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Heaven In Your Head

By Wes Phillips • Posted: Apr 23, 2006

April 24: On Saturday, April 22, the audio forum [Head-Fi](#) staged its first national meet at the Adria Ramada Inn and Conference Center in Bayside, NY. The meet, organized by Aaron Kovics (Head-Fi tag: immtbiker), occupied over 3300 square feet of floor space, most of which was divided into manufacturers' display tables and forum members' demonstration areas. Yep, you read that right—unlike ordinary hi-fi shows, the Head-Fi meets are opportunities for the attendees to show off their systems, sample and compare professionally manufactured components, and demonstrate their DIY projects. In fact, one of the biggest surprises I experienced when I attended a regional meet at the same venue last [November](#) was that some of the DIY projects not only sounded as good as the commercially available gear, they were built to standards of fit'n'finish that rival "real" products as well.



Event organizer Aaron Kovics.

My neighbor and friend, caricaturist [Jeff Wong](#) is an active member of the Head-Fi community,

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Using a VPI Scoutmaster to drive the B-52, Samuels delivered some of the best sound of the show. I began to wonder if John was going to be able to get *me* out of the room.

As we walked the perimeter of the room scanning the manufacturer's tables, we spied a gent with bright green goo packed into his ears. **Ultimate Ears** had brought an audiologist with them to produce custom molds for their \$900 UE-10 in-ear monitors (which JA will be reviewing shortly). "Here," said Mike Dias, "try these with the temporary foam inserts and tell me what you think." Minutes later, I was grooving to Gorillaz, experiencing intensely physical bass and phenomenal clarity. When I resurfaced, dazed and confused, Dias sat me down in the chair, and the next thing I knew, the audiologist was stuffing foam into my ear canal so he could take a custom mold of my ear.



I'm not screaming—the audiologist told me to keep my mouth open while the goo set.

From Ultimate Ears, Jeff, John, and I made our way over to [Single Power Audio](#)'s behemoth SDS-XLR, a \$15,000 balanced headphone amplifier that would have set any audiophile's heart a-flutter. I might still be sitting there listening to Brian Eno's *Before and After Science*, but the boss wanted to hear the Sony Qualias driven by the SDS-XLR. He emerged stunned.



JA in headphone heaven.

I spoke to Single Power's Mikhail Rotenberg about his components. "Is there really a market for \$15,000 headphone amplifiers?"

"It's not immense," he confessed. "But the customer who demands the level of quality we deliver seems to be able to find us. Essentially, everything we make is custom to an individual customer's needs. We recently had someone say that his entire collection is on his iPod and that he wanted to listen to it through a balanced component, so we devised a tube phase splitter to balance the iPod's output. Even for us, that's extreme, but we're going to satisfy our customers even when they ask for products that never existed before."

Rotenberg also showed us an amplifier he'd built to drive Sennheiser's out-of-production HE-90 electrostatic headphones. "They're still popular with headphone enthusiasts—besides, we can configure the connector to drive any electrostats. That's the beauty of custom designs."

In some ways, the best sound of the show came from an unidentified member's one-off. Clad in very professional-looking gold-glitter aluminum, it was a two-chassis, tube-rectified, choke-power-supply, 300B-driven headphone amplifier. I heard it playing a Verve reissue of Lester Young and completely melted. "Check this out," I said to JA. He listened with his eyes closed and a small smile on his face.

Correction: Turns out it is available commercially [here](#) and that the chassis is solid copper, not anodized aluminum.

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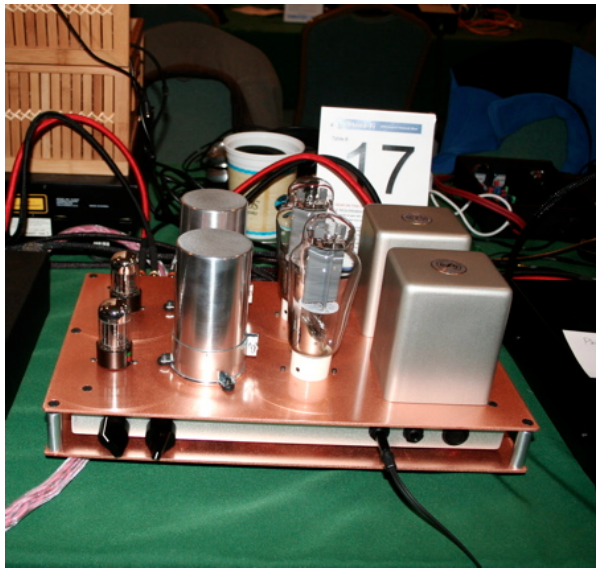
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There's nothing like home cooking—especially with 300Bs.

