



## KEN KANTOR

I learned a heck of a lot more about being a healthy human than I did about speaker design from Ken...I wouldn't have had it any other way.



**Tyll:** *One of the things I've started asking people is, "Did you enjoy music more, as you remember it, when you were 15 or now?" And the answer is surprisingly large that people say they actually remember having more fun with music at 15 years old, than what they do now. That tells me that we (high-end audio people) are doing something wrong.*

**Ken:** Well, you know, it's a really mixed up question for me, and hard to give you a real honest answer, because when I was 15, music was really mixed up with my hormones. Music was representative of whether I was scoring or not scoring, tripping or not tripping. Music was like really, *totally* a developmental thing.

*Yeah.*

I think albums marked life change, so it's hard ever to do that again; it's hard to recreate that. On the other hand, music is so much more a part of my life in a positive way now. I mean I'm making my own albums, I'm recording my own albums.

*Are you? I didn't know that. Cool.*

And I enjoy music every bit as much now, and so I can't say it's gotten less. It's changed.

*The same thing has happened to me, but different. My musical tastes have gotten incredibly broader---I tell ya, I've been playing things like Boardwalk music from the late 1800's and I play Nusrat Fateh Ali Kahn---this Pakistani incredible Suni singer guy, wailer, or whatever you call him. So my musical tastes are hugely broad and I am enjoying it. But I think this issue of audiophiles not enjoying [music] as much as they used to, I think it has something to do with the equipment getting in the way.*

Yeah, I know but I got to say something very cynical. Let's take the average 20-year-old and the average 40-year-old, audiophile or not. What is the average 40-year-old in America enjoying more?

*Television.*

No, no you don't understand. I think you see so many people that have life paths that are pulling them away from enjoyment and into an obsession with materialism. And I think people are buying more expensive cars and enjoying them less, taking more expensive vacations and enjoying them less, drinking more expensive Scotch and enjoying it less, and they're buying more expensive hi-fi and enjoying it less. And, yeah, you could blame the equipment manufacturers and marketers, but partly it's also the life choices that are distracting people from the essence of enjoyment. I think you're right, but I don't think that's a problem that's unique to audio, I think that's a general problem of, you know, life.

*I think that's exactly true. They've somehow bought into the media bullshit that says you can actually buy happiness somehow if you buy this product. There's now this relationship between the media push for self-gratification and the agreed cultural concept of "buying into happiness." In our case, they buy a big friggin \$20,000 stereo thinking it will make music better, and when they discover they're not enjoying the music as much, they blame the stereo. Then they don't know what to do, so they go buy something more.*

Absolutely. They buy a fast car or whatever the hell it is. And what it comes down to is you know people look back on when they were 20 and they go "I was free, and I was liberated, and I had fun when I was 15," or whenever the last time was that they felt free. And they try to replace that with status; they try to replace that with perfectionism.

*Yup.*

And that's what's missing. I mean you can't ever buy freedom and spiritual liberation. If you lose that, there's no amount of money you can spend on a car or a hi-fi or a dinner, that's gonna replace that. People get into this, like, addictive thing where they think the next one's gonna give them the feeling...or the next one...or the next one. Bullshit, man. When I hear great music and it's coming out of a Real Audio PC speaker, I go "cool tunes." When I hear garbage that's coming out of some...

(At this point there is a pregnant pause and you can almost hear the tumblers in his head ratcheting through a litany of high end products that failed to cut his mustard. He seemed to sour at the waste, then begin anew, somewhat

exasperated.)

...so it's a personal thing. You know to me, all I can do is make speakers that I think are good, and worth the money, and try to remind people, which is one of the things I try to do as a musician, "hey, have fun with it". But, once you remind people of that it's up to their personal psychology whether they're going to be able to enjoy it or get obsessional about it.

*We have people who call us and ask us, "Oh, should I get your better portable headphone amplifier?" And my answer is "Well, are you going to set it up at home on a reference rig?" "No" "Well, then don't bother because you don't actually need it, you know, because it's not going to make you happy, get a less expensive thing and spend the extra money on discs, spend the money on music."*

...or spend the money on psychotherapy so you can enjoy the 2000 discs you already bought. (laugh) People aren't just going to be able to enjoy music by buying things. That's the problem. You've got to open yourself to getting back to the things that were joyous about it when you first heard it, which was letting yourself go! Letting yourself free!

