

# HIGH-PERFORMANCE AUDIO

FROM THE EDITORS OF *ELECTRONIC HOUSE*

## TODAY'S AUDIO: A BLEND OF OLD AND NEW

➤ How to take your audio enjoyment to the next level

➤ Bon Jovi's  
Richie Sambora  
dishes on digital,  
analog and all  
things music



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BRITAIN'S MOST FAMOUS LOUDSPEAKERS ... SINCE 1932

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## BRITAIN'S MOST FAMOUS LOUDSPEAKERS ... SINCE 1932

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—What Hi Fi Sound and Vision,  
September 2009

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## *Today's Audio: A Pleasing Blend of Old and New Technologies*

**Tried-and-true analog music coexists with computer-based systems in the current audiophile landscape.**

**By Bob Archer**

**IT USED TO BE** that if a music fan wanted a high-performance system, he would have had to invest in products that didn't quite live up to their advanced billing. In the early years of consumer audio, listeners had to deal with the maintenance of tube-based components. Then in the 1980s and 90s, discerning audiophiles had to tolerate the growing pains of the CD format until it matured into a viable, quality means of entertainment.

Today music lovers have a much broader choice—CDs, multichannel SACD, and DVD-A formats, portable MP3s, high-resolution lossless digital files, and even vinyl. You can have a computer-based system alongside your turntables and tube electronics and experience audio nirvana from both.

What makes this particular era special is that not only do these products require less TLC, but they are in many cases better performing than their counterparts from earlier generations. In addition, there's a growing choice of affordable analog products to pair up with digital gear, as well as the all-around value of universal disc players. Online there is even a growing list of destinations that offer better-than-CD-quality downloads in 24-bit/96kHz resolution. With the abundance of ways to hear music now, a case could be made that the next several years will go down as the golden years of audio.

### Old is New Again: Vinyl and Tubes

There are many theories being thrown about as to why technologies that were once given up for dead—vinyl LPs and tubes—have become popular once again. Whatever the reason, the trend speaks to the yearning for high-quality music.

## Trend to watch: Vinyl sales increased from 1.8 million LPs sold in 2008 to 2.5 million sold in 2009.

—Nielsen SoundScan

### Vinyl Rebirth

According to Nielsen SoundScan in 2009, the music industry recorded its highest vinyl sales figure since the firm started to track the numbers in 1991. Sales increased from 1.8 million LPs sold in 2008 to 2.5 million LPs sold in 2009—while CD sales plummeted.

Of course, vinyl sales are small compared to digital downloads—Apple has rocketed to become the top music retailer—but vinyl's rebirth is still intriguing. Audio experts such

as Sean Olive, director of acoustic research for Harman International, aren't sure why vinyl sales have increased, but as part of a recent Harman study he reports that younger people are buying LPs, too. "I'm not sure if it's driven by quality or if it's just fashionable. Maybe it's because the master tapes [of classic titles on vinyl] aren't overly compressed. That may explain why people prefer it."

### Tubes are Taking Off

Manufacturers of tube-based products are also feeling in demand once again. Audio professional Bob Pletka, owner of the online tube retail company Eurotubes.com, attributes the renewed interest in analog components to the fact that people are once again passionate about music. "Tubes are becoming popular because people are listening," he says. "Tubes for hi-fi and guitar amps are warmer sounding, and that sound is more detailed oriented" than music from solid-state amplifiers. He continues to describe the sound differences between solid-state amplification products and tube-based products as simply more musical and more natural, adding that many audiophiles consider SET amp designs to be the ultimate amplifier products on the market. "The best sounding tubes in my opinion are the low-powered SET 300B and 2A3 tube amplifiers, and then of course there are push-pull amps," he explains. "Ultimately though, the 'you get what you pay for,' adage does come into play."

### Flexibility and Convenience Drive Digital

Since the early 2000s, digital audio has grown exponentially through the mass adoption of products like the Apple iPod and iTunes software, as well as the increased growth of high-speed Internet services.

