

# Spreading the Word

## The Joy of Making Things

An Interview with Edward T. Dell

In my audio library, I have several feet of bound magazines: *The Audio Amateur*, *Speaker Builder*, *Glass Audio*, and recently, *audioXpress*. All of them were published for over 40 years by Edward T. Dell, Jr. Who is this man who single-handedly did more for the audio construction hobby than anyone else? To answer this question and more, I visited him in beautiful New England and spent many fascinating hours talking about audio, life, and everything.

**Jan Didden (JD):** Mr. Dell, we have been communicating, on and off, for almost 30 years, and what has always intrigued me was why you decided to take up publishing about audio design and construction.

**Edward T. Dell (ETD):** You got a few hours? Seriously, the one red thread through my life is that I am extremely curious about how things work. I wonder how things work. That curiosity has been the basis of most of what I did in my life. My dad worked for Western Electric, the installation division of Western Telephone. We moved all the time. We went to Washington in '42; we moved 27 times before junior high! I know that because I published my dad's memoirs. He was one of the experts who knew how to put in a PABX, shifting over from operators to automatic exchanges so once the job was done we moved again, sometimes after a few months. It became such a habit we kept on moving all the time! Anyway, when I went to college in 1941, we lived in Miami, and I ended up working all summer at Western Electric. I worked on converting Miami Beach telephone exchange from 5 digits to 6 digits. Great experience because I learned color codes, I learned to solder, and learned to do extremely accurate and clean work. For the telephone company, you either



Edward T. Dell in his home office

do it right or you do it over.

**JD: How did printing figure in to your education?**

**ETD:** To get through grad school, I took up contract printing. I took on a job for the Psychiatric Association, and finished the job in two weeks. Then I took a printing job for Railway Express in Washington, and I charged them \$9,000 for it! So, literally, printing put me through my education!

**JD: I understand that at a certain point you became interested in theology?**

**ETD:** Yes, since I was growing up in a very religious family, I thought I had to be a minister. I earned two bachelor degrees, Arts and Theology. I went to graduate school at Boston University and struggled and slowly earned my grad points. Now, theology is somewhat related to philosophy, same type of questions being asked. But I wasn't really happy in my situation; I was doing what is called supply work in Methodist churches, tak-

ing Sunday services, early Sunday morning, did the service and preach. This was late '40s. I was also teaching in a high school, in Boston, as assistant in the philosophy department, teaching English and Philosophy.

But somehow, I wasn't happy in the fundamentalist atmosphere I grew up in. One time, I was an officer in the State Student Council in Florida and the Continental Convention came to Florida, and we had to entertain student members from across the nation. My parents turned up at a dance and marched me home saying I couldn't even stay to watch. Then, I discovered the Episcopal Church in Boston, in a setting so radically different from what I knew. Two years later, I started to work as a chaplain in Boston. We had a beautifully church, and we did great things. I learned all these interesting things about the history of the Episcopal Church and I was captivated and found this was something I wanted to do. The parish was 50% white and 50% black; it was a great place for reconciliation, for understanding. This was the early '50s, the



Edward T. Dell at work

world was about to go to hell. I worked there for two years, and we worked hard and did well, but they sent in a total idiot as my successor. He destroyed everything I had built up, and I came to realize that you can't count on anything that you do to survive. Nothing really survives.

**JD: I remember that the first issues of *The Audio Amateur* came from Old Jaffrey Road in Swarthmore, PA. How did you end up there?**

**ETD:** In my last year in the suburbs, I got a call from a former classmate from seminary. He had just been appointed to a parish in Swarthmore, PA. It is a town half way between Philly and Delaware. He wanted us to come down and visit, and of course, clergy always visits during the week because on the weekends it's business for them!

They had these "parish neighborhood meetings," and I went to one of them. By sheer chance, I ran into the managing editor of the national edition of a brand new magazine *The Episcopalian*. We started talking, and we talked, and talked, and I mentioned C.S. Lewis. Lewis was a phenomenon. I stumbled on him in 1943 when I found his book *Screwtape Letters*. He wrote things about Christianity that were totally different than what had been written in the previous 100 years. I started to get more books by him, every book by him, and there were a lot. [Yes, there's a whole bookcase of them in Mr. Dell's residence!—JD] Lewis became a lifeline for me, the voice of rationality. *Screwtape Letters* discusses Christianity from the viewpoint of the

devil. He talks about how to get this God back into his fold and away from being a Christian. Anyway, to make the story short, I was asked to be book editor for the *Episcopalian*, working from home but meeting with the staff in New York once a month.

