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Interviews
Posted Feb 21, 2016

RAY KIMBER - KIMBER KABLE

Audiophile cable market may seem very complicated at first glance - hundreds of brands and products, and the only thing that seems to be connecting them all is the general purpose. However, among new companies and those whose products are now fashionable for some reason, there is a number of manufacturers who have their permanent place at the table. Audioquest, Nordost, Monster Cable, Cardas Audio, Van den Hul or Kimber Kable have largely created this market and continue to shape it to the greatest extent. In most cases, the whole philosophy of the company is linked with their founder, and therefore we were extremely happy to meet one of the legends of the cable world - Ray Kimber.

Kimber Kable is a unique brand in this group even due to its year of establishment. Ray Kimber is an extremely warm and polite, yet interesting man. During our meeting he was cheerful and very open right from the beginning. Although there's always something interesting going on in his phone, in his backpack and certainly also in his head, he remained perfectly calm and focused, and during the interview he even arranged a little lecture for me. Ray has the gift of talking about a fairly complex issues in a very simple and easily digestible way, so I asked more and more questions. He's one of those people who are really worth

listening to, not only because of the substantial value of their stories, but also the ability to perceive the world through a magnifying glass and from the orbit at the same time.

Before we had a chance to meet, I tried to find some interviews with you and if I'm honest, there weren't that many. Is it an unusual situation for you to get questioned about cables?

No, but you're right - I haven't been very active lately, or not so busy as I should have been. For the last ten years I haven't been traveling very much, I just did my work devoted myself to my hobbies. I love motorbikes very much, I often say they are my children. So at one time I had 28 bikes in my garage, then it was 26, a year later I had 23, then 20... One day I just realized that most of these bikes haven't been ridden for the whole year, so I thought - what are you doing Ray? That's when I really got back to my work, I started traveling, meeting my friends and my family, and of course my distributors and partners from around the world. That's why I'm here in Europe right now. I'm actually on my way from India, through Korea, Poland, and then back to USA. But I have no problem going west in terms of flying. You know, that's the right way to do it in terms of time zones and everything.

You started Kimber Kable in 1979, which is quite early for an audiophile cable manufacturer. AudioQuest was created in 1980, TARA Labs in 1986, and Cardas Audio started in 1987.

Yes, the whole concept of high-quality cables designed for audio equipment was quite new back then, but it all came from a practical need to eliminate interferences and noise in pro audio systems. In terms of timing, when I started the only big cable company on the market was Monster Cable. Most companies similar to ours started a few years later, but speaking of this, I think everyone has their way of chasing perfection and most of these companies make very good products. I know George Cardas, Bill Low, J.J. Van den Hul and many other people in the business so most of my competitors are my friends as well. But here's the thing - we've never listened to any of our competitor's cables. We have very good testing facilities, we compare our prototypes to the cables we already make. I am also doing a lot of recordings, I spend a lot of time in recording studios, so I have a good comparison and a pretty good idea of what the real sound is.



Ray Kimber's cables are famous for their geometry.

In the mid '70s you worked at a sound and lighting company in Los Angeles, you found that the lighting systems were generating noise picked up by speaker cables and that's how your first inventions were born. Can you tell me more about that?

Yes, this is actually very interesting. I was working as a sound engineer at a time when the first big discotheques were being installed in the States. The problem with cables picking up all the noise from electronics, especially lighting installations, was quite a big one, and basically it was my job to solve it. You

see, at a concert which takes place on a stadium or a big concert hall, you don't get so much of these interferences because the speakers can be placed on both sides of the stage, away from all the lights which are above the stage and behind the audience. But in a discotheque everything is very close so the lights generate noise you can clearly hear in the speakers. A normal cable is working like an antenna, so it's not surprising you get all these unwanted interferences. Solving this problem was very important back then.

So how did you do it?

Well, I tried shielding at first but it was annoying because the wire reacts with the shielding when current moves through it. For example, if you take a steel plate, put a cable on it and pass a signal, you can actually make the cable move, bounce slightly on the steel plate. It's basic physics really so there's no magic in it. This movement of the wire is of course some form of energy, specifically the kinetic energy that comes from the electrical energy generated the amplifier. Because some part of this energy goes into moving the cable, you get less energy at the other end. I tried to fix this problem by counter-rotating the cables, so they don't interfere with one another. And it worked. We didn't get interferences from the lights anymore, but what I didn't realize was that the sound would be different as well. That's when it all started for real. I braided some of the first speaker cables by hand, listened to the results and that's when Kimber Cable was born.

