



THE
PATH

OF

SHINDO

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFA ARNOTT



Abdul the Uber driver laughed, and pointed over his shoulder at the 80-foot cliff face that dropped away a couple yards to our left as the minivan we were in veered across the road's centre line.

The guard rails along this stretch of Highway 74 south of Palm Springs were punched through like frayed ribbons here and there, and I could just make out the wreckage of burned-out cars that dotted the canyon floors far below.

My girlfriend Karin's head almost hit the side window while trying to video the ride with her phone, and my friend Chris pleaded with Abdul from the front passenger seat to keep his eyes on the road, but Abdul was in the middle of recounting his run-ins with snakes since he took up living in the desert, and

didn't seem concerned.

"I killed a rattle snake with a baseball bat inside my house," he chuckled.

A small laugh escaped my lips.

A sort of "is-this-how-I-die?" laugh.

As we swerved up the narrow cut-throughs, switchbacks, and sheer cliff faces that made up the almost 2,000-foot vertical climb into the mountains abutting the California desert, I pondered what had brought us more than a 1,000 miles to this possible end.

We had flown down from Vancouver that afternoon, and were en route from the airport to a small enclave of homes near Mt. San Jacinto that Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports, and Matthew Rotunda of Pitch Perfect Audio call home.

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"Start at the core, and build a system that doesn't need band-aids."

MATTHEW ROTUNDA







The two met years ago while both working for hifi bricks-and-mortar shops in New York City, and have stayed fast friends since.

I was there to film interviews with them, and discuss the mystique of Shindo Laboratory high-fidelity gear, eat, drink, hike, and touch on the connection between playing records, and driving Porsches. We would also check out the Pitch Perfect showroom in Los Angeles.

Abdul finally dropped us at Halpern's place – although he wasn't home, he and Rotunda were at a concert up state – which is affectionately known as the "Spider House" because of its unique mid-century architecture. Perched at the highest point of his property, it offers almost 360-degree view.

The light and the space of this region of Southern California is captivating, and the scale of the surroundings seems to shift when you're thousands of feet above the twinkling lights of Palm Desert looking at mountain ranges lined

up like armies in the distance, with the sun throwing shadows for miles across the valley floor.

Silence overtook us momentarily, and then we realized... silence. "Let's get some tunes going!" Chris said.

So began one of the most enjoyable high-fidelity adventures I've been on.

I'd hung out with, and broke bread with Halpern, and Rotunda a number of times previously but always around a trade-show environment, so spending quality time on their home turf was a treat. Chris is a long-time customer of both, but had never had a chance to meet either in person, so when he heard I was flying down he joined in. Because of my fascination with vintage single-ended triode, and pentode tube amplification designs, and high-efficiency speakers, Shindo Labs, which Halpern imports, and Rotunda sells (among a number of other high-end companies such as Line Magnetic, Auditorium

23, J.C. Verdier, Sugden, and Leben to name but a few) had been on my radar for some time.

Shindo, for those not in the know, is a family-run hifi atelier near Tokyo, Japan which has been around since 1977. It specializes in hand-made preamplifiers, amplifiers, and speakers the designs of which centre around both new old stock, and vintage resistors, tubes, capacitors, and wiring – loudspeaker drivers are vintage, rebuilt, and modified.

The bottle green chassis, and component naming conventions formed around company founder Ken Shindo's predilection for fine French red wines: Haut-Brion, Corton-Charlemagne, Vosne-Romanee... more art than product, and more about emotions than measurements, Shindo gear is aimed at a niche market segment of those who think 10-30 watts of pure Class-A amplification is enough.

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Sadly, Ken Shindo passed away in 2014, but his wife Harumi, sons Takashi, and Yoshinobu have taken the reins, and continue the work, which is being built on with great success.

Halpern and Rotunda met the elder Shindo in 2005. “He was very private... a man of few words. When he said something it was always very poignant, and had a lot of impact,” Halpern said.

