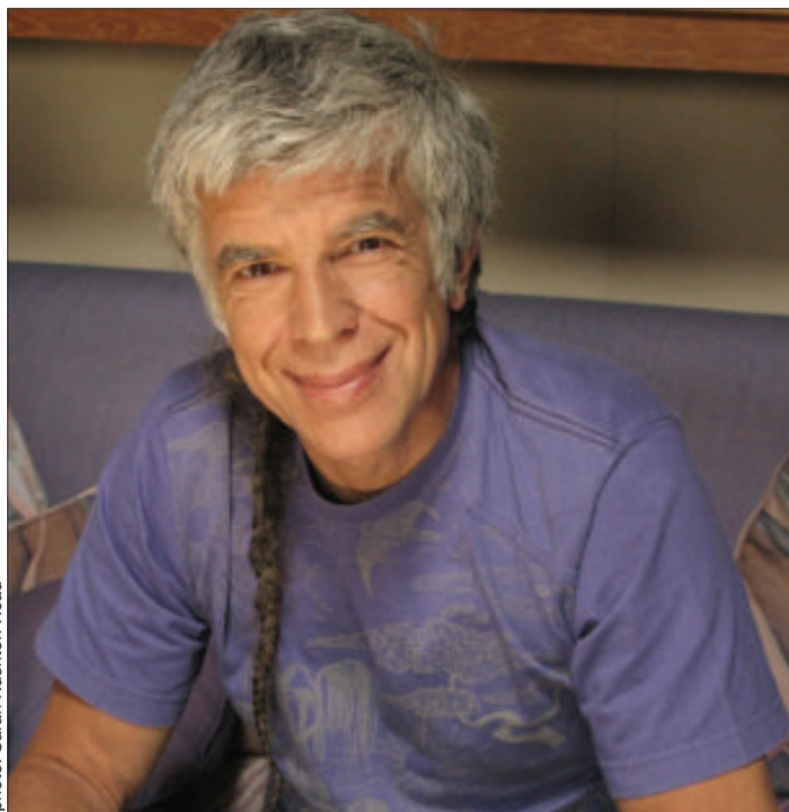


photo: Sarah Rushton-Read



Never a bystander . . .

"Sound is 360 degrees, it tells you where you are, if you're inside or out, in a big room or a small one. It's the first sense we experience when we're born and the last to go when we die . . ." These are the words of Tony Andrews, impassioned, pioneering and sometimes outspoken founder of loudspeaker developer and manufacturer, Funktion One. Sarah Rushton-Read meets the man . . .

A fervent, principled and dedicated man, Tony Andrews has spent the majority of his life striving to perfect the point source loudspeaker. For him, it's all about the noise that comes out the front - not how it arrays or, indeed, the brand name. "It's whether the system delivers to the people who've paid money to hear and see a show. For me, music is a universal language. It has a power to transcend and it should be heard as it's played. My first objective as a designer was to try and reproduce the level of experience I got with my hi-fi system at home in my bedroom, at a gig. Nothing's changed, that's still what Funktion One's all about."

There's no half measures or room for indifference for Tony. He's 100% passionate about every idea and word that germinates in his mind: to be in his company is to be totally engaged. That's not to say he's overbearing - far from it. If there's nothing to say or a subject not worthy of his input he'll quietly close his eyes, let everyone rattle on and wait for better times.

With ears as finely tuned as any wine-taster's tongue, Tony believes that sound is almost as fundamental to life as good food and clean water. After 40 years of listening, tweaking and listening again, there's still work to be done: "There are many in the audio industry who think it's finished business and that now all they have to do is learn the formula. Nobody told me it was over! When I started in this business the equipment just wasn't up to the job, it's closer now, but there's still more to do."

If there is, it surely begs the question - Who, except the most dedicated audiophiles, will appreciate it? As Tony insightfully says: "We live in a time where mass ownership of personal stereos, in the shape of MP3 players and low quality headphones, are commonplace. The result being that the general populace's aural organs have been systematically trained to accept the lowest of sound quality and expect little more. Let's face it - before you can break out of prison you actually have to realise you're in one!"

And to prove his point he stands me between two stacks of beautifully sculpted, violet and silver loudspeakers where I listen in awe, relishing every nuance of David Byrne's Talking Heads song, Psycho Killer. I hear elements of the track I've never heard before and suddenly I realise I've been in a low quality audio prison all of my very own! For the first time ever, and with total clarity, I hear and understand every word Byrne is singing, every instrument in the band and every finger on a string - it brings a tear to my eye.

