

point / counterpoint: OBJECTIVE VS. SUBJECTIVE EVALUATION

by Steve Guttenberg and Mark Block

Mark Block: Why do audiophiles make such irrational choices, always seeming to prefer the old to the new, the unproven to the proven? An audiophile friend just told me he was selling his new Ferrari F355 because he thought it had no soul. He still likes his antique Ferrari, and needless to say, he prefers LPs. But *things* don't have souls. Our primitive natures look for magic where there is none; audiophiles look at tubes and see something preternatural.

Steve Guttenberg: Yeah, they glow! [*Chuckles*] It's really simple: The hi-fi game should be about enjoying music, and I'm for whatever it takes to accomplish that. But so much depends on our personal tastes and desires. I guess this is where the road diverges, because some of us, those of us who look for certain kinds of satisfaction, may *want* to invest our hi-fi components with soul. Japanese audiophiles have a word for this, *tsukaikonashi*; roughly translated, it means "handling." But

it's more than that: There's a merging between Man and his Machine. The bonding process seems to enhance the listening experience. The audiophile's identification with his system is so complete that if it's not working properly—blown amp, broken stylus, etc.—he may not sleep well; at the very least he will remain anxious until the system is whole again.

M.B.: Don't get New Agey on me. You start by saying that it's all about music but then go on to say that finding the soul in your high-end machinery gives you satisfaction. Let's cut the phony, mystical crap. If you're really a music lover, then go to concerts. That's number 1. Number 2: Play music all the time on whatever system you have on hand. In the car, for instance, I can't tell a good recording from a bad one, and I don't care—I just enjoy it. But I also have an interest in hearing what the artist and the recording engineer put on the master tape. Sometimes when you

Is the Audiophile Truth out there—or out to lunch?

get a system that really lets the recording come through, it's a revelation. You get a kind of enjoyment from it that you don't get from an average system: You get goose bumps, just like you get at a live performance. That's the value of a high-end system, and it's why I don't waste my time with LPs.

S.G.: You were sounding like an honest-to-god audiophile for a second, and then you blew it. Music always starts out in the analog domain, but it's the conversion to and from digital data where the trouble begins. Sure, when you're listening to the very best recordings, the most neutral system will give the best possible rendition of the music. The catch is, most of us listen to recordings that

run the gamut, so picking equipment that gets the best out of the vast majority of them makes sense.

As luck would have it, just last night a friend of my wife's came to me because she was confused about something. She had recently played an LP and thought it sounded so much better than her CD player. "How could that be?" she asked. I asked her to describe how the LP was superior. "It's warmer, less tinny," she replied. She came to that conclusion on her own; she isn't an audiophile, and she certainly wasn't trying to invest soul into her hi-fi. Let's face it, 44.1-kHz/16-bit digital sampling loses information, and those losses bother some of us more than others.

Steve Guttenberg worked for more than a decade at New York City audio retailer Sound By Singer. Now a freelance writer and a producer for Chesky Records, Guttenberg recorded this debate on analog cassette. Mark Block, who recorded the exchange on DAT, is a film editor at Crew Cuts in New York, a Senior Contributing Editor to The Audiophile Voice, and an officer of the Audiophile Society.

M.B.: So a rock scraping through a rotating plastic platter is better? Would it matter if I told you that music doesn't start out analog, that it literally exists in the ear of the beholder and that our hearing mechanisms are, in effect, digital? The nerve cells either fire or they don't—like on/off switches. The brain puts it together and calls it music. And as to the way audiophiles choose equipment, they seem to want a magical combination of components that makes everything sound pleasant all the time: It's the hi-fi as an enchanted equalizer, an aimless search for the Holy Grail.

S.G.: You make that seem like it's a bad thing. The way I see it, the distance between the sound of real instruments and digital or analog recordings remains wide; at best, I'd say we're only 50% there. So by that arbitrary standard, we're listening to 50% distortion. In fact, we're *always* listening to some form of distortion; we pick the type that's least bothersome to our ears. Linn's Ivor Tiefenbrun once told me about his surefire cure for distortion: Turn off the hi-fi system.