How did the sound change when you connected these first cables?

There was a big certainty to the bass, it was more precise and powerful, the midrange was not so harsh, and the high frequencies lacked a certain distortion I got earlier. In short, you could hear the space between the notes. Even though I made a good living as an engineer, I decided to investigate this some more.



Good welding takes a lot of practice and patience.

Some companies make cables which have a certain sound signature. For example George Cardas said he could get any sound he wanted, but he simply chose to go for the warm, human sound. Did you have to decide at one point what sound signature you want to go for?

Because my background was pro audio, I didn't choose the direction in terms of sound signature. For me, the goal always was to have neutral electronics, neutral speakers and neutral cables. If you compare this to an accent, I want my cables' accent to be neutral - not Canadian, not Australian, just neutral.

So now the big question is - how to achieve it?

Yes, that's a good one. Of course you have to investigate and experiment a lot to achieve your goal, and care about every single element that goes into the final product. Because in my case the initial need was

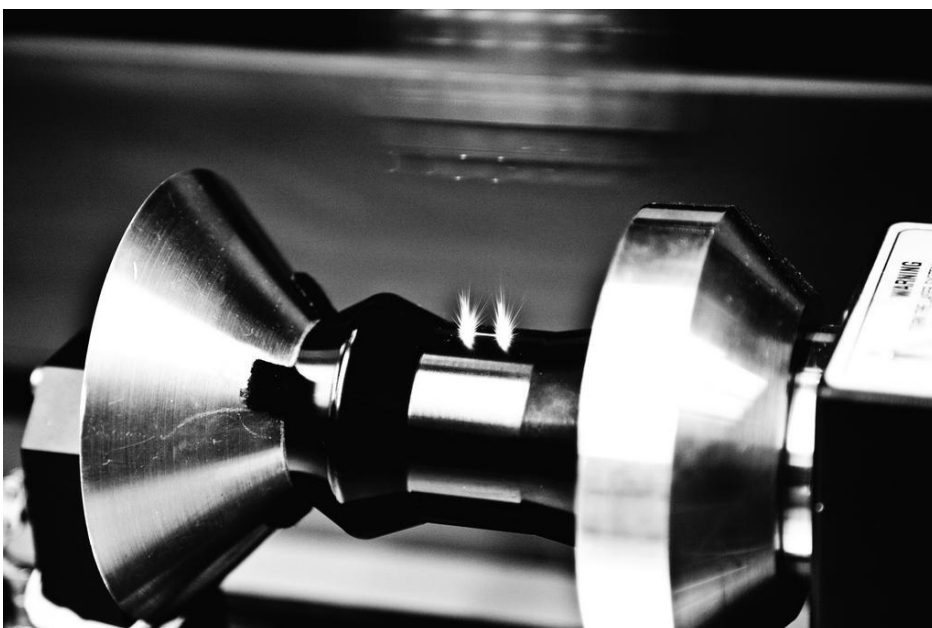
for a braided cable, my company started to buy braiding machines and making our own cables. Then we just experimented with a number of conductors, insulators, metals, but the goal was always to make a cable as neutral as possible.



This is how Kimber Kable's cables are braided. A very cool photo by the way.

Kimber Kable is all about geometry, that's for sure, but what other factors are the most important in your opinion? Insulation, purity of the conductors, terminations?

You can have a valid geometry, but if you use poor quality conductor or insulator, the end result is going to be poor. Of course the purity of copper or silver is important, but ultra-high purity metals only exist only as a laboratory curiosity. It was a big problem on Japanese market where one company made a cable using 4N copper, then came 6N, 7N, 8N... What it means is theoretically you have 99,999999% pure copper, so on 100,000,000 particles of copper there is 1 particle of something else. In my opinion it's just not possible. If it is, let me ask what this one particle is? I asked that question before and no one could answer. But there's another aspect to it because who can check if the manufacturer is correct? If you can buy a cable like that, and believe the copper in it is that pure, you can't really tell if it's true. Well, that is unless you have a big laboratory in the basement. Also, a cable that is supposedly using 8N pure copper is almost certainly going to be expensive, so you're not going to cut it in half and take it to the lab to check the purity of the metal inside. You have no way of seeing what's really there, so they can write whatever they like.



