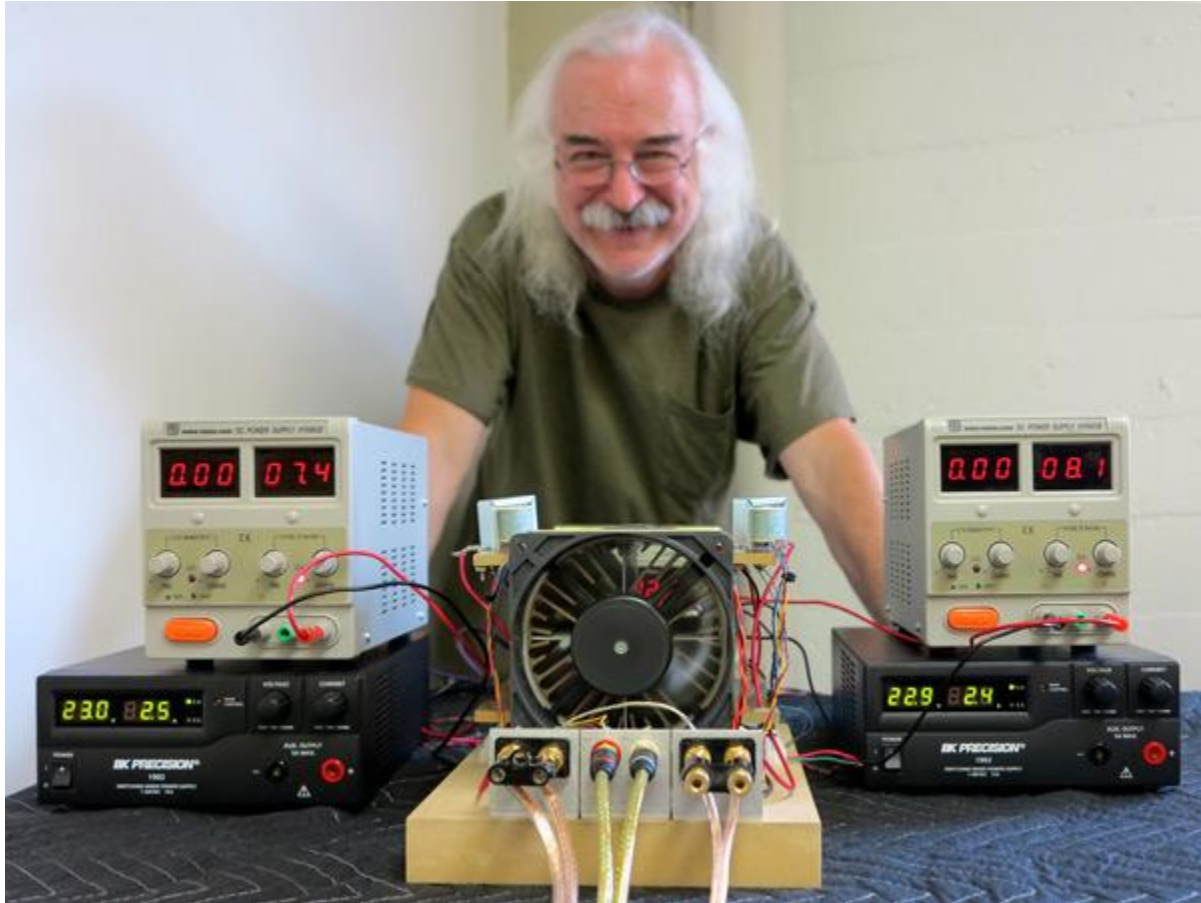




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## Nelson Pass Interview: The Crux of the Biscuit | Paul Ashby



Nelson Pass: the guy whose company built the unit that led to my first serious foray into decent (and, as some of my neighbors might remark, *indecent*) amplification, and whose products can be found in listening rooms the world over.

Sure, we know lots about Nelson's theories (and practices) concerning distortion, bias, topology differentials, and rare MOSFETs. We know his eponymous line of amps and preamps is among the most drooled-after hardware in a high-end market brimming with, well, droolworthy stuff. And we know his well-earned position of respect and admiration among fans and peers alike.

But what music does Nelson Pass *listen* to?

At the 2014 California Audio Show in Oakland, I asked this question of Pass Labs' Kent English.

"Lounge," Kent replied.

So....um....lounge? Martin Denny? Nouvelle Vague? Dean Martin? Bill Murray?

Kent chuckled. "There are other types of lounge."

I left it at that.

But I wondered.

And I've been wondering, all this time. After nearly a decade — not that I brood over this kind of stuff, mind you — I decided to stop wondering, and ask Nelson Pass what his musical tastes are. What follows is a lightly-edited transcript of an email dialog between myself and Nelson Pass regarding that very subject.

*Q: Can you recall the first songs/artists that made an impression on you, and how/where you heard them?*

A: Back in 1964, I would go to sleep at night listening to my AM radio, either KGO San Francisco or the local Santa Rosa rock and roll station. One night I woke up to the The Beatles.

