

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH JOHN DEVORE - DEVORE FIDELITY 07/2019



How it all started and when did DeVore Fidelity enter the high-end audio industry?

I've been an audiophile since I was a kid. I was the one with his speakers mounted in the perfect spots, the one who made tapes for everyone. Through collage the system grew and evolved—I got my first separate amp and preamp in '86.

I started building speakers in '87, and since I was at art school I even got college credit for them. When I got out of school I had a part-time gig as a High End Audio salesman for a dozen years in different stores while pursuing other interests. I continued building speakers through this whole period, and spent countless hours exploring how different speakers and systems and room positions effected the sound in the various shops I worked in.

In '97 I built a pair of speakers for a friend that incorporated what I'd learned up to then, and mixed it with some new ideas I had about circuits and the overall interaction of the drivers, cabinet and crossover. I nicknamed them "gibbons" because they were small, lively and fun, and also to make

fun of the seriousness of most high-end audio branding. In 2000 a friend of mine began selling refurbished vintage tube amps from his Brooklyn apartment and I supplied the speakers. In 2001 he opened a true storefront HiFi shop in Manhattan and after refining the product line to two gibbon models, I was in business as a speaker company. Within a year it was my full-time gig and I moved to company to the Brooklyn Navy Yard where our factory remains today.

What was the initial reason of pursuing the path of high-end audio speaker manufacturer?

Before 2000 I'd never even seriously considered starting a speaker company. I was having fun building just for me and my friends, and a quick survey of the HiFi landscape showed dozens of established speaker brands, many with compelling histories, led by "experts." I was just an art major playing drums in East Village rock bands, selling HiFi on the side. A closer look at the speakers available at the time though revealed more nuance. The trend throughout the 80s and 90s had been towards lower sensitivity and lower impedance--in designs that favored frequency response with no regard to drivability. These were the days when the top rated speakers from Wilson, Infinity, Thiel, Apogee, and many others dipped down below 2 ohms! It was the age of current-monster solid state amps and CDs.

In contrast, my designs had evolved to be higher sensitivity, and more importantly, to have higher, smoother impedance. While there were many solid-state amps I admired, I also loved tubes, including many mid-level vintage designs from Sherwood, Pilot, Dynaco and others. While some of them would perform decently with the typical 86dB, 4-Ohm speaker of the time, they really came alive with speakers presenting a more generous load. By 2000 I realized I had something to offer the speaker market that didn't exist: a speaker that was very easy to drive, but wasn't a giant horn-loaded thing, or a single-driver compromise. A speaker that looked and sounded "normal" and worked in regular rooms. With the added bonus: if my speakers allow more amps to run with less stress, the amps sound better which makes my speakers sound better. That easy-to-drive ethos carries through every DeVore Fidelity model.

Why the name DeVore Fidelity?

Because I thought it would be funny to abbreviate it in my logo as DeF.

I'm sure you've been asked the question about Orangutan name countless time, but must for the reference... Why?

It all started with that first gibbon in 1997, making fun of the serious names of most HiFi brands. All my first models were gibbons and so I kept the ape theme with any new designs, Silverback and Orangutan. I thought Orangutan was a natural fit, because the speakers in that series are lower and wider than what's commonly found in the market.

Who were or still are your inspirations?

I've always gravitated towards speakers with personality. This generally means the models that were designed by a company's founder--Peter Snell Snells, Franco Serblin Sonus Fabers, John Bau Spicas, Joachim Gerhard Audio Physics and Jacques Mahul JM Labs.

Do you see yourself as a boutique manufacturer?

Yes, I guess so. We are certainly not mass-produced, but we do offer a stable product line, built completely by hand here in Brooklyn.

Do you consider yourself as an audiophile?

Absolutely!

What would you say is the difference between music lover and audiophile?

There shouldn't be any difference! Not all music lovers are audiophiles of course, but all audiophiles should be music lovers. Of course there are a few who are just pure gear fetishists, but they are not the majority.