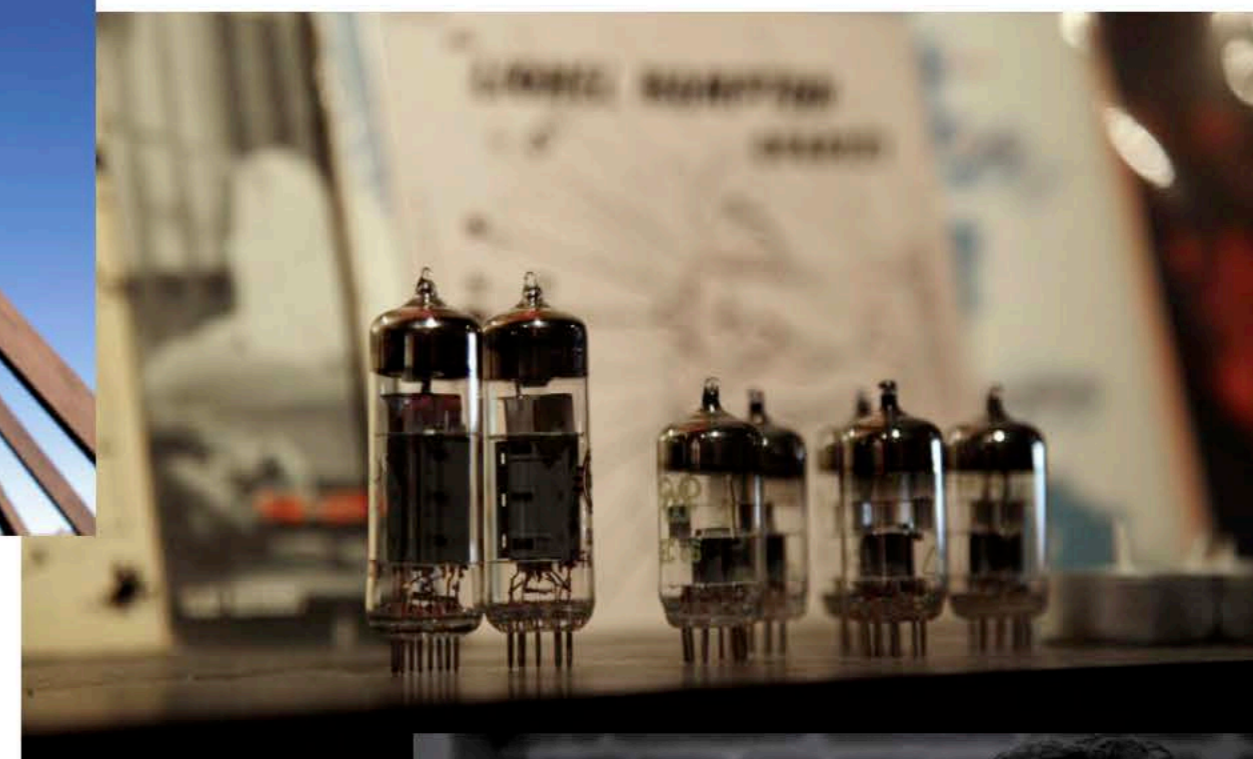
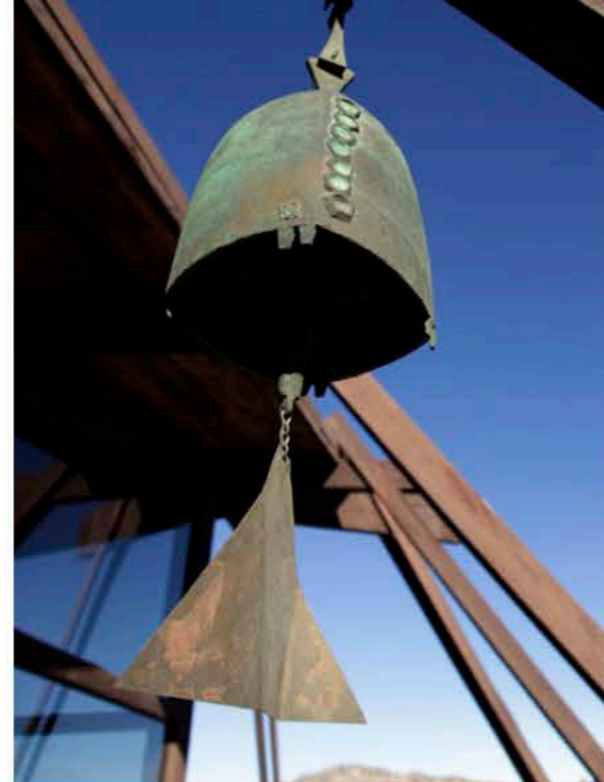
“Sometimes you had to think about what he said for a long time. Sometimes it took years to recognize what he was really trying to convey.”

