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The Good Guys in the White Hats and the Bad Guys in the Black Hats: a Guide for the Perplexed

By Peter Aczel
Editor and Publisher

In audio, as in life, there are good guys and bad guys—good and bad manufacturers, designers, dealers, publishers, reviewers, editors, etc. Here you have them conveniently listed for reference.

Who's a good guy? Who's a bad guy? A good guy in the audio world is a practitioner whose efforts, in word or in deed, are aimed at the most accurate sound reproduction possible, at a price commensurate with the means to achieve it. A bad guy in the audio world is a practitioner who has any kind of agenda, overt or covert, contrary to the aforesaid aim of the good guys. It's as simple as that.

Many, if not most, of the names that appear below have been discussed in our pages before, but a consolidated summary of our pantheon and of our demonology appears to be good idea at this point, as we have picked up a large number of new readers in the course of the last few issues. The list is, needless to say, far from complete; there are more good guys and bad guys out there than we could possibly be aware of. The idea here is to answer briefly the incessant questions we get that start with "what do you think of" or "how do you rate" or "do you agree with" or "should I believe" and so forth. Of course, those who are familiar with our audio philosophy will readily relate to these lists; the rest of our readers will get the hang of it before they turn the page.

The White Hats.

The following audio people have our trust. When you see one of these names, you don't have to proceed with caution. (Please note that our own contributors, such as David Rich, Tom Nousaine, David Ranada, Richard Modafferi, etc., are not incorporated in the list because their White Hat ranking is self-evident—they wouldn't be with us otherwise.)

Robert Adams (Analog Devices, Inc.)

Digital audio's voice of authority and silicon jockey supreme. In contrast to those who have only opinions on digital technology, Bob Adams has solutions. Since he designs chips rather than complete audio gear, his solutions affect our

audio life only indirectly but none the less significantly. On the journalistically and promotionally abused subject of jitter, he is the compass that points true north. Believe him, not the tweako pundits.

John Bau (Spica)

Living proof that a typical audiophile can intellectually bootstrap himself to the level of professional engineers. He parted company with the dilettante speakerbuilder crowd about 15 years ago and has developed into a thoroughly scientific loudspeaker designer with a valid engineering rationale for every theoretical and practical aspect of his designs. A veritable role model. (Unfortunately, Parasound closed their Spica division after operating it only a couple of years, but I am sure we shall hear from John Bau again.)

Bob Carver (Sunfire Corporation)

Possibly the most brilliant audio designer of our time, an inventor rather than just an engineer. His work is nearly always on a level of technological creativity that makes one forgive his P.T. Barnum taste in product naming, advertising, and publicity. His specialty is solving the "impossible" design problem, which he does often. He also happens to be a warmhearted and highly tolerant human being who seldom uses his vast intellectual advantage over not-so-bright critics and adversaries.

Edward Cherry (Australia)

Strictly an academic rather than an audio industry person but important to all amplifier designers to this day for helping to straighten out the serious confusion about feedback that existed back in the '70s and early '80s. One of the seminal thinkers in audio electronics.

David Clark (DLC Design)

Mr. ABX himself, designer of the original ABX comparator and the earliest apostle of double-blind listening tests at perfectly matched levels. That makes him the tweako camp's Beelzebub, but to my knowledge he has never been proven wrong about what is audible and what isn't. Today his work is mostly in car audio, where ABX comparisons reveal audible differences quite often.

Bob Cordell (David Sarnoff Laboratories)

The other great feedback revisionist of the 1980s, together with Professor Cherry (see above). A superbly clear thinker, he is still interested in audio although not part of the industry. His 13-year old prototype MOSFET power amplifier has never been surpassed (nor commercially produced).

Mark Davis (Dolby Laboratories)

One of the keenest minds in the industry. He is doing so much highly advanced audio-of-the-future work at Dolby that I

am almost embarrassed to remember him mainly for being the first (at least in my experience) to point Out that all well-designed electronic signal paths sound the same under controlled listening conditions. That was twenty years ago, when he was still part of the Boston audio mafia, and I didn't believe him. Now I believe all the far more radical things he is saying.

Mike Dzurko (ACI: Audio Concepts, Inc.)

The hobbyist manufacturer/marketer who redefined value in loudspeaker systems. Thanks to his excellent taste in sound, his respect for science, and his direct-from-the- factory distribution, ACI speakers have a history of performing like much costlier units sold by dealers. At the moment Mike is working as a schoolteacher again, and the company is in a somewhat austere holding pattern. I trust the situation is temporary because no one is more deserving of audiophile support.

John Eargie (Delos International, Inc.)

The Compleat audio expert, a veritable Renaissance man of audio. He has been president of the AES; he has designed loudspeakers for JBL; he has written textbooks and engineering papers on recording techniques, microphones, etc.; he plays the organ and the piano; his credits as a recording engineer go back to the golden age of Mercury and RCA; but today he is best known for making state-of-the-art recordings for Delos. I have never failed to get an erudite, realistic, levelheaded answer from him on any audio question, no matter how controversial.

R. A. (Dick) Greiner (University of Wisconsin, retired)

The E.E. conscience of the audio world. We have all learned from him over the years on the subject of amplifiers, wires and cables, polarity—you name it, the list is endless. He makes life a little simpler and easier for those of us who trust science because he is a great explainer. To tweako cultists he is a nemesis because his calm professorial logic devastates their agenda.

David Hall (Velodyne Acoustics, Inc.)

The emperor of subwoofers and defender of the faith (not shared by all practitioners) in low-distortion loudspeaker design. His motional-feedback subwoofer design of 1989 signaled the beginning of a new era in bass reproduction. He is very much a hands-on engineer, and his latest stuff is still ahead of the competition.