M.B.: I can see we're not getting anywhere, so let me propose my grand theory of everything. It explains why you think LPs sound better, why cables sound different, why tweaks work, etc. It passes the Occam's-razor test for elegance, and it's based on years of solid research.

I'm referring to the placebo effect. What scientists have been finding is that the placebo effect is much more powerful than previously believed and that placebos cause real, biological changes. They cure things. Studies of baldness show Rogaine has 67% effectiveness in hair regrowth, but placebos come in at about 50%. Placebos work great; real medicines work a little better. Applying that to audio, when you put an LP on your turntable—which you've lovingly and painstakingly set up—you believe it's going to sound great, so it really does. If placebos can alter our immune systems, it's not a stretch to assume they can affect our hearing. But when LPs don't sound wonder-

ful to me, I'm not imagining that, either. I don't believe in LP magic; you do. The better sound happening in your head is real, but it has nothing to do with the sound waves coming out of your speakers and hitting your eardrums. It has everything to do with your expectations.

S.G.: So the placebo engages something positive in us. It raises our aesthetic and puts us in touch with the widest range of human emotions, as expressed by musicians and composers. Hey, our systems

should be a conduit to that. Music isn't data. It's *supposed* to have soul.

M.B.: I'm going to hurl. Just keep believing in Peter Pan, and you won't grow up. If I could bring us back to reality for a minute, I meant to say that a doctor's attitude toward treatment can be very important in its effectiveness, which is exactly why studies must be done double-blind. When the doctor knows which is the *real* medicine and which is the placebo, the placebo doesn't do so well. So, with all we know about the

placebo effect, why is it that audiophiles object to double-blind tests?

S.G.: I'm not searching for a cure, just musical satisfaction. Why does your side have such a hard time accepting the fact that the stress of doing the test—repeating the A/B comparisons over and over—is problematic? I'm perfectly willing to concede that it's difficult to reliably distinguish between similar devices under blind test conditions. I guess my underlying fear is simply that, yeah, they're all the same. That would take all the fun out of it.

I wish somebody would test the test: Use two identical amplifiers, introduce a certain amount of distortion or frequency response errors into one of them, and then conduct a battery of blind tests. We would then discover the precise threshold of distortion for each listener. I would next use open comparisons to eliminate stress factors, because they sure as hell do affect our judgment, if not our hearing. I'd like to investigate the possibility that differences that fall below the threshold may still be valuable.

M.B.: Does the stress of a double-blind test invalidate a wine-tasting? Do subtle distinctions suddenly fall below the threshold of cognition? Certainly not; serious wine-tastings are always double-blind.

S.G.: There was the story about the editor of a high-end audio magazine who submitted to a blind test between his own, highly regarded amp and an inexpensive, mass-market amp, and—hot damn—he couldn't consistently tell the difference between them. He was so shaken by the results

that he sold his mega-amp and bought the cheap one. Your side won! Unfortunately, he found himself becoming less interested in listening to music; his system couldn't hold his attention like it used to.

M.B.: Doesn't the placebo effect explain that? Day after day, that guy goes home and instead of his beautiful, pricey British amp he sees a mass-market Japanese product—no allure, no status, no *soul*. Why is it surprising that he soon finds the Japanese amp somehow unmusical? The expensive amp goes back in the system, and he goes, "Ah, I'm tapping my foot again!" It's all expectations.

S.G.: Gotcha! During my 16-year stint selling high-end audio, I can't tell you how many times I auditioned electronics, cables, or CD players that didn't match my positive—or negative—expectations. If the placebo effect is so powerful, why was I so frequently disappointed?

M.B.: Sometimes there really is a difference. I don't have a problem with that. And placebos don't always work; their average effectiveness is 35%. In the case of suggestible audiophiles, it's probably higher—enough to create a very powerful belief system based on intermittent positive reinforcement.