Kindly list all of the current DeVore Fidelity product line?

The gibbon 3XL, gibbon Super Nine, and gibbon X. The Orangutan O/93, O/96, and O/Reference.

Over the years you established yourself as a prominent loudspeaker manufacturer. What would you say is the reason of success?

Well, we've stayed true to the goals I set for the products and the company at the beginning. Though I'm likely better appreciated as a designer than as a manufacturer, as I haven't grown the company very quickly, and we still build everything by hand here in the same factory. This often leads to long back-order situations.

What your most proud achievement?

Staying alive in such a fickle and dynamic market. We weathered the 9/11 attack and the 2008 recession and it was not easy. While we are still very small, we've managed to outlast quite a few speaker companies that just didn't make it.

How would you describe the sound difference between your entry level speakers and the flagship ones?

I think every model we've produced reflects a common origin. Generally as you move up the line you get a larger performance envelope: frequency bandwidth, dynamic range, transparency.

High sensitivity speakers!?! What are the benefits from your perspective?

It's not just sensitivity, it's the entire load the speaker presents to an amp that matters in my opinion. This actually brings up a major soapbox issue for me. To illustrate this issue I want to use as an example a speaker with unequivocal bonafides. I'm not picking on this particular speaker or brand, quite the opposite, I feel it is a very thoroughly engineered, very high-performing speaker from the most successful ultra-high-end speaker company of all time: The Wilson ALEXX. It is over 91dB sensitive (measured with 2.83V), however it presents an impedance below 3 Ohms over most of it's range and a tube-bursting 1.5 Ohms in the upper midrange.

For the majority of HiFi history speaker sensitivity was expressed as XdB @ 1 Watt @ 1 meter. As an example let's say "speaker A" that is 8 Ohms has a measured sensitivity of 87dB output with 1 watt of input measured from 1 meter away. As I mentioned above, speaker designs throughout the 80's and 90's began decreasing in sensitivity and impedance, expecting solid-state amps with high power to take up the slack. But the sensitivity specs looked worse and worse, 86dB/W/M, 84dB/W/M...

In the 90's these speaker manufacturers began using a new specification: XdB @ 2.83 Volts @ 1 meter. They made the excuse that it was exactly the same as the accepted spec: $2.83V = 1W$. This is marketing BS. Using Watt's law, only at precisely 8 Ohms does $2.83V = 1W$. At 4 Ohms $2.83V = 2W$, at 16 Ohms $2.83V = .5W$, at 2 Ohms $2.83V = 4W$. Speakers are current driven, and amps are specced for the wattage they output, so quoting a spec normalized for a voltage makes no sense. Unless of course you want to make your speaker appear more sensitive than it actually is because a 2 Ohm speaker will receive EIGHT TIMES more power than a 16 Ohm speaker in the test.

Let's compare a top of the line speaker from the late 80's to our example "speaker A" above. Because "speaker A" is 8 Ohms, it is both 87dB/W/M and 87dB/2.83V/M. In 1989 Thiel introduced a new flagship speaker, the CS5. It was rated at 87dB/2.83V/M, so it seems similar to our speaker A, right? Nope. As John Atkinson points out in the specs section of the 1990 Stereophile review, because of the punishingly low impedance of the CS5, it's actually equivalent to 82dB/W/M. 82dB! Of course Thiel used the voltage spec! Using the magic of the voltage spec, the Wilson ALEXX can claim to have 91dB sensitivity instead of about 85dB, which is more accurate, using the wattage spec.



DeVore Fidelity Orangutan Reference. Can you tell us more about their creation and what drive you to design them?

Over the eight year development of the O/Reference the goal evolved from building an Orangutan model above the O/96 to building my interpretation of the perfect speaker. It was certainly not the most commercially viable path--a model much closer in price to the O/96 would have a better chance of selling well--but I realized as we got farther along that many of the elements that cost us the most to develop will be applicable to more affordable models in the future. This was enough justification to allow me to really push the limits and take everything as far as possible in the Reference. To define the outer performance envelope of a speaker system as I see it.

