

Issue 34 • November 2010

audiopro

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Can't fake the funk

Tony Andrews looks back on 40 years in the business

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Funkin for fun

This year's Audio Pro Industry Excellence Awards Lifetime Achievement Award winner was Funktion One's Tony Andrews. He was given the award by our readers for his significant contributions to the industry over his four-decade career. **Andrew Low** talks to Andrews about what has kept the flame burning...

Anyone who has come in contact with Funktion One founder Tony Andrews quickly realises that he is a man of many ideas and strong opinions, with a warm and friendly demeanour. Determined to maintain full control over Funktion One after having suffered the sale of his earlier company Turbosound to AKG, Andrews and John Newsham invested their own money in the company rather than having their options narrowed by being beholden to a bank.

This allowed the pair to maintain control, concentrating on quality and innovation with an indifference to fashion and current paradigms. Bringing his wife Ann on board as financial director and now managing director has helped the family run company become a global success.

From building the second Glastonbury Pyramid stage in 1981 to using rocks, nails and scrap wood to build speaker risers in the scorching sun at last year's Lake of Stars festival in Malawi, Andrews is the real deal: a self-professed hippy and an example to the industry of how to keep the spirit of rock n roll in a paradoxically and increasingly corporate pro audio industry. And apparently he has got it right because, not only has he won this year's Lifetime Achievement Award, he has gained a cult following from the public, DJs, musicians, club owners, engineers and rental companies around the globe, so much so that promoters advertise F-1 PAs on gig flyers as a selling point to punters.

According to Andrews, his enviable career started in 1969/70 whilst touring with Pete Brown and Piblokto. Inspired by the use of stereo technology on albums such as Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, he began experimenting

with wood and speakers in his garage, setting out to design PA speakers that were as good as listening to a hi-fi system.

The garage experiments lead to him touring his first system with the Pink Fairies and Hawkwind. "People have always liked our bass since the early days," says Andrews. "I stumbled across the principle at the beginning of the 70s and developed the concept to the point where I applied for my first bass patent in 1977, progressions of which we still use today. Meanwhile I had joined forces with Tim Isaac, and agreeing that we had to move away from compression drivers, we began our early experiments with cone midrange giving rise to the birth of the first Turbos.

"When it comes to developing something new, you don't just sit down and just invent it, it's more a case of noticing something as it passes by you and thinking, 'that was strange! Why did that happen?'" You need to be switched on and bothered enough to notice things and obsessive enough to find the answer.

"Unless you are open, you are going to stick with known theory. You have to get a lot of things right to make it work as it should and not all of them are within standard practice. Any loudspeaker is a resonant system, it's just how well tuned it is."

Inspired by the sonic palette of the 70s funk revolution, Funktion One – as it is known today – was born when it was commissioned to provide the system for the Millennium Dome project at the turn of the century. "Although we had been in an intensive R&D period since 1992, that project really made us crystallise the designs," Andrews says. "There were particularly stringent limits to the weight load on the system. We had been involved with hi-tech materials from early on, so we knew we had a way to cut the typical weight in half, and they knew we could get a good sound. It was a big enough project with enough numbers involved to warrant cutting the first production tools. Once we had that, the product line began."

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Tony Andrews
Funktion
One





"I have had a lot of people thank me for voicing my thoughts, which tells me that there is an audience out there that cares deeply about good audio. When you really get this, it is a powerful thing. A lot of motivation comes with it and it goes way beyond mere entertainment."

The motivation behind Andrews' passion has always been achieving the best possible audio quality. He furthers: "The thing about deep appreciation of sound is that it is akin to meditation in that people use music to get in touch with their inner selves or the higher state. If you do get in touch with that part of yourself – and everyone has it – you begin to realise that at a certain level there is no separation between one person and the next. We are all in this web of communal thought and feelings."

"I used to experience this feeling of community back in the early days of Glastonbury when bands like Taj Mahal and Spirit played. I also experienced this when the rave scene was at its height in the late 80s."

These philosophies and ideologies have led to a dedicated worldwide dealer network, which share Funktion One's passion for audio. "The people that found us and who are looking for good sound are pretty much on our wavelength. They share the love of good audio for its own sake."

As for the future, as you can imagine, it's ever onward and upwards for Andrews. "The speaker technology we have been advancing all these years has applications in every area of the audio market. We are continuing to explore and evolve products to penetrate these market areas," he says. "As long as it looks like there is a meaningful step forward, we are going to take it. Honestly, I can't do anything else. It has taken 40 years to learn this much and I can't go and waste it by doing something sensible like retiring. I have a feeling of being obligated, but it is an exciting obligation".

> funktion-one.com

Andrews explains that although the current product line is the third generation of his early concepts, each generation has been a step forward in sonic quality and technical innovation resulting in a steady stream of worldwide patents. "We operate a policy of continual improvement, but we ensure that earlier customers have easy access to any upgrades," he points out.

"We are still expanding the envelope and have some exciting things coming up. At the loudspeaker component level, you know when you are getting the tuning near where it should be because small changes make large differences. Similarly, you know when you have progressed because what you did five years ago, which sounded great, now sounds inferior to what you are currently working on," he laughs.

Not being afraid to say what he thinks has led to a lot of opposition from his competitors and the increasing amount of jobsworths in the business. Andrews has backed up his opinions by presenting his side of the argument in a presentation called *Reality or Soft Focus?*, which highlights the neglected parameters of sound reinforcement and the inherent shortcomings of line-array technology.

"People are disturbed by me because I am not noted for paying much attention to rank," he comments. "I am not afraid to say what needs saying. It is a demanding combination for people who are on their own narrow agendas and who are politically capable rather than competent."

"I could be a much wealthier man if I had been concerned with politics and Machiavellian behaviour, but that's not what I'm about. I've got my integrity. As long as I'm able to do what I am obsessed with then I'm all right."