S.G.: You really want it both ways. Here's my fantasy blind test for amplifiers: Put amps A and B in boxes so that they're impossible to tell apart visually, and then let the subject live with them. You would eliminate time pressure as a factor, and they could do open comparisons for themselves. Listen, I've just had too many experiences hearing very significant differences between components to accept your side's they-all-sound-the-same mind-set.

M.B.: I just told you that there *are* differences; the problem is your side's thickheaded inability to understand that you can't always trust your ears, that your evaluations are compromised by placebo effects. Here's my fantasy: Do a trick test, putting the same amp in two different boxes. Audiophiles will spend the next five years coming up with excuses for the embarrassing results.

S.G.: Man, you're vicious! Let's put aside the whole question of blind tests. It's not a question of right or wrong, of which measures better or is more accurate. If somebody enjoys listening to LPs or tube equipment, why should he feel persecuted? It's as if we're breaking a law of nature. It's not an



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—Mark Block

And you don't have to be a scientist to want the equipment to get out of the way of the recording, to give you a you-are-there or they-are-here experience. The pleasure aspect is everybody's own business, and it will take care of itself. When I put on a Diana Krall recording, I want to hear a pretty good simulation of Diana Krall at a piano in my living room. Sometimes it gives me goose bumps; sometimes it literally takes my breath away. What I don't want to hear is groove noise, rumble, flutter, warp-wow, hiss, clicks, pops, static, or any other form of distortion. It destroys the illusion. The artist and engineer created this wonderful potential, and I don't want it screwed up on my end—particularly by components that cost a small fortune.

S.G.: Sez you. I have the opposite point of view. When I listen to any of the Chesky recordings that were released on both LP and CD, I usually prefer the LP. And since these are identical recordings—from the same recording chain, up to the analog-to-digital converter or analog recorder—they provide a neutral comparison of the distortions of each format. I'll tell you this: When I hear Sara K.'s voice on the LP *Play on Words* [Chesky JD105], it's a hell of a lot closer to her actual voice than I've ever heard from the CD. [Guttenberg worked as an assistant producer on all five Sara K. sessions.]

M.B.: More like the mike feed of Sara K. at that session?

S.G.: More like the actual voice of Sara K.

M.B.: Irrelevant. The mike feed is the reference. And the fact is, you don't know what the mike feed really sounded like. I call this the Audio Uncertainty Principle because it points to a limit of what is ultimately knowable. The recording engineer only knows what the mike feed sounds like over the monitors used at the session. Different monitors, different sound.

It's a very illogical leap to go from this point of ambiguity to a preference for LP based on your recollection of Sara K.'s live voice.

S.G.: I don't believe there's anything particularly magical about analog; it just seems to

audiophile's job to be a scientist. You're mixing pleasure with science.

M.B.: Most audiophiles *think* they're capable of mixing musical pleasure with an in-depth understanding of the equipment.

capture more essential information than any 44.1-kHz/16-bit recordings I've heard. Maybe 96-kHz/24-bit DVD-Audio discs will "liberate" some of us die-hard analogophiles from our LPs. Then again, now that some digiphiles have heard 96/24 recordings, they're starting to question the "perfection" of CD sound quality. Some even credit 96/24 with a more "analog-like" sound. Imagine that!

M.B.: The Classic and Chesky audio releases on DVD-Video are an interesting diversion, but Sony's DSD [Direct Stream Digital] system is the one audiophiles should be rooting for. Anyway, free markets and free minds will ultimately have their say. Armor All is still a product for your car, not your hi-fi. Nobody made a killing on cable break-in boxes or CD demagnetizers. LPs are novelty items. The market has spoken.

S.G.: I guess that's why there's a proliferation of tube electronics manufacturers decades after engineers proved the superiority of solid-state gear.

