

Shopping Spree

From the outside you could be mistaken for thinking PJ Hi-Fi is just another AV store, but you'd be wrong. Behind the modest exterior lies the stuff of legend. HAMISH McNAIR-WILSON popped down to Guildford to uncover the audacious demonstration room that's sent shockwaves through all who've seen it.

It's not every day in the laborious life of a journalist you actually get to step outside of the office and see something in the flesh that takes what you know, or think you know, about your chosen area of writing, and shakes it up a bit, almost turning it on its head. However, that proved the case recently when I took a day out of my tight editorial schedule to pop down to Guildford and take a peek at something a little special that PJ Hi-Fi had been hiding away in their backroom. In a specially built annex to the shop, I was given a highly personal introduction to one of the finest demo rooms in the UK. The brainchild of the company's Custom Install Manager and a director to boot, the frighteningly young Elliot Hicks, it had been designed to "show people what really could be achieved". "Very few people in the UK," Elliot explained, "have any idea of the level of performance attainable at home," and to this end it was thought that only a demonstration suite genuinely representative of the highest end could redress this. What better way to show the buying public just what they are missing and what, thanks to these technological wizards, they could have.

Described by Elliot as "one of the best rooms you could find," we had to concur. But how did what looks like a relatively innocuous Hi-Fi shop from the street go about funding a project of this magnitude? Well, through a large outlay from shop funds and some seriously hard work. With Managing Director Richard Taunton overseeing the project, Elliot himself was almost exclusively responsible for conceptualising the room. The only other parties involved at this stage were, naturally, the builders and a company to advise about air conditioning. Even with the early blueprint there were a lot of things to consider in order to cook up something as complete as the room is now. Elliot was acutely aware that the room should be as dynamic as possible and be used as a high end 2-channel demonstration suite as well – a factor that would affect its development. The plans came together relatively smoothly and no delays were encountered in the run up to construction. In fact, the only minor blip in the process came in the demolition of the existing garage area and ground preparation – something unforeseen that PJ certainly couldn't have legislated for or helped.

building bridges

The building process, from start to finish, took approximately 8-months, but left the store with far more than just the demonstration room, which was built on what was once the car park. Also included in the new structure were low level parking facilities, located immediately beneath the suite, a new customer meeting room and toiletry facilities. As with any redevelopment of this magnitude third parties needed to be contracted, and on top of the builders and air conditioning experts, electricians, plumbers and carpet fitters were called to site. A relatively short list given the net result, all other work was undertaken by the multi-talented Mr. Hicks and the shop staff. Charged, alongside Richard Taunton, with the responsibility of managing the building process, Elliot himself focused on the performance side of affairs with Richard taking a more general overview. During the whole rigmarole there proved to be surprisingly few hitches, although particular consideration did need to be taken when building the roof and joist structure. After all, having planned to run a sizable and weighty CRT projector from this it needed to be able to bear the load. To this end, extra care was also taken when it came to the placement of any lighting to ensure it wouldn't be an obstruction when it came to fitting the imperative AV kit. Meanwhile, the walls were also specially constructed with the methods involved specifically tailored to offer the finest soundproofing and acoustic performance attainable.



'An innocuous exterior.'

But what has the feedback been to this astonishing conception? Well naturally I would never ask you to just take my word for it, particularly when so many others have lavished such enthused commendation upon it. "The feedback," Elliot beamed, "has been nothing less than sensational. Many have listened to the room," he continued, "whether it was in its reference form or via customers specifying their own demonstrations there... and all have been very, very positive." Pleasing the public is one thing, however, but what about the infinitely more cynical, scrutinising eye of the industry? Well, manufacturers, PJ's Custom Install Director, reiterated have "been amazed at the time and money that has been put into this room." Not just that, but they have been left dumbfounded by its performance to boot. And should we be surprised? Well not really, because as the sprightly director confirmed, it is "a real eye opener as to what can be done when there are no limiting factors."

viewing pleasure

My personal introduction to the demonstration suite was certainly impressive. Elliot really took the time out to talk me through the kit and demonstrate performance from an array of sources. However, whether I found myself viewing the latest Master And Commander DVD, a scene from Lord Of The Rings from a DTS demo disk or even HDTV, the pictures, and in particular the sounds, were awe inspiring. In the former film you could feel every lurch of the ship as the bass reverberated around the room, yet also make out the subtlest pattering of feet on the deck above and discern the most distant yelp. Like no other home cinema set-up I've come across, it thrust you into the environment of the movie on screen and enabled you to live and breathe the action.