**JD: What sort of periodical was *The Episcopalian*?**

**ETD:** *The Episcopalian* was a magazine talking about real life for real people in their living rooms. Trying to offer the layman a Christian point of view for what he was seeing, what he was reading, what he did, what he saw in the news, and somewhat about what the Church was doing. But we tried to be independent and not be a house-organ, which in the '60s was no mean trick. The Church, which is supposed to be about communicating the good news of Jesus as the savior of the world is doing a lousy job of it. We were very passionate about it, how we convey the gospel, and those things happening in the street that were part of that gospel.

**JD: So there you were an editor!**

**ETD:** Yes, this was my entry into the circle of professional editors; they were all professionals except me. *The Episcopalian* went quite well and got to a 100,000 circulation. In the '60s, my career was very much influenced by my travels. I had saved up some money and bought a ticket on the Queen Mary to England. I was an Anglophile before I got there! This was the early '60s. I walked into the Selfridges store and

found a book called *A Grief Observed* by N.W. Clerk. I knew exactly who that was because he had used that pseudonym before. Lewis wrote poems for *Punch* in the '60s under the *nom de plume* N.W. Clerk. A year before that, I had written to Lewis offering my condolences because his wife Joyce had died and I had expressed my hope he would write something about grief. And this was the book! I called his agent and got an appointment and said I was looking for rights for a book by Lewis. Then I asked about *A Grief Observed* and the man was horrified. I was ushered into the boss' office, and they were scared I was going to blow the whistle. So I bought the rights to it for the *Episcopalian* for \$500 or so, on the condition that I not reveal the pseudonym. I started to write to Lewis in 1945 or thereabouts, and he answered my letters. This was a breakthrough for me because it was an intellectual confirmation that I was on the right track. I visited him twice, once when he was in the hospital. Lewis died the same day Kennedy was killed.

I started to work in Swarthmore six months before I went to England. Our boss at the time was convinced his people should go out in the world. Se gave each of us a major assignment, and we were all sent abroad once in a while. One of us went to Haiti; one went to South America, etc. I was sent to the Pacific, best trip I ever had and I did stories about Hawaii, Philippines, Taiwan, Okinawa, and Tokyo. I travelled 25,000 miles and lost 30 pounds in the process! I learned a lot about Taiwan and gained a deep respect for the country and its people. This trip really changed me; and later on I spend time in France, Denmark, and The Netherlands. Such trips are important and shape your outlook.

**JD: What prompted you to start *Audio Amateur*? When was that?**

**ETD:** *Stereophile's* Gordon Holt lived across the street from me, and we met early on. He was fussy about usability before everybody else was talking about it. I was still going to New York once a month, to the area where the Twin Towers later stood, and there were any number of surplus stores with great mil-spec electronics parts for very little money.

I sat down one time with Gordon and said, what's wrong with us? We put the absolutely very best parts in stuff that we never use and it is thrown away when obsolete; yet, we put the crappiest parts in consumer stuff that's used daily, only because we want to sell them another amp in a few years time. So I said to Gordon, what would happen if we take all these marvelous mil-spec parts and build the same exact amplifier that Dynaco builds (Dynaco Stereo 70) but with all those hermetically-sealed, oil-filled caps, Holtek potted filament transformers, and expensive high-quality resistors and switches? So I built it and Gordon drew the schematics, it was a centerfold just for the circuit, and we published it in *Stereophile*. It's a Dynaco 3-tube circuit and the layout clearly shows the influence of Western Electric. It has separate supplies for each channel, DC filaments, delayed DC switch on, the works. Gordon got a storm of criticism for the article and he said, we're not going to publish these construction articles again! So that probably is the first time that the idea of *Audio Amateur* started to grow in my mind. (*A Mr. Landers built this amplifier from the Stereophile article, and his project was published as "The Super Brute" in The Audio Amateur, Issue 3, 1973, still available from www.audioamateur.com—JD*) I called Gordon a few days later when he had cooled off and I said I should start a magazine for people who like to build things. Gordon said it was a great idea, and he lent me his subscriber list, 5,000 people, and that helped get me started. That was really the beginning of *Audio Amateur*.