Some magical things appear at different production stages.

So how important the purity of the conductors really is?

It is important of course, but there's no point going further than we already did. You are always going to get some impurities in the conductors, but it's very important to know what these impurities are, rather than try to eliminate all of them. For example, in a silver wire you don't want any sulfur in it, and in copper wires you don't want to have iron or in fact any ferrites. There is a number of things which I think are far more important than the number you get on the back of the box.

Some people say that from a physics point of view, an ideal cable would be made of a great number of very thin strands and that's basically it. Would you agree?

No, that's not a solution to all of our problems. To understand it, you need to imagine how a thick cable can be made smaller in terms of diameter. Well, you have to take the wire through a series of drawing machines which make it thinner and longer. It happens several times, and the speed of the machine is bigger every time it gets thinner. Squeezing and stretching the wire makes it hot, so the machines have to be lubricated and cooled. With a big cable it's not a problem, but with a strand the size of a hair, what do you think is going to happen? The wire is under a lot of stress. The lubricant has to go somewhere so it soaks in the surface of the cable. You have friction, heat, tension... Also the end of the machine is made of diamond, so with large diameter cable you can shape the diamond in such way that you get a perfect geometry of the cable. But with a very small one? It's hard to even make such a small hole in the diamond. That's why thin cables are generally poor. The whole process can change their internal structure, their properties and it can also make the copper contaminated. In my opinion, the critical size is 32 AWG. If you want to make cables thinner than that, you need to develop a very advanced technology. In some areas of course, you need thin cables, like in tonearms, but in most cases making very thin strands will make sound suffer.



Assembling the speaker spades.

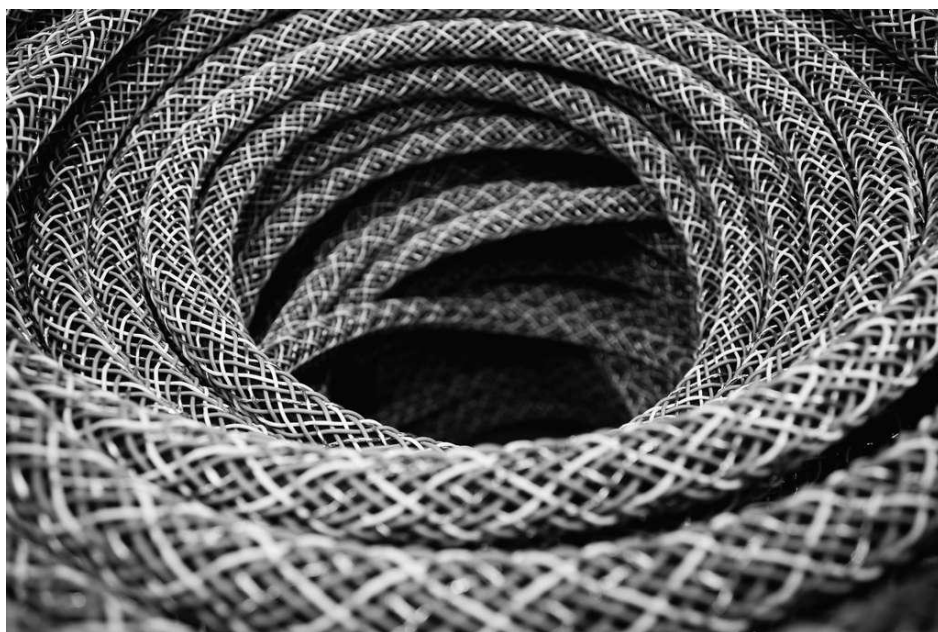
All this brings us to the delicate matter of prices. As you said, audiophile cables tend to be expensive, and in some cases the gap between some cheap cables and flagship models, even made by the same company, is huge. But the technology has to be quite similar, so what are we paying for?