Many still question the exotic materials of choice for the speakers' enclosure. What is your take on the proprietary materials and their benefits?

Materials have a sound, whether its a diaphragm material, enclosure material, port-tube material, you can hear it. Thin, light and quick? Heavy and damped? Tuned? Dead? Metal, wood, plastic.

How about the wood speaker's enclosures vs other materials? Why do you prefer wooden chassis over other materials?

As above--materials have a sound, and likewise enclosure tuning techniques have a sound. I've never been a fan of massive over-damped cabinets, I find they need to be played loud to "wake up" and require a lot of amplifier power. All my designs are medium mass and employ careful tuning of panels rather than critical damping--and this imparts a livelier quality to the sound, energizing a listening room more like real instruments do. In the O/Reference this is taken to the most extreme level, with bronze and exotic composites combined with solid hardwood and several different plywoods to create the perfect foundation for the drivers to build on.

Solid bamboo cabinets!?

It's a beautiful material, has great acoustic properties, is a joy to work with once you get to know it, and doesn't require the logging of slow-growth hardwood trees. It is very expensive, but once we were able to streamline our production the extra money spent on material was earned back by not having to select, lay-up and glue veneers and all the cabinet tracking and finishing that requires.

How about timeless clash of titans. Tubes vs solid-state?

I own at least as many solid state amps as I own tube amps. Either can be fantastic or boring depending on the design. In a perfect world I prefer tube amps, as long as they are driving speakers that provide them the perfect load.



Do you recommend the tube amplifiers for your speakers?

Yes. I also recommend solid state amps.

Exotic electronic parts?

If you refer to the passive components used in the speakers: capacitors, wire, etc, I will testify that they all sound different. We have our own proprietary hook-up wire made for us, and every cap, coil and resistor is auditioned before it's place in a circuit is finalized. All our speakers are fully hardwired with no circuit boards and no extra connections. from the solid copper binding post to the driver there is not a single connection that isn't essential for the circuit. And all our speakers are fully star grounded.

What's the importance of proper crossover implementation and what is special about DeVore Fidelity designs?

If the drivers are the heart and the cabinet is the body, the crossover is the mind. It is critical to the final sound of a speaker system, both in the way it is implemented (see above) and in the way it interacts with the rest of the system of amplifier, drivers, and cabinet.

Can you tell us more about the drivers you are using for your speakers?

They are all my designs and built for us by Seas in Norway for the most part. There are some elements we make in house and assemble ourselves or in some cases ship to Norway for assembly there. All our tweeters are treated silk domes. All but two of our woofers use paper cones. The only exceptions are the gibbon X midrange which only operates above 150Hz and the O/Ref/B Bassmachine woofer which is reinforced aluminum because our experiments with paper in that system buckled under the extreme 2-inch excursions that the system is capable of. As the Bassmachine is crossed over at around 30Hz, none of the problems of metal cone breakup modes come into play.

Do you manufacture everything in house?

Yes, except the drivers as described above, and the bronze parts of the O/Reference system. Those are cast and machined by specialists elsewhere in the US before coming to us.

Does form follow the function with DeVore Fidelity?

Yes. But that form must express the function in a way that is both honest and beautiful. By honest I mean the form should reflect the materials and purpose rather than some conjured idea of what the speaker should be. Beautiful because these are significant objects that must exist in people's homes. I want owners to feel pride of ownership.

How important are the measurements and how important is the listening part?

Very. Also very.

Voicing of the speakers. Kindly elaborate...

I think by voicing you refer to the process of getting the speaker system to sound the way you want it. This is an integral part of the design of course. For me "voicing" starts all the way at the beginning, but becomes a more and more dominant element of the process as I get closer to the end.