**JD: How difficult was it to combine your day job work with publishing *The Audio Amateur*?**

**ETD:** I worked for the *Episcopalian* for 14 years, and then in 1970 I started *Audio Amateur* as a moonlighting project, a quarterly. As we were living in Swarthmore, I had to commute into Philly daily by train. Those trains had nice seats and you can work for 30 minutes during the ride, not being disturbed. I was, at that time, also manuscript editor for the *Episcopalian*; I did a lot of my editing work during those

train rides!

**JD: Looking at the early issues, I see what looks like your entire family on the masthead. Why?**

**EDT:** It really WAS a family affair in those early years! The kids used to help me with it. We got the first issue from the printer in my car, and that evening, we all got together, the kids, and some friends. We had an abandoned Scriptomatic addressing system, which I had bought from the *Episcopalian*. It was a two-part machine. You inserted an address card, ran that through the machine, and the address appeared in purple ink on the magazine. Once we got the magazines addressed, we had them bundled by area code, put them in mailing bags, labeled the bags, put them in the station wagon, and took them to the post office. Then, we would go downtown to Greens Delicatessen on Chestnut Street, and the kids could have anything they wanted. This was their pay, and we really had a ball! Having the whole family on the magazine masthead is a good American tradition!

**JD: So you picked up your printing skills again from your teenage years!**

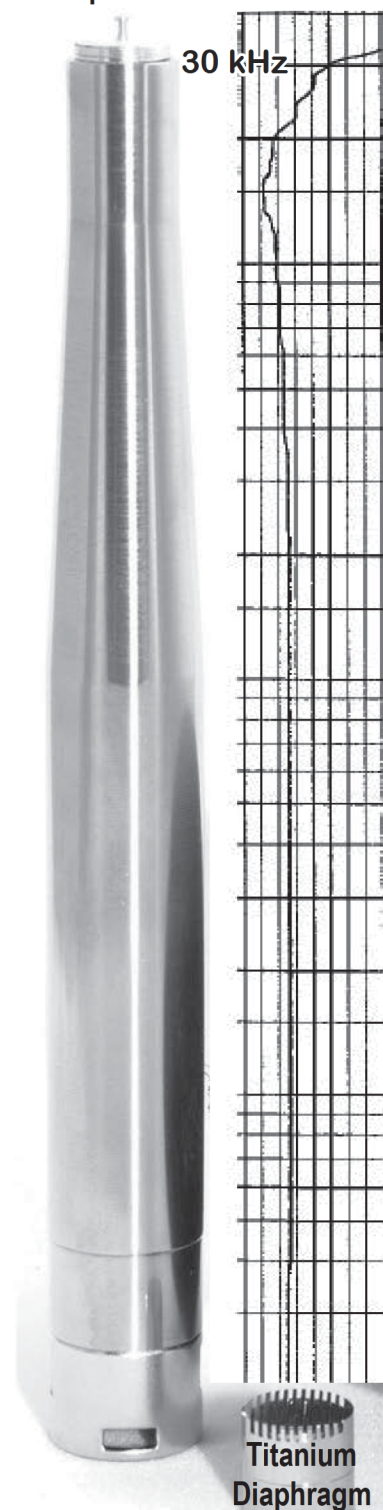
**ETD:** Yes indeed! I was going to set *Audio Amateur* on a Selectric typewriter, 6 squares to the inch. We pasted up pages that were going to be reduced in a camera on 17 × 22" sheets of cardstock. We reduced it to 75% or 66%. It was black and white to begin with, 24 or 36 pages. I spent \$500 savings to print 100,000 promotional pieces 11 × 17 folded twice with a pitch for the magazine, including a sign-up part that was supposed to be cut off and returned with a check! We found a distributor of technical equipment in Long Island who sent out a newsletter every three months or so. There was a McIntosh page in there every time and I contacted them, and it turned out McIntosh had one of the largest newsletter distributions that went out through their dealers. The equipment distributor agreed to let us include our flyer with his mailings. So we got our flyers out to each of those dealer addresses, and I remember being on the floor with the kids folding 80,000 flyers! Then, we went up to our cot-

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tage in Vermont, but before we left, we asked our Postmaster to forward any of these reply envelopes to us in Vermont. I remember, the first day we got the mail in Vermont there were eight subscriptions, at \$5 each, for four issues. We got 5,000 subscriptions out of the 80,000 flyers. That was our subscription core. That's how it started. We didn't get up to schedule with publishing until 1976 I think.