### DACs in Demand

Driving this growth has been the rapid emergence of products that facilitate digital audio

**“Tubes for hi-fi and guitar amps are warmer sounding and that sound is more detail oriented.”**

—Bob Pletka, owner of  
*Eurotubes.com*

playback in the home. Still, you may not know much about a leading category in this area: stand-alone digital-to-analog converters (DACs) that incorporate USB and other digital inputs and software drivers to help reliably integrate PCs into a network to work as storage devices.

According to Paul McGowan, CEO of PS Audio, the biggest benefit of a DAC to a home music listener is that it enables digital audio to play back on home stereo speakers. "With a computer, hard drive or any means of storage you need to convert the data that's being stored into something we can hear and a DAC performs that function," he continues. Users get the best of both worlds: new digital content working in combination with their existing legacy stereo components.

McGowan says that with the digital audio market evolving so quickly, it's important for consumers who are interested in playing digital audio to be able to adapt to changes that are affecting the music delivery chain. DACs offer a versatile way to adapt to these changes, he notes, because they rely neither on local storage nor remote cloud-based storage. Music can be stored optically, magnetically or in the cloud, and it can be delivered via a home network, HDMI cable or the Internet. "The truth is, if a DAC is engineered properly, how your content is stored and delivered doesn't matter, as long as you do it right," McGowan says.

# Sambora Speaks Out

By Bob Archer

**IF SOMEONE** were to put a soundtrack to Generation X, it would require at least a few selections from Bon Jovi. With a career that includes more than 120 million albums sold, countless worldwide arena tours and a recent nomination to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Bon Jovi is, along with U2, arguably the most enduring rock band of the last quarter century.

Led by the songwriting duo of singer Jon Bon Jovi and guitar player Richie Sambora, the band's hit list includes classics like "You Give Love a Bad Name," "Wanted Dead or Alive," and "It's My Life" plus soon-to-be classics like "Have a Nice Day" and "Who Says You Can't Go Home."

It's been a milestone past year for Bon Jovi, Sambora, keyboard player David Bryan and drummer Tico Torres, who along with their original bass player Alec John Such, received the Hall of Fame nomination, journeyed through another world tour and released a *Greatest Hits* album.

We had a chance to sit down with Sambora last summer before the band rocked Foxboro's Gillette Stadium, to talk about the music business and home theater.

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**How does a veteran musician like yourself adapt to the trends in the music industry and sustain a career that's been as successful as yours for so long?**

There are a lot of components to that question. Number one, it's the songs ... they are the foundation of the business, whether you



are selling records or touring. Number two is the dedication to evolution, from continuing to learn—I still learn all the time—to the dedication to touring. The most simple analogy I can make is, if you have a dog and you don't pet it, it's not going to like you—it's going to bite you. So, in essence, when I play South America, South Africa or Australia, I have to keep going back to those places.

Very interesting, on stage the other night in Toronto Jon said, now finally after 27 years we've effectively played every venue in Toronto—starting out at the El Mocambo club, where the Stones played and where they recorded that live album [side three of *Love You Live*], to two nights at the Rogers Center.

The dedication to touring is a very important component [to long-term success]. Making sure that you go back to the area, doing the press to other commitments, it's a very meat-and-potatoes kind of way to look at things.

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**Is being a musician different now than it was when you were breaking into the industry?**

Yes! It's lifestyle basically. Obviously, you mature and as you get older so you have to take care of yourself physically. So the approach is very different in that respect. In the 1980s, everyone was [just] living. Think about it—just imagine what one of the biggest bands in the world was doing, and

multiply it by about 20 on a daily basis. So the approach now is a lot different.

Essentially, the playing part of it is just the same. The way the band plays, our dedication to putting on great shows, but now we couldn't live that way [as we did back then].

**How has technology aided you and the band to create and record music, and do you prefer the older analog technologies to digital technologies?**

Yes, basically Jon and I recorded a lot of our song-writing sessions on iPhones. Both of us backed them up on iPhones. But we're also old-school guys. Pro Tools [popular recording software] has become a great help to be able to edit and move things around so quickly, it's a definite help.

If you listen to our older records, which are analog, they sound great too.