According to Halpern, he didn’t get to know Ken Shindo as much as he liked, and he’s still looking to know more, adding that he explores him through his products, and what he was able to express emotionally through those products.

“Shindo has a certain quality to it, it allows you to forget about the system. It’s not so much about ‘listen to the size of my sound stage,’ or ‘wow, I’m completely blown away by that sparkling treble.’ When you put the music on, it’s more like a live acoustic event,” said Halpern, who in describing the Shindo listening experience compared it to closing his eyes, and losing track of time completely like he had at a small concert he had taken in a few days earlier.

“The room disappeared, it was pitch black, and I was completely involved in the music, and that’s something that a well set-up Shindo system is able to do for me... it’s almost a meditative state.”

Indeed, it’s this type of listening experience that I feel music lovers like myself seek out from their sound systems, as opposed to those who would be conventionally wooed by ever-vanishing specifications of distortion, and the further piling on of watts in pursuit of power over musicality.



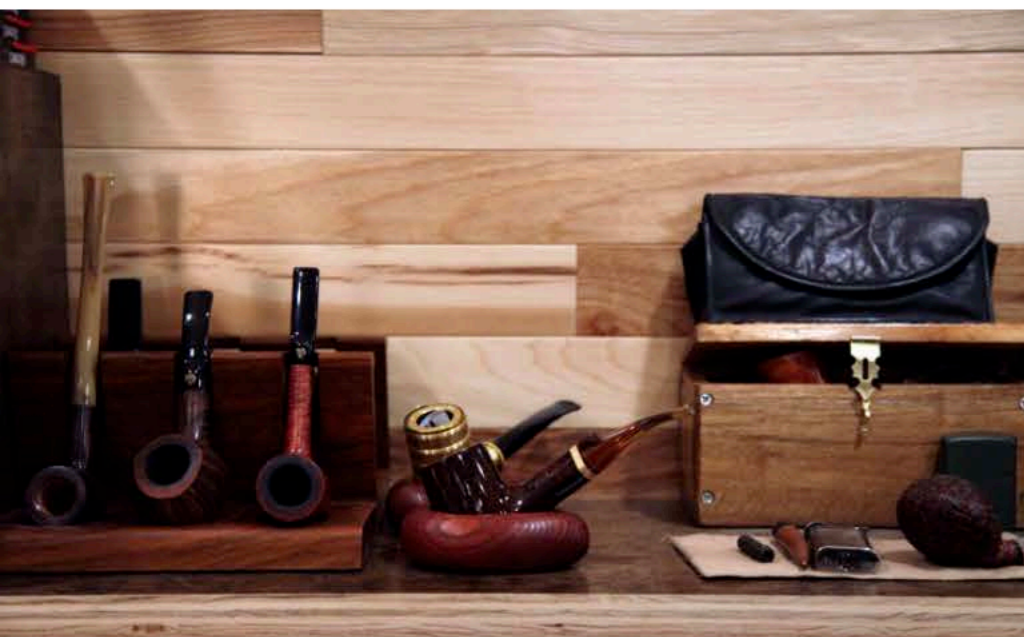
“I like to go fast, I also appreciate subtlety...”

MATTHEW ROTUNDA

That’s not to say that amazing sonic results cannot be achieved by properly designed, and powerful solid-state circuit paths, but there is a magic to the emotional connection that low-powered tubes can create from recorded events in my opinion.

I’m reminded again of this type of organic relationship involving transportation (of the *physical* kind, as opposed to the *metaphysical*) with man-made products during a film session with Rotunda in his 1988 Porsche 911 on Highway 74.