Now, I was working days in Philly and doing everything myself. But people would turn up on my door step and offer help. One person who turned up told me: "You need me; I need to do all this typing for you." She turned out to be absolutely invaluable and critical to our success. She had a degree in English from the University of London. She became, and still is, very dear to me (*She became vice president of Audio Amateur, Inc. —JD*)

So, when I got flak from someone like Reginald Williamson about grammar or spelling, I would say, "Well, the person doing the copy editing has a degree in

English, how about you?"

At one time we sold about 15,000 copies through stores, newsstands and subscriptions. From all our publications, *Voice Coil* is the most lucrative, next is the *Loudspeaker Source Book*. We also got a lot of interest for *Loudspeaker Design Cookbook*, of which we sold more than 100,000 copies. We also have a good book that we can't sell because of the wrong title, *Loudspeaker Recipes*, but it really is a book on computer-designed speakers.

**JD: Why a move from Philadelphia to New Hampshire?**

**ETD:** I quit my job in 1974 when *The Audio Amateur* was making enough money to support me and my family. In February 1975, my wife and I said we have to go back to New England. Massachusetts is known as Taxachusetts, it's a great place to live IF you can afford it. So, we looked to New Hampshire: at that time they had no income tax, no sales tax, everything comes out of property tax. We ended up in Peterborough, in this four-bedroom house built in 1812. It was only an hour and a half from Boston. We also discovered that there were some 30 magazine headquarters there as well! That's interesting in that if one industry comes to a town, in time, some of the employees will decide, hey, I can do that, and set up shop for themselves, and the whole thing blooms.

There's an interesting background here, in that this proliferation of periodicals in this country was partly possible because of the 2<sup>nd</sup> class postage rates we had. In the UK there is no 2<sup>nd</sup> class periodicals mail rate, you know why? The British never had the need to educate the masses through periodicals, being originally a Victorian society. At the time of our revolution a much larger proportion of the population had a right to vote, even if they had no property. If you say in the Declaration of Independence that the government derives its powers from the consent of the governed, you better provide the means for the governed to inform and educate themselves! Franklin set up the U.S. mail system to make it possible to mail a newspaper over 100 miles for a penny! So that contributed to the growth of

periodicals and newspapers in this country.

**JD: Your interest in, and profound knowledge of, national history shines through!**

**ETD:** That's true; I always have been fascinated by historical events and persons! If you read the biography of Benjamin Franklin, he went to Paris, he befriended the King and he drained the French treasury. They probably didn't even realize it! Of course he also borrowed from the friendly Dutch, but I don't think we drained their treasury. It's a pity that not more people are interested in the history of their nation, where they come from, how their culture was formed. It would make it easier to live in your society, and understand what happens, and how you can handle, and accept that. The Dutch presence in Manhattan, and along the Hudson, was snuffed out a long time ago, but the influence is still there. New York is different, they are more kind of let's get it done, let's go ahead, don't mess about. And, also very tolerant, more so than the surrounding areas.

**JD: Anyway, you decided for New Hampshire.**

**ETD:** Yes; we filled four of the largest U-hauls we could find, plus a large moving van, and in August '75 we moved there.

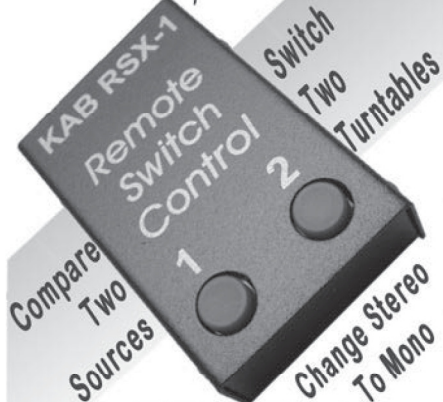
**JD: If I may ask, what was the connection of Audio Amateur with Old Colony Sound Lab? I remember that OCSL sold parts and kits for AA designs.**

**ETD:** The OCSL business was part of something I did before I started AA. I devised a record filing system consisting of small labels and a special stamp. You could use alphabetical characters for instance to establish at which shelf a particular record was stored, and numbers for indexing the shelf. I printed special cards with what we call "bleed boxes" where the ink bleeds across the edge of the card, so you can see the indications by looking at the card edge. So this was a system where you could find your particular recordings quickly. I sold several hundred copies, and it was even re-

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viewed in *High Fidelity* by Gordon Holt who gave it a good review. The name OCSL came from the Old Colony name of Massachusetts where I worked at the time.