**People listen to everything from low-resolution MP3 files to high-res 24-bit/96kHz WAV files. Do you have preferences?**

The WAV file is better than a low-resolution file. It's harder to transport, because it's a dense file when compared to a low-resolution file. Look, compressed music is not going to sound as good as analog ever, it just can't, but the ear does get use to it.

**From a musician/songwriter's perspective, do you think that compressed music takes away from the listening experience?**

Honestly, what happens is the ear trains itself to listen to it. A lot of people don't know what analog sound is—I would say the majority of people. You have to be, what, 40 to know what analog was even, and then to actually remember it?

For my birthday someone recently got me an amazing gift. Somebody bought me a bunch LPs [vinyl], and now I've got to go out and get myself a record player. I'm looking forward to [playing them], and that I'll be an analog freak. I can't wait to go out and get all this stuff and re-visit all of that [vinyl and analog].

My ear is now trained to listen to digital music. It's all conditioning.

**Do audiophiles make too much out of the differences between lossy and lossless music files?**

No, I think it's a different experience. If you are a music lover you should experiment to see which one you like better.

I use my iPod all the time. I'm always in the gym and it comes in handy. I have 4,000 songs on my iPod, and I have a myriad of everything, but right now I am stuck on the new Stones *Exile on Main Street* [re-release of the 1972 Rolling Stones double album]. Bob Clearmountain and Don Was, who also produced my second solo record [*Undiscovered Soul*], did an amazing job. I was a big fan of *Exile* when it came out, and then I lost it. The original analog version was pretty murky, but they remixed it and I was, like, 'Wow!' There is stuff going on there that I didn't hear [on the original version].

In this case, it is the reverse of what was happening, but when they were doing the double record *Exile*, they... kind of dismissed the sound quality in the mix. Now they've paid attention to it, and boy, it kissed me! I can't stop listening to it.

**You're known as a guitar player who's not afraid to use new equipment. How have your equipment preferences evolved and how does your live rig compare to the equipment you use to record?**

I use all kinds of stuff in the studio. Live I use Marshall Amplification and have used Marshall for years. I was honored—back when we were in England, Jim [Marshall] came to the show and [told me] they're making a Richie Sambora signature Marshall.

I went to the factory and played through a lot of different heads [amplifiers] for all different eras. I'm also a vintage collector and I have a lot of vintage guitars that I bring on the road. I have about 30 guitars I bring on the road and I have the Richie Sambora model guitar that I also use. I use about five of the Richie Sambora model guitars for half of the show.

The thing about Marshall Amplification is that it sounds good with every guitar. I've tried other amps before, but they don't have the

dexterity that I need because I switch guitars so many times during the show.

As far as pedals, I use a lot of analog pedals these days. I do try stuff. I have about 15 pedals on my pedal board and I'm just messing around up there, having a good time. That's what I do.