It's a free market so every company can set their prices as they like, but to explain our philosophy I can give you an example of the cable we still make. It's an optical cable, and when we decided to make one, we started by investigating a lot of companies who make just the optical fiber. We found one company in Japan who made a very pure fiber for laparoscopic tools. We bought thousands of meters of this fiber, and we also bought a machine for cutting it. When the cable was ready and we performed first listening tests, the results were quite poor. So we called the fiber company and checked if perhaps they sent us a worse

type of fiber, but no - it was the best kind they had. After some investigation, we found that the problem was a wrong method of applying the cover on the optical fiber. We did it normally, and heat created in the process made the fiber much worse. So we developed a technique of applying the insulator in lower temperature. Then came lots of other things, among which was the plastic connector. In our first prototype it was made of polished plastic, and it turns out that if you have a polished connector, some of the light will be reflected by it, which of course causes data loss. So we used the connector which was matte black. Then the cable got reviewed by one of the leading magazines in the US and the reviewers said it was a lot better than others. Their only complaint regarded these crude connectors, because all the others were shiny, and ours was not. That's when I said - yes, that's it guys! But still, because we make so many of these cables, we are able to keep the price at a reasonable level. In our case, the price of the cable depends only on the value of the materials used in it and the amount of work and technology that went into designing it.

As we said before, you started very early, with not many true competitors on the market. Now there are hundreds of companies making audiophile cables, so why should customers buy yours?

Well, I can tell you a story about one of our retailers in the US. One day he called me and said they were going to get rid of many brands and products, because there were simply too many of them. In order to leave the best products in their store, they ordered their salesmen to perform some listening tests and pick the brands they liked most. It's a big store, so we're talking about 40 people listening to all the cables they had there. And guess what... The guy called me and said - Ray, you're not the number one, but almost every member of our staff has named you as number two. So the number one was changing depending on a person who did the listening test, numbers three, four and five were different, but our cables were picked as number two in almost all cases. This is very good news for me because our goal from the start was to keep some consistency in our work and this experiment shows that clearly there's something all people value in our cables. As a company, we like to keep our clients and our dealers happy. We really do a lot of work to keep it that way.



Another great photo showing the end result - a cable you'd recognize immediately.

Some people don't believe cables can change anything at all. On the other end of the scale there are those who think cables and things like vibration dampers are the most important in the whole hi-fi system. So how important they really are?

Audio cables are like tires for a car. They are not the most important element of the whole system, but you surely want your cables to be okay. If you just have a car for taking your kids to school and doing your groceries, you just need a set of decent tires which won't let you down in the rain, but if you have a nice sportscar, the tires will make a big difference. Most people who really care about music, own good or very

good hi-fi systems, so they need very good cables which can improve their listening experience a lot. You know, I'm sure people would love to go and hear their favorite artists live, but there is a problem because they're either dead or thousands of miles away. So most of us rely on our speakers at home, and there's always this need to make your stereo sound better, and since cables are hard to break, they tend to retain their value. Customers buy them and then, when they want to improve the sound even more, they usually have a very good resale. This is also possible because we don't change our models very often.

Your catalog is pretty impressive, so what are you going to do next?

There are always many areas to explore and things you can improve. Necessity is the mother of invention, and it seems now there is a very strong need for specialized headphone cables on the market. Actually, I brought two new cables here with me. These are very special because they are made by us for Sony. They are even branded by Sony and will be sold by them, in their boxes and everything. These cables have been designed for hi-end headphones like MDR-Z7. You can clearly see our geometry, the plugs are very nice, these cables are very good products and they make the headphones sound much better. Also, because of the braiding, there was no need to make a metal splitter for the cable. Each of these headphone cables made for Sony uses an 8-wire braided structure which offers superior resistance to interference and noise, and minimizes signal loss. As it turns out, the demand for such cables is bigger than anyone might have expected. Sony already sold many times more than they thought they were going to, so we know we're going in the right direction with these new products. Now we are making the whole series of headphone cables called Axios. They are designed for headphones made by Sennheiser, HiFiMAN, Audeze and so on. This market is growing like crazy, so we basically answer the customers' needs, as we should.