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The guttural snarl, and whine of the modified flat-six motor and five-speed gearbox as we power our way up, and down this stretch of road reaches me through the base of my spine, and is translated into adrenaline. “I like to go fast, I also appreciate subtlety,” said Rotunda. “And I think that whether it’s a high-end piece of componentry that’s handmade, or an air-cooled Porsche 911, there’s a shared tangible quality about the experience of the tactile sensation of turning on your audio system, and adjusting the knobs, and dropping the needle down on a vinyl record, as there is with sitting in the cockpit of a vintage car.”

Halpern’s wheels hail from Stuttgart too, but his ’64 356C, and ’87 911 coupe call New York State home.

Whether it’s in their choice of stereo system, or automobile, both men have a love, and deep appreciation of the finer, more esoteric things life can offer. Both their residences exude an air of refinement, and taste with a mid-century leaning that strikes a chord with me personally, and there was never a moment on the trip when I felt anything but at home.

After taking the maximum g-forces our bodies would allow on the road with the 911, and enjoying a spectacular dinner with Rotunda’s family, we woke early the next morning to make the roughly three-hour trip to Pitch Perfect Audio in Los Angeles for a full day of filming, interviews, and most importantly; listening to a full Shindo Labs system *in situ*.

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Equipment list:

Shindo Monbrison preamplifier: \$12,500 USD
 Cortese F2a stereo amplifier: \$12,250 USD
 Shindo 301 Player System full setup: \$31,395 USD
 Hommage T1 SUT – SPU: \$4,995 USD
 Hommage T2 SUT – EMT: \$4,995,
 Platine Verdier Turntable: \$14,000 USD
 EMT997 tonearm: \$5,495 USD
 TSD15 MC cartridge: \$2,400 USD
 Tonapparate Equipment support: Starts \$9,995 USD
 A23 Hommage 755 Loudspeakers: \$11,500 USD
 A23 interconnects: \$795 USD/pair
 A23 speaker wire: \$1,180 USD/three meter pair

Rotunda's shop is a continuation of his house stylistically, and the feel is more home than shop. The sheer amount of drool-worthy new, and historical hifi equipment on hand is staggering, and even after shooting hundreds of photographs, and doing hours of filming, I still felt hard-pressed to fully convey what a heavyweight analog temple he has built for worshipping music playback.

We moved between two turntables – a Shindo-modified Garrard 301, and J.C. Verdier La Platine, but remained rock-steady with the Shindo Monbrison preamplifier, and Cortese stereo power amplifier. Two transducers were auditioned: The Auditorium 23 Hommage 755, and Shindo's flagship Latour field-coil loudspeakers. Cabling was a mix of Shindo, and Auditorium 23.

There were no sound field optimizers, no stainless steel isolation feet under components, no cable risers, or dust covers, the amps, and tables sat on a Tonapparate rack, and room treatment consisted of some foam panels, rugs, and paintings on the walls.

Spending time in the sweet spot during listening sessions (or even off-axis) was an exercise more in maintaining emotional control than professional composure. Spinning a mix

of jazz, soul, rock, and blues, Rotunda, and Halpern took turns controlling the decades we visited through a system I can only describe as a time machine. The sheer physical presence of performers that was conveyed never faltered from recording-to-recording, and I couldn't help but shake my head while listening because every simile, and metaphor that I wanted to use to describe for what I was hearing seemed underwhelming in their ability to accurately communicate what I was experiencing.

"There's a lot of snake oil out there on the market, and a lot of it is just to feed the audiophile insecurities about how they can put a band-aid on a system to improve it," Rotunda said when I mentioned it. "Start at the core, and build a system that doesn't need band-aids." "It's about system synergy, and not fixing things that are wrong to begin with."

Writing this piece many weeks after visiting with Rotunda, and Halpern, I can still close my eyes and transport myself back to that listening session, and looking upon the visit, I see now that the light, and space of the mountains they call home was a fitting stage to cleanse my mental, and emotional palette for the path they took me down with Shindo Labs.