep next?"

"Hey, I brought over a best-of compilation you guys need to check out."

You get the idea.

Comfort meets audio quality

Then Apple iPod came year after the trip and dare I say that this time it was for the better that my country of residence back then was still in it's infancy of adopting semi-niche audio products.

Hence first iPod ever to come here was 5th generation of the "iPod Video" in two capacities. I chose the larger, 80GB one - I felt my horrid music taste would be better contained with some room to contain future audio explorations.

The funny thing was that as players such as this became wide(r)spread (there was also Creative Zen line of data-hoarding - by the back-in-the-day standards, mind you - players, as well as iRiver), anyone could become a trackslinger with UIs that, though lacking touchscreens, could still teach a lesson or two in UX to some of the more modern, yet more esoteric DAPs today, which force you to navigate obscure menus via ever more obscure controls. Scroll wheels became as ubiquitous as revolver drums in my Mogwai's Ex Cowboy infused dreams of yonder Wild West.

Portable head-fi happened

As digital players went mainstream, numerous things changed, too. There used to be just few quality in-ear monitors (while the rest was called somehow offensively ear plugs) - Shure with its' SE535, Ultimate Ears with Triple.fi 10 and Sennheiser with IE80 (IE800 only later on). Some more were diamonds in the rough like Etymotic ER6i.

Also, lassoed stacks started to become a thing - even though iPods now started to implement touchscreens, trusty old 5.5 generation were the ones with decent Wolfson DACs, seen with silver cabling dangling to external brick of an amp (or even to another brick - pre-amp, high-end capacitor containers etc.).

And headphones reserved formerly for big and expensive home setups started to trickle into portable audio.

People started to bring along to desk bound jobs, picnics, cafés and libraries gear that used to be reserved for the (wo)man cave lit up just by glowing amplifier tubes. Gear like Sennheiser HD800s, AKG K7xx series or 600ohm Beyers.

Others caught up

And soon, thanks to increasing demand for personal audio, that could be brought just about anywhere with you, companies mushroomed - ones that created headphones with such sound and price tag never imagined before (well, apart from Stax, K-1000 and other legends from the past). And just like that, people started to actually buy them.

But not only people that used to spend considerable more on two-channel systems, but people new to the hobby of audio as well. They knew their fathers' systems whose price tags were always quoted higher in front of neighbors' visits and lower when their spouses were present.

And they deemed somehow correctly that owning a system that rivals or best that (though said fathers would disinherit them for that) for fraction of the price is still a pretty good deal.

Suddenly non-pro users started to post their earlobe imprints over from audiologists to custom in-ear monitor manufacturers, said manufactures started to best each other by number of drivers per monitor, portable amps the size of small brick bulged from every serious audiophile's trousers and those without the box shape stenciled on their trouser legs were dismayed while out and about headphone meetings - which also started to be a thing.

This meant that those somehow semi-quiet societies of people silently spending the equivalent of a car on speakers became loud and proud groups of people toting big DACs and amps about in messenger bags and Seahorse cases.

Audiophilia was a growing force to be reckoned with.

The path went on

Soon trends emerging in smartphones caught up with audio industry and MP3 players changed places with DAPs.

Today the players can stream Spotify (and others), DLNA from home NAS, bypass chunky wires and feed sound directly to Bluetooth headphones, amplify single-ended or balanced signal and hold terabytes of storage. Both my old MP3 player and CD player look positively vintage now.

What has not changed, though, is willingness of audiophiles to tweak their systems to perfection. Many sub-niches in personal audio have emerged and nearly all of them are doing well.

Even one of the formerly lowest bidders in audio quality - Bluetooth audio - is losing its' rep of crappy sound and cheap headphones with somehow expensive price for what you get. Today modern audio aficionado willing to dabble away from cult of silver cables can have it all - high-end polished headphones (such as Bower & Wilkins ones) and speakers (such as KEF LSX), while others add yet more features, such as Sony's noise-cancelling headphones.

Then there's the world of streaming and everything from cheap Raspberry Pi-based streamers to Roon Nucleus and offerings from Innuos, Auratic and other heavy hitters of the air floating ones and zeroes.

And yet more audiophiles spend thousands on short interconnect cables alone, headphones that are driven sometimes solely by high-end DAPs with potent amplifiers inside - not piggybacked and obscuring screen real estate. CIEMs are getting commonplace and portable DACs are found in desk-bound jobs and in home two-channel systems alike.

Conclusion

There has never been a better time to sell quality audio niche products as the audience is prepared (ideal stage, is it not?) and enlightened enough to hear your sound, erm, voice.

Many have their wallets out, deciding which headphones, DAC or streamer to buy next, stung by never-ending "upgraditis bug". It is rare, that in tech world, this is single bug no one has desire to bugfix for good.

It is gurantee that many of said customers would be happily recurring ones.

This is the time to think hard about easy and obvious ways to promote your stuff - content marketing with blog articles, YouTube video reviews, luxurious-looking landing pages or contributing to various audio forums can go a long way - perhaps longer than ever.

As these days, you not only get the audience for (almost) free - but they get you and your message already.