The wider affirmation of its abilities by the industry should not be doubted. For, having played a critical role in the Event 2, which was covered heavily in this very magazine, its credentials are assured. Assuming the role of the main projector room, dealers, retailers and other industry bods





'...with a stunning interior'

from around the country were left aghast by its spectacularly accurate and immersing sound system. With lighting conditions also controlled, up to 35 people at a time were given the full PJ Hi-Fi treatment. Over the two days some 200 attendees slipped through the doors and their feedback and reaction was something special. Even many of those at the very cutting-edge of the residential AV market admitted they had never dreamt that a cinema system with such audacious performance could be reproduced within the domestic environment. Manufacturers, meanwhile, have greeted it with similar enthusiasm and some who have seen the room in its current incarnation, up and running, have expressed interest in using the facilities for an open evening to promote their kit and spread their gospel to a wider audience. And what does that mean? Well, that they see no greater vehicle around for highlighting and promoting the potential of their own wares... and that says a lot.

fully equipped

But what specific equipment is this extra special set-up founded upon? Well, crucially at its heart lies a Barco Cine 8 CRT projector... and we'll talk a bit more as to the relative benefits of CRT performance next month. This is



accompanied by a 7.5ft Wide Studiotek130 microperf from Stewart Filmscreen and a Lumagen VisionPro HDP Video Scaler. The DVDs of choice were popped into a DV27a from British pioneers Arcam, featuring a custom SDI modification courtesy of the PJ boffins, designed to drain every last drop of quality from the source. An Arcam AV8 Processor and Genelec D18A Active Balancer completed this line up. The audacious, earth shaking sonic performance was relayed by an active speaker system comprising Genelec 1037C's at the left, right and centre, Genelec AIW26's In-Wall at the side left and side right and Genelec AIW26's In-Wall at the surround back left and surround back right. It is these, supported by two of Genelec's HTS4 Subwoofers, that really seem to make things happen and their presence here alone is enough, once more, to boost Genelec's ever burgeoning credentials and reputation. So they weren't displaying their wares at CEDIA? Some might say you don't need to when you have promotion like this! Of course, in this day and age there is much, much more to the finest cinema system than the AV kit that graces it. Integration has become the hallmark of the successful installer in this industry, and as a result it was no surprise to see Lutron's familiar and fabled Grafik Eye system of lighting control encompassed herein. Offering a number of scenes appropriate for almost any scenario and certainly sufficient to highlight its abilities to the prospective buyer, everything is harnessed and under the control of a 8.4-inch Custom Web tablet which is paired with a Crestron Ethernet Processor. Intuitive and easy to use, this should prove beneficial in illustrating to the discerning audiophile and film buff the benefits of automation – something crucial for Elliot and his custom installation team.

So there we have it. Thanks to the vision of one man and his store, the wilful investment of his company, a lot of hard work and some remarkable expertise – much of which was even, apparently, self taught – Guildford is now home to one of the finest examples of home cinema to be seen in the UK. And with a demonstration suite like this we fully expect to see new customers flooding in in their droves, enraptured by what PJ can now prove is attainable in the domestic sphere. Of course, this kind of work has to stem from some serious enthusiasm, and talking to Elliot there is no doubt! Unlike surprising numbers of people in the industry, he actually lives and breathes home cinema. So much so, in fact, that alongside this gargantuan project he has also been putting together something rather special within the confines of his own home. But that's another story, and something we'll take a look at next month. However for the time being I'm still trying to take in the battle at sea I briefly felt immersed in; for PJ Hi-Fi's demo room and the movies shown therein are an inspiration to all who grace them.

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