So when I started AA, I thought we ought to provide the means for people to build the designs and we used OCSL initially to provide circuit cards. Eventually, we had people working in my cellar etching simple circuit boards! One design was the Quad Pod by Joshua Goldberg, who lived directly across of the street from me. He was an engineer at Boeing in their Surface Transport Division in Philly. Wonderful guy, I still correspond with him. He used to say: "Every engineer has a favorite resistor, and he uses it all the time!" We did a follow-up for an encoder to the Quad Pod and a matching amplifier feeding two ambience speakers in the back. We sold several hundred of those as well, it was very popular. We had a deal with ElectroValue in the UK who also sold our kits. The owner actually found a French source for us for very good quality log taper pots, much better than anything you could buy in the States at the time. They were available in dual concentric also, very well done.

**JD:** You've carried many audio-related books and reprints.

**ETD:** We have a CD version of *The Radiotron Designers Handbook*, 1,500 pages, the scanning alone cost us \$5,000! I once got called from a British publisher of the book version who said it had a 1942 Australian copy right. They reprinted it in a two-volume set. But we used the U.S. RCA edition. I consulted counsel and nowhere could we find any trace of a U.S. copyright for the book! I think we probably sold 1,400–1,500 copies. We also sent two copies of *Loudspeaker Design Cookbook* to Beijing for translation into Chinese. We had also had it translated into Dutch and French. Interestingly, the French complained that some of the equations were wrong. They were correct in the original so it's easy to make mistakes in translation. Interestingly, *LDC* isn't translated in British English and it is not sold in England. I don't know why.

On the subject of copyright: We pub-

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lished *The Birdhouse*, a speaker enclosure design by a teacher from Arizona, I think, and we got attacked by Bose! Now, the author hadn't copied it, he had figured the principles out himself, as a labyrinth style. Bose told me to pull back all issues, destroy them etc. My lawyer said it was ridiculous, the man built just one copy and Bose would have to prove that damage was done. So nothing further came of it, but later, I thought I should have used it for free publicity, you know, like this tiny publisher attacked by this giant corporation about nothing really.

**JD: I remember your editorials in those early days. Not always related to audio, but always related to human endeavors.**

ETD: I don't believe in writing editorials if you have nothing to say. Sometimes I get moved, something strikes me, and then I write about it. That's why I don't believe in columns. In the '90s I collected my editorials in a small booklet, "Of Mockingbirds and Other Irrelevancies," (available at [www.cc-webshop.com](http://www.cc-webshop.com)) and it's amusing to read it these days. The first one is pathetic as it predicted a sudden interest in guitars. [*He paused to write down "gui-tar" in his notebook.—JD*] The second was on fidelity and perception, and the composer Charles Ivens. He wrote difficult to understand music. He wanted you to listen to ALL the sound, and not let your ears pick only this or only that part. He said that if you hear two bands marching, listen to them both. And, you can hear that in his music. You can hear two bands, different tempo, and different rhythms. I thought at the time that he would steadily advance in appreciation, but it didn't happen. He has been recorded several times, but it was too controversial I guess. He went to Yale and wrote a symphony. His teacher didn't like it and told him he'd never go anywhere with it! But, Ivens thought that aping the European musical culture was nonsense.

Anyway, Ivens heard his own symphony, directed by Leonard Bernstein, only once on the radio. His music is still being explored to this day, and I think he was one of the greatest composers of this country.

I was flattered when the *Boston Audio*

*Society* picked up one of my editorials from 1978. It said essentially that people often say "this magazine is paid for by the advertisers," but that's not true! Every dollar the advertisers and manufacturers have is coming from the customers. Everything, magazines included, is paid for by the customers' dollars! This is important to remember. The advertiser/manufacturer has an obligation to be honest and forthright to readers and customers, and produce a good product.

**JD: What do you think of the state of high-end audio these days?**

ETD: One thing that becomes increasingly difficult is to experience a first-class system. You need to find a high-end dealer in your area who has some choice of high-quality equipment. I mean, it was so much easier when HiFi was young. When Edgar Villchur designed the Acoustic Research acoustic suspension bookshelf speakers, they had a demo room right in Grand Central Station in New York City. Can