*Q: What about your high school and college years?*

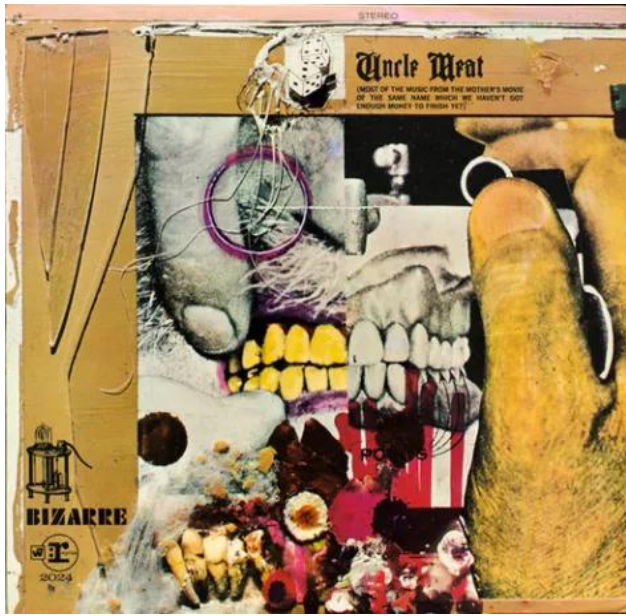
A: In 1969 I was sleeping in my little apartment in Davis, CA, listening to UC Davis station KDVS, and woke up to Crosby Stills and Nash. I called the DJ to ask who the hell that was, and bought the record.

*Q: What were the first concerts / shows you recall? Did any stand out?*

A: The Freeborn Hall concerts at UC Davis that stood out were Don Ellis, The Grateful Dead and Frank Zappa. Outside of Davis, it was Zappa at Pepperland and Zappa with Captain Beefheart at Winterland (could you guess that I'm a Zappa fan?).

*Q: When and how did you become aware of the relationship between live and/or recorded music and sound reinforcement / "hi-fi"?*





A: At 16 I built a pair of speakers out of cardboard, full range drivers, a Radio Shack amplifier, and a Garrard turntable. Later I modified the amplifier and upgraded the speakers to plywood and added a tweeter. I fell in with the audiophile crowd at UC Davis – JBL's, McIntosh, Dynaco, and, by second year in an apartment, all this connected to form a wall of sound. Oddly, the neighbors (nice girls) didn't complain.

Third year I was building big speakers, including the Claw, an LE15A and 375 compression driver in a horn measuring 9 ft deep by 7 ft square mouth. Whenever we hauled it out to play, the cops came. It got performances in Freeborn Hall and Picnic Day

on the quad, and I met a lot audiophiles that way.

And I was introduced to ESS. On my first visit they hired me to do R&D work, this about two months before Oscar Heil knocked on their door. I ended up going to school by day and working at ESS by night until I graduated about a year later. After that, I worked at ESS by day for another six months until management decided to replace me with real professionals, so I started Threshold along with their art director Rene Besne.

(As an aside, a number of ESS employees eventually joined Threshold, in particular my wife Jill, whom I met in 1972 and married in 1982.)

*Q: What do you listen to when you're relaxing at home? Working on electronics?*

A: I have about 2,754 CDs, of which there is a large subset referred to as "Lounge" that runs in the background on a nice pair of Jordan J92's when I am working. It's stuff that I like that doesn't harsh my buzz, some literally Lounge music, but mostly a broad mix of genres not requiring too much attention.

Favorites (in no order):

Thievery Corp  
Philip Glass  
James Horner  
Thomas Newman  
Jazzanova  
Air  
Bebel Gilberto  
Massive Attack  
Micatone

The Books  
Zappa  
De Phazz  
Tosca  
Zero 7

Of course, when I'm listening to amplifiers it's a whole other thing. I have about an hour playlist of edited "shortcuts", each offering a sample of music that is in some way revealing of amplifier character, and this list gives me a consistent reference source.

*Q: Not to be nosy (or nosy-er), but I believe that sound I heard was our readers pricking up their ears at the mention of these "shortcuts". Care to elucidate specifically (or vaguely, even) regarding some of the tracks on that playlist? I'll understand if this would mean giving up trade secrets. But c'mon.*

A: I just rip the shortcuts I want from CDs and use editing software to select the portion whose character seems helpful, usually a minute long or so, and put maybe 50 of them on a CD. You wouldn't necessarily want my list (and actually I no longer have a list, just the CD) and it's just a matter of picking stuff that stands out sonically.

*Q: \*sigh\* Got it. Do you have any artist, genre, or song preferences that might qualify as "guilty pleasures"?*

A: Captain Beefheart, Pepe Deluxe, Lemon Jelly.

*Q: Are there any genres / artists you simply can't tolerate?*

A: I don't seem to have any country music.

*Q: Have you ever worked for/with a label or in an A&R capacity? Been tempted to do so? Consulted?*

A: Years ago, Telarc and Mobile Fidelity, both for monitoring and record cutting electronics, but I haven't done that for many years now. Now almost all my outside design is for DIYers at [www.diyaudio.com](http://www.diyaudio.com).

*Q: Have you ever played a musical instrument? Played in a band?*



A: I played drums when I was young. I was not good at it and didn't have a car

Q: *Do you have opinions on high-resolution audio vs CD quality, etc? Vinyl? MP3s? Do you prefer certain formats for particular genres?*

A: I prefer vinyl or CD. Like many others, I enjoy the physicality of it — take it off the shelf, out of the case, into the player, select the track, read the liner notes...

Q: *Are there any recent artist / album discoveries that you find entertaining?*

A: No. I'm just an old fart, sitting around listening to stuff from the good old days.