"You know," JA mused when he came out from under the Sennheiser HD650s, "it's really rather odd to demonstrate an stereo amplifier with a mono source." Yeah, but didn't Prez sound luscious through those 300Bs? "Well, there is that," he conceded.

We weren't the only visiting firemen. As we passed by Shure's table, we spotted *Home Theater's* Steve Guttenberg listening raptly to Shure's soon-to-be-released E-500cs (\$500). He was there for a while, lucky dog. I know because I was waiting impatiently to hear 'em myself. The '500c is a three-driver in-ear design and when I finally got to audition it, it was impressive. I'll be getting a pair to review for *Stereophile*, so I'll report back on my extended listening conclusions. The short-term verdict? Wow.

New to me were Dr. Florian König's Ultrasone headphone designs. König believes that conventional headphone can damage your hearing both through excessive volume levels beaming directly into your ear canal from a source scant millimeters away from your ears *and* through unshielded radiation emissions, including EMI from the motor mechanism. To prevent such harm, he shields the motor assembly and aims the drivers into the pinna (the outer ear). He also believes that one reason people listen to their headphones so loud is the absence of a directional component in stereo headphones, so he advocates a kind of 4.0 quasi-surround taken from MPEG4 surround. He's a thoughtful guy, and I found his headphones interesting in a short-term demo, although I'd have to spend more time with them before accepting or dismissing his theories.

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Ultrasonics: Steffenee Copley shows us an Ultrasonics driver.

After a day of listening, talking, schmoozing, and good old catching up, we all retired to the banquet room for a dinner, only to return to the main room for a headphone designers seminar, moderated by yours truly. Included on the panel were Eric Palonen, associate production manager at Sennheiser USA; Matt Engstrom, product manager (designer) of Shure; Dr. König from Ultrasonics; Dan Bostick, sales and training specialist from AKG; Mead C. Killian, president and designer at Etymotic Research; and Jerry Harvey, president and designer at Ultimate Ears.

The design panel seminar was emblematic of the Head-Fi ethos, in that it was collaborative: Members had submitted some 44 pages of possible questions, which I had edited down to a manageable handful. The Head-Fi panel may be the best I've ever worked with—the questions were good and the participants rose to the occasion. It was a classy group of guys and the panel dynamic was collegial, although the panelists weren't above slipping the needle in every now and then.

Some of my personal favorite moments:

Responding to my question, *What was your most memorable headphone moment?*, Ultimate Ear's Jerry Harvey responded that it was seeing all the girls lined up to go backstage at a Little Feat concert he attended at age 17. "I figured if I had to wear a pair of headphones and tote equipment to get back there, that was what I was going to do!"

When I asked the panelists what it took to design a new product, Dr. König deadpanned. "Pain! You have to hear a lot of bad designs to recognize a good one."

I asked the panel a classic *When did you stop beating your wife?* question: "Since speaker measurements are so similar these days, how do you account for the seemingly wide variations in headphone measurements?" Sennheiser's Eric Palonen pointed out that each company used different measurement criteria, but Etymotic's Mead Killian cracked the room up, saying, "We've measured Sennheiser's HE-90s, so we know they *can* build headphones that measure flat."

All too soon, the seminar was over—and so was the public day of the Head-Fi meet. Sunday, April 23 was members only and we did not attend.

I had a ball, as I believe JA and Jeff did. The Head-Fi meet was personal and informal, but it had an energy that was overwhelmingly positive. Manufacturers who compete head-to-head (as it were) complimented one another on great designs and stood in line to audition each other's products. Perhaps they're just a reflection of the greater headphone community as personified by the guys at Head-Fi. There was enthusiasm and mutual support in the Adria's ballroom that reminded me of my earliest days in hi-fi. It felt good—and it felt like home.

Note: For more Head-Fi Meet pictures, visit our [Galleries: Show Photos and Reports](#).

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