

Stairway to H.E.A.V.E.N.*

**High-End Audio-Video Entertainment Nirvana*

For me, the iconic Led Zeppelin song “Stairway to Heaven” is right up there as one of the top rock songs of all time. Recently,



Paul Squillo

I had the privilege to play it live on my trumpet, with the Fairfield All Star Big Band. And I got to play the lead part! I know that sounds cringeworthy if you aren't into big band jazz, but for me it was a proud moment. Most importantly, though, I was playing live music with a big group of friends, who were missing playing together as much as I was. We were spread far apart at a band member's country home, COVID-19 careful. If nothing else, this pandemic is making us all appreciate live music more.

When I came up with the acronym H.E.A.V.E.N., I was looking for a way to describe the process of transforming one's music system from a starter mid-fi stereo into a “Dream System” over time. What is it that affects us so deeply that we want to strive for audio perfection?

At the start, you probably chose to buy an audio system so you could play the music that you love, when you wanted. If you were on a budget and nobody helped you, your first system was probably not so wonderful, but having music is always better than no music.

If you trusted your familiarity with how live music sounds, you knew that your first system was limited, and likely even fatiguing

to listen to. (When your brain has to work too hard to make the music sound real, it actually gets tired.) Eventually, when you had a little extra to spend, you most likely decided to find something that sounded more realistic. You were probably influenced by a highly advertised brand, full of promises. And when you decided to buy this name brand, you left with something that was BTB—that is, not that good but better than before.

Of course, BTB runs the commodity part of the audio-video industry. For minimal expenditure, a big business makes a product that they can tout as something special, and if they succeed in convincing us, we buy without comparing it to anything else. If you continued that practice, 30 years down the road, you'd have spent quite a bit of money but may never have stumbled upon any equipment that was exceptional. What a waste of money, time, and music!

These days, it's dissatisfaction with the sound of ear buds and the resurgence of interest in the phonograph record that have given modern music lovers reasons to discover that music is more than background filler, and that great audio gear can give them far greater satisfaction. Here are a few experiences that I've had that may help you understand why taking the time to discover real audio can be so worth it.

A young man who was already bitten by the bug came to me after he chose some big tower speakers from ads. When he hooked up the speakers at home, his neighbor in the next apartment came for a listen. “Your speakers don't play anywhere close to how loud mine can play!”



Playing outdoors with the Fairfield All Stars Big Band

the neighbor said. So I was invited over to discover what was wrong. As it turned out, when the neighbor's system was cranked up, it sounded awful. It hurt! My client's speakers were actually playing quite a bit louder, but they were quick, precise, and clean, so they didn't cause any discomfort at all. His neighbor had listened to bad sound for so long that he equated painful distortion with loudness. My client was delighted.

Another client of mine, when I had a store here in Iowa in the 1980s, was well into high-end listening. He owned a Cyrus Two amplifier, a really basic, plasticky-looking, budget British audiophile thing that purposely put all the product money into the guts. He loved the amp, but he hated how cheap the unit looked.

Then he discovered some gorgeous, sleek equipment from Braun in Germany called Atelier. My client immediately had me get a system for him. Then a week or two after he took it home, he called. “Paul, I just can't keep this equipment! Come over and I'll show you why.”

When I got there, he was playing the Atelier. It was beautiful. Detailed, balanced, I could hear no flaw. He was playing a new CD of Flim & the BB's that featured the drummer hitting the crown of the

cymbal over and over again. Every ring was clear, all exactly the same. I couldn't hear anything wrong.

Then he hooked up the Cyrus and played the same passage again. I couldn't believe my ears! Every time the drummer hit the crown of the cymbal, he hit it in an ever-so-slightly different place. And each ring sounded completely different in the way it rang. The overtones changed dramatically! I was happy to take the Atelier back. My client still owns his old Cyrus amp, slightly worse for wear but still sounding remarkable 33 years later.

When you build yourself a high-end quality system, it should feed your personal preferences to the point that you can forget the electronics and fall completely into the music. Once you're there, you're there, and you really don't need go any further.

Then again, the nature of man is propelled to more and more happiness, so you can take that perfectly fine system, and make it sound better and better by many means, whenever the need arises.

Next month, we'll look at the most effective ways to do.

Paul welcomes your feedback at paul@paulsquillo.com. Paul is a trumpet player, an audio-video specialist, and CEO of Golden Ears, Inc., in Fairfield.