To step back a little from our own obsessive/neurotic audiophile listening experience, it seems that most civilians have stopped listening altogether. Not so long ago, people listened to recorded music at home—really sat down and *listened* to music. Nowadays, music is filler: background sound at home, in the car, or at the computer. The "fidelity" concept of recording, to make the instruments sound realistic, seems to have evaporated around the time CD was introduced. *Hmm*. Coincidence or cause?

M.B.: And sound reinforcement engineers seem to think their goal is to make the live event sound recorded! People go to a Broadway musical and expect it to sound like a recording. The drums are too loud, and the voices are too equalized. Very few people appreciate the sound of unamplified instruments.

S.G.: I suppose that explains the popularity of CDs. Sorry, I couldn't resist.

M.B.: You know, you're taking *my* position now, making a value judgment and criticizing people for liking a certain kind of sound. Most people prefer boomy, tizzy, compressed recordings. I say that they have

bad taste, almost as bad as audiophiles who use single-ended triodes with horn loudspeakers. (Sorry, I couldn't resist.) Recording engineers ought to make voices sound like voices, not squawk boxes, and audiophiles ought to be interested in hearing those recordings without adding their own sweetening. Let's say you order tiramisu and then pour honey all over it. You may say it tastes better that way, but clinically speaking, there's something wrong with your taste buds.

S.G.: Over the years, the trend has inexorably moved toward more unnatural and less musical-sounding recordings. When



stereo recording began in studios and musicians were separated from each other, that was the beginning of the end. Overdubbing, overdubbing, processing, and—later—MIDI-ing of music has removed, well, the soul or human feel of the music. And, yes, slicing and dicing the sound into zeroes and ones didn't help.

M.B.: Audio without pictures has been relegated to the background. You may not like it, but that's progress. Sometimes friends and clients come to me for hi-fi advice. I start by asking them, "Is there ever a time when you put on some music, sit between the speakers, and do nothing but listen?" One of my brothers is the only person who has ever answered affirmatively; everyone else says, "No, not really." At that point I tell them they've come to the wrong guy for help, because the stuff I'd recommend demands that they pay attention.

S.G.: We're on the same page here. The whole idea is to get more pleasure out of the music.

M.B.: Yes, the equipment is merely a means to an end. But besides being music lovers, audiophiles purport to be experts; we claim to have a deeper understanding of the equipment. Although we should be more knowledgeable about it than casual consumers, the sad truth is that many of us are just flat-out ignorant: ignorant of scientific fact and contemptuous of empiricism. I think the term high-end audio should be changed to alternative audio, because, like advocates of alternative medicine, audiophiles seem to feel that science doesn't apply to them. Knowledge is important; it leads to progress, makes us civilized, and keeps us free. Products based on junk science, fantasy, and self-delusion may give pleasure, but I think we have an obligation to dig deeper. And a big part of that process must involve objective, scientific methodology. Hey, if tweaky-fringe audiophiles ran a race-car team, they'd probably put magic dots on the steering wheel and not bother to time the car on a track—too stressful! If they ran medical programs, we'd be back to hot tea and bloodletting.

S.G.: Very funny. Science isn't infallible. Remember those poor audiophiles who bought those horrid early solid-state amps in the late '50s and early '60s? After all, back then their measured distortion was a tiny fraction of tube amps'. Listen to those early god-awful transistor amps now, and they'll fry your ears off! Yeah, those old solid-state amps measured much, much better, but they sounded much, much worse. I wouldn't be surprised if a bunch of the early adopters later became the most stalwart tube fanatics.

In the final analysis, all systems, from \$39 boomboxes to the most exalted high-end gear, present *different* proportions, balances, and elements within our recordings. Just like so many views of Mt. Fuji—all of them are different. I worry about those audiophiles obsessively searching for technical perfection, because they're never going to find it. Worse yet, they're missing out on the pleasures their highly imperfect systems afford them right now. They should stop and smell the vinyl—or ponder their pits. A

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