It also bought a tear to Tony's eye, but listen to his impassioned vision of his self-imposed mission, and that should come as no surprise. He stresses: "When something's good we can all share it; we all feel it, it's almost religious in its effect. Sadly, over the last 20 years we've become culturally sick. We consume too much low quality stuff and don't savour or spend enough time enjoying the top end, good things in life. To be honest, if crap goes in, then the only thing to come out is going to be a lower grade of crap."

It's no secret that Tony feels a large part of this problem is caused by the advent of the digital sound systems and line array PA systems - plenty has been written about his views on the subject in this publication (see his *Viewpoint* column in L&S, September 2006) and others. Put simply, he believes both over-complicate and compromise the audio. He says the less electronics there is on the line between the source and the resulting output, the better and purer the sound: "We've got this line array paradigm which introduces a softening of the sound. Add digital desks and line arrays together and its soft focus everywhere! It's removed the dynamic range for the engineers. In other words, good engineers can't really excel because the equipment's holding them back, and the bad ones get away with it. There's this idea that you can just take any old sound system plug the DSP in and it will sort it all out - it can't."

Andrews points out that you can do more to improve sound quality with a carefully placed microphone than you ever can using EQ and DSP. "People EQ to suit their own voice, which affects the flavour of the whole mix. If you need to EQ a vocal mic then you should do it at the channel EQ with the individual voice. Unfortunately, a lot of engineers tend to do it right across the board. Engineers have got lost in a myriad of processing and compression. People aren't thinking about what they're doing anymore, they're just copying the last bloke. Every time you use EQ or an outboard device, you're creating a new, changed generation of the original signal."

Anyone would agree that to get the best out of any system, we need a basic understanding of its components. Tony considers: "Too often sound

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engineers are "what we called 'white glove people'. They work alongside system techs, usually from the hire company, who take care of the PA tuning."

Of course, it's not all bad: "Digital is very good at getting top end - analogue tends to tail off at the high frequencies. However, people have become so enamoured with the brilliant top end that they've forgotten that the richness of the mid-range has nearly died and that the bass is positively insipid. You lose all the low level stuff, the slight reverb, the fingers leaving the strings etc, it's depressing."



photo: Christopher Toulmin

Tony believes we're being steamrollered by the over development of digital audio, a tendency to compensate with EQ rather than design and manufacture loudspeakers that don't need it, and the separate control and management of PA tuning and engineering. This has caused the process to become fractionalized and, by default, the quality of the audio has been compromised. "To build correctional electronics into a system to compensate for something's failure further up the line is utterly ridiculous," he says emphatically.

"Today," he insists, "the sound quality at most gigs, using line array and digital consoles, is worse than it was 20 years ago. These systems have been developed purely for ease of use - all settings saved on a USB stick to cut down on costly set-up time and maximize time spent making money."

Of course, being the vocal chap he is, Tony has, on occasions, found himself sitting alone in the field of PA system design and usage. In particular at Glastonbury 2007, where on the order of the environmental officer for the event, his PA was temporarily turned down very low. (See L&S! July-August 2007 for the full story).

Glastonbury was an unpleasant experience and left a nasty taste, so it was with great pride that he discovered his industry peers had voted for him to receive the 2007 Gottelier Award (pictured above) at the PLASA show. The Award, named in memory of Tony Gottelier, was created to recognise those product developers who've made significant contributions to the equipment and tools that push the boundaries of event production, presentation and installation. After a tough year, at last Tony got the chance to speak his mind: "It's not about the beans it's about the places it can take you," he said.

He later elaborated: "We should talk about sound in terms of feeling, not application. When I had my first company, Turbosound, it became known to the industry as: 'Turbosound - only ever good as a live system'. Today it's 'Funktion One - only ever good as a club system.' You can't say one system is good for one type of application and another's better for something else. All we're doing is reproducing what's in front of us. I mean, we do orchestras, for God's sake - the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Tasmanian Philharmonic Orchestra - both love our system as much as any club does. For me, it's about delivering the whole landscape of sound, whatever the source. That's why we called our range Resolution - it's about absolute resolution and accuracy. To me, sub-standard equipment is an insult to our ability to hear."

Tony's voice may sometimes be a lonely one when it comes to views on digital audio and Line Array. While it may be common for people who stand alone to be considered slightly mad or eccentric, it's surely worth bearing in mind the words of Mohandas K. Gandhi: "Strength of numbers is the delight of the timid. The valiant in spirit glory in fighting alone."