*So, now you're obviously very in touch with the complexity and the richness of being a human being. You're in touch, it seems to me, with yourself and finding ways to your contentment...*

I can touch myself.

*Yes. Ahhh, so that's the answer. So the next question is: From your postings I've seen in the past, you're quite an objectivist. When you make the very best speakers you could, it ends up being what, \$4000 or \$5000 a pair for the 3.3. Is there something that an audiophile manufacturer does that endows the equipment they have with a better way to connect spiritually with the music? Or, are we strictly talking about a straightforward technological problem of reproducing air pressures according to the electrical signal?*

To me, this is a red herring. To me, all an objectivist is trying to say is "Understand why something does what it does." To me, being an objectivist means not bullshitting yourself about what you are doing. It doesn't say that flat speakers are better. That's not my point. That's never been my point. If the amplifier sounds musically better to you, and it's technically less accurate, great! But don't tell me it's technically more accurate.

*Right.*

Just tell me it sounds better. That's all I mean as being an objectivist. You just try to break the illusion and get real rather than tell people they should be enjoying something they're not. But, to answer your question, I think that the musical experience---connecting with your soul musically---is more intense with decent equipment and a decent mind state, than with superb equipment and a shitty mind state.

*Right. The best tweak in all of audiodom is to close your eyes. I mean, it does*

*more than any other tweak that exists.*

That's right.

*It's totally different, and it is purely psychological. It's a perfect demonstration of the strength of the subjective in relationship to objectively what's happening.*

Look, everybody in the world can relate to obsessionism. When I come home, and I am in the mood to obsess on everything my wife is doing wrong, I can go, "Wuh goddammit, you left your shoe's here. Wuh goddammit, there's dishes in the sink. Wuh goddammit, there's..." It's obsessional thinking. Or, I can come home, and I can go, "Ahh, this is the person who loves me and I love them. And they love me for myself." And have fun. Otherwise, you're getting into an obsessional mindset that's going to keep you from enjoying things. I'm not saying settle for anything. I wouldn't settle for one person over another in a relationship. And I wouldn't settle for a crappy hi-fi. But if you're going to go into it with the attitude of looking for flaws, you can find flaws in anything. And if you're going to obsess over those flaws you're not going to enjoy the music.

*I think, and I'm going to go back to this expensive equipment issue: I think people spend too much money on their equipment and they're forced to obsess about it because it financially hurt them to get it.*

Or maybe they like obsession, ('cause they don't understand how to enjoy music they love and they're afraid of intimacy), so their relationships are based on obsessional items.

*I hate to blow everything off with the fact that some people are really screwed up, but it's true, there are a lot of really screwed up people.*

Screwed up is such a judgmental term. I just know a lot of people that I know are not really intimate in their relationships, and they're not really intimate with music.

*Well, they're not intimate with themselves! You have to have guts to be intimate with yourself and say, "Boy, am I really weird in this way." and, "Boy, I actually got it pretty good in this way," and then laugh at yourself and go, "Boy, in this other way I'm so screwed up I can't believe it."*

And still treat yourself in a loving intimate way. I think everybody needs a different strategy for breaking obsession, okay, but I think the key is to look at yourself and go, "Where do I need to relax about this?" Some people relax when they feel they have the best, right?

*And they can afford it.*

Right. And some people relax when they feel they can stop trying. And some people relax when they feel they have something appropriate. And I don't know whether there's a cure-all for every personality, because some person is going to relax when they feel like, "I've bought the best! There's nothing else I can buy." And that's a legitimate strategy. But to me, the important thing is to look into your own soul, and say, "What is it going to take for me to stop thinking about

my equipment?" Is it going to take spending a hundred thousand dollars, or spending a hundred dollars, or something in between? But if I want to get back to music, which I'm not convinced everybody in this building is truly interested in, and that's fine, there's plenty of people who collect cars without ever wanting to go anywhere.

*Well, you know, there's a lot to be said that there's actually two hobbies here, one is listening to music, and the other is playing with a lot of electronic stuff. And, you know, it's too bad Heathkit went out of business, and I applaud Sonic for coming out with their kits, especially since the board's already built. All you have to do is wire it up, you know. But now they can actually get involved with the real part, the inside part, rather than sticking dots on the wall or something like that, that may or may not have any effect. But...*

(long pause)

I think we agree about some fundamentals.

*Well, Ken, hey, thanks.*

Hey, thank you!

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