Would you say the DeVore Fidelity DNA is carried across the complete product line?

Of course--they are all my children!

Sealed speaker design vs bass reflect etc?

Because I want our speakers to be efficient and easy for low-power tubes to drive, they must be bass reflex. Acoustic suspension systems require much more power and current to come alive in my opinion.

What is your take on fully active speakers?

Active speakers are fine but I think a lot of emphasis is put on the few advantages an active system has but the disadvantages are overlooked. High End Audio, in general, establishes that pretty much everything makes a difference to the sound of the final system. An active speaker system's superiority relies on an assumption that many of these differences don't exist. The amps built in to active speakers pale in comparison to most separate component amps, likewise the DACs and preamp sections. Off the shelf class D, or basic A/AB amps, and IC DACs equivalent to entry-level separates.

Is there a cost no object DeVore Fidelity dream speaker project still waiting to be revealed?

That is the Orangutan O/Reference.

What components do you officially recommend as great companions with your speakers, or you leave that choice to the end users?

By making our speakers as easy-to-drive as possible, I give the customer the widest possible choice of gear to accompany them in a system.

How would you describe the difference between hi-fi, high-end and ultimate high-end audio?

Just points on the same continuum.

Where is the borderline of transparency and proper sound balance?

Transparency IS the proper sound balance. The more transparent the more proper.

How do you refine and fine tune your products?

This is simply part of the design process. It takes place from the start to the very end--basically a new design gets more and more refined and fine-tuned as it approaches completion. For me this involves a circle of modeling, listening, and testing that continues all the way through to the end of the design process.

Would you say one's love and passion for music reflect into his products?

I hope so!

How important is the room acoustic in achieving the state of the art sound?

The interaction between the room and the speakers is a critical part of the sound of a system. Careful set-up and careful design go hand-in-hand towards getting the best results.

What does state of the art high-end audio reproduction represent for the DeVore Fidelity?

My goal is to get a listener as close as possible to the recorded event--making them less and less aware of the system itself and more and more deeply aware of the music.

Are we finally coming closer to reality with the high-end audio reproduction?

In some ways, sure. If you look at the whole of the history of HiFi, the goals have shifted around a great deal--everything from dynamics to bandwidth to detail to distortion, and each of these

pursuits has merit, but as far as I'm concerned, it's the overall balance of these individual attributes that makes a system sound "real."

What sets the DeVore Fidelity apart from the competition?

Well, certainly much of what we've already discussed. Also I think DeVore Fidelity is a little unusual in the industry in that our products designed entirely by one person, me. This imbues all our models with a certain character, contrasted with a company that might have a team of designers, or different chief designers over time. Obviously there are other companies out there like ours, but most of the brands we compete with in the market are much larger and do not have a single voice.

How do you see the current state of the high-end audio industry?

I think we're healthy. The iPod/iPhone was a nice shot in the arm, getting far more people back to listening to music, and the current trend of high end headphones becoming fashionable helps get people aware of fidelity. The hipsters are doing their part to keep vinyl in the mix.

What are the most demanding challenges with running the high-end audio company?

Because we're so small, it's everything. Aside from trying to get my new designs to market in a timely fashion, the day-to-day running of the company is a lot to handle. Managing production and inventory, personnel, book-keeping, etc...

Who would you say are the DeVore Fidelity speakers customers?

I think it runs the whole spectrum. I can't find any particular individual type in the customers I've met.

Is classical music the ultimate reference material to judge any speaker system?

No. Just because a system can reproduce an orchestral recording well doesn't mean it will perform equally well with other music. To make a truly transparent speaker system you must use a wide variety of music.

What to expect in future from DeVore Fidelity?

I love what I do, I hope to keep on doing it as long as I possibly can. Huge thanks to all the customers, dealers, and other great industry people who've supported me along the way--they are all why I'm still around and still making our speakers here in Brooklyn.