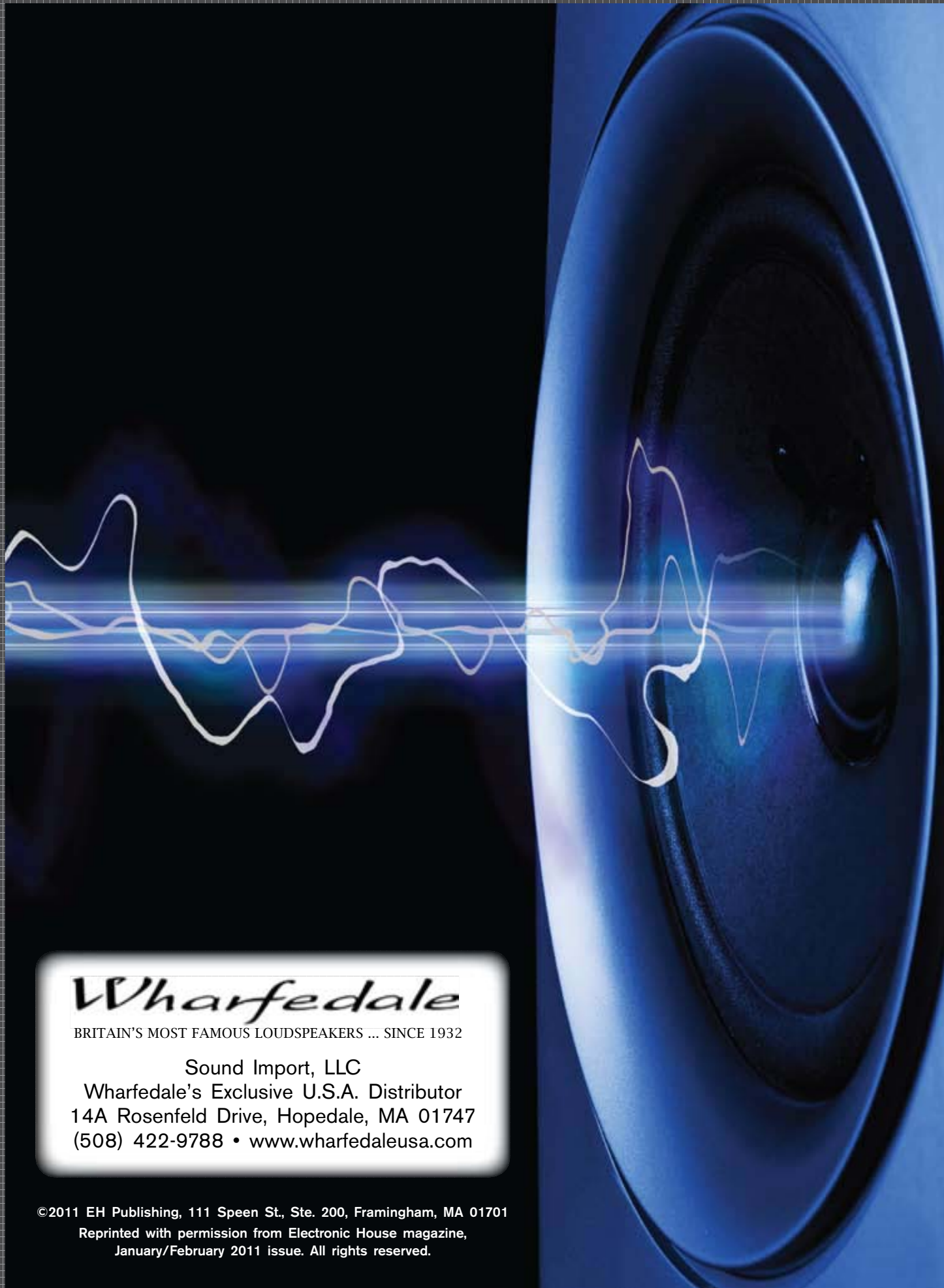
**“My ear is now trained to listen to digital music. It's all conditioning.”**

**If you could recommend any Bon Jovi or solo material recording (videos and CDs) for a killer home theater/music system demo, what would you choose and why?**

All of our stuff sounds pretty good. Obviously, if you're looking for a classic Bon Jovi album, *Slippery When Wet* is that. I think as an audiophile [recording], *New Jersey* may be the best-sounding record that we've made, because it's the last analog record that we made. The production team of Bruce Fairburn and Bob Rock [put together *New Jersey*], and unfortunately Bruce died [in 1999]; it was Bob's last album as an engineer. (Rock went on to produce Motley Crue's *Dr. Feelgood* and Metallica's *Black* album immediately following his work on *New Jersey*.)

To put Bruce and Bob together with the songs that Jon and I wrote—Jon and I were also becoming producers at that time—to put four record producers in the room who really wanted to make a great record, that really wanted to do something special, and to follow up *Slippery When Wet* was no easy task, but we did. We had more top-10 hits on *Jersey* than we had on *Slippery*.

DVD wise, I would say *Bon Jovi Live from Madison Square Garden* from the last tour is the best sounding that we have so far. It's also well shot by a guy named Phil Griffin, and it's mixed by our longtime cohort and engineer Obie O'Brien. He did an amazing job.



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