Ken Kantor (Now Hear This, Inc.)

Another original whose unconventional ideas on sound reproduction, more specifically on loudspeaker design, must be taken seriously. He is so smart that he has gained entrée into, and the confidence of, tweako circles without being a tweak himself. Neat trick.

D. B. (Don) Keele, Jr. (Audio magazine)

The most honest, thorough, knowledgeable, and commonsensical of loudspeaker reviewers. (Present company excepted? Hell, no.) He is responsible for the highly reliable and accurate nearfield method we all use now to measure woofers. Unfortunately, just because he is a total objectivist, it does not follow that Audio shuns tweako reviewers of questionable credibility.

Siegfried Linkwitz (Audio Artistry)

One of the truly serious thinkers on the subject of loudspeaker design, with impeccable academic and professional credentials. His widely quoted work on crossover networks provided the antidote to the simplistic firstorder cult. His current work on large speaker systems shows considerable originality.

Stanley Lipshitz (University of Waterloo)

Arguably the keenest intellect in the audio community. He is not associated with any specific audio product but has mathematically analyzed just about every important audio design problem and written a paper about it (usually with fellow savant John Vanderkooy—see below). If we don't understand something about a new technology, we ask Stanley. He knows. As David Clark (see above) once said, "The audio world doesn't deserve Stanley." That's probably true, but as Clint Eastwood said in *Unforgiven*, "Deserve's got nothing to do with it." We have him, and he is indispensable.

E. Brad Meyer (The Boston Audio Society, CompuServe)

One audio journalist who makes a serious effort to be objective. His tests and his writings evidence both technical knowledge and intellectual honesty. If he has an audio-political agenda, I am not aware of it. His well-documented article on the CD vs. vinyl controversy in the January 1996 issue of *Stereo Review* is a case in point. He is also a recording engineer and producer.

Ed Mutka (B&K Components, Ltd.)

A circuit designer after our own heart. He does pretty much everything right, even though he must operate within budget constraints. What's more, he is not afraid to express strong opinions about the right and the wrong way to design audio equipment. His boss, John Beyer, also deserves full credit for the intelligent guidelines that allow Ed to do his thing.

John Ötvös (Waveform)

Not an engineer but an audio perfectionist advised by some of the best engineering brains. Almost painfully honest and uncompromising, he takes the high road of scientific loudspeaker design without heed to trendy directions or commercial pressures. Possibly the most selfless, idealistic man of audio.

Ken Pohlmann (University of Miami, *Stereo Review*)

The straight talker of the digital domain. Read his textbooks if you want to be genuinely savvy on digital matters; read his

magazine articles for general insights; in either case you will be totally safe from the digital drivell that permeates so much of the audiophile press. His academic specialty is actually "music engineering."

Chris Russell (Bryston Ltd.)

The incorruptible amplifier designer. His designs combine engineering elegance with moral rectitude (meaning the simplest solutions that will yield maximum performance, no expense spared where it counts, not a penny for tweeko fetishes). That goes double, with little bells on it, since Stuart Taylor (ST) became his engineering associate.

Jim Thiel (Thiel Loudspeakers)

The high priest of the doctrine of coherence through first-order crossovers in loudspeaker systems. I do not even agree with his doctrine but nonetheless admire him for his engineering talent and uncompromising integrity. The man's devotion to scientific design and quality construction cannot be questioned. On top of it he is a true gentleman.

Floyd Toole (Harman International Company)

The man who codified the controlled subjective testing of loudspeakers and the listening/measuring correlation. His scholarly work at Canada's National Research Council laboratories was so basic and groundbreaking that Sidney Harman, whose appetite for audio talent is insatiable, just had to have him and his associate Sean Olive. At this point I'm still waiting for JBL, Infinity, Citation, and/or other speakers from the Harman group that fully reflect his input. They ought to be good.

John Vanderkooy (University of Waterloo)

Physicist partner of Stanley Lipshitz (see above). They are team; their names appear as coauthors on AES papers; however, John maintains a much lower profile vis-à-vis the audiophile world, so that only a professional inner circle is regularly exposed to his awesome intellect and urbane charm. I have seen him in action as a B.S. detector and audio-issue clarifier, and I am a believer!

Kevin Voecks (Harman International Company)

Long associated with Snell Acoustics, now embarked on Sidney Harman's latest high-end project, Revel loudspeakers. I identify with his evolution from wideeyed audiophilia to hard-nosed scientific objectivism because it paralleled mine. His last few Snell speaker systems have been nothing short of world-class.

Max Wilcox (independent producer/recordist)

The name that guarantees integrity in the interface of music and sound. As a fine musician, Max is able to steer a recording session to the highest performance level obtainable with the given talent, and as a recordist of unfailingly good taste he will tape the performance in utterly natural, accurate, unexaggerated sound. His recordings (on RCA,

Elektra/Nonesuch, MusicMasters, Teldec, DOG, etc.) seem to wear better on repeated listening than the work of the hotshot, razzle-dazzle engineers.

Sao Zaw Win (Win Research Group, Inc.)

Who says there is a conflict between aesthetics and science in audio? This Burmese-American technologist excels in both. His creations are invariably beautiful (in looks and in sound) and scientific (in concept and in execution). If all practitioners were like him, the audio world would be Camelot. Among other things, he is probably the number one authority on materials science as it relates to transducer design. Paradoxically, he seems to be irresistibly attractive to the tweako community, whose pundits are constantly courting him and whom he constantly rejects! I have written so much about him in the past that this much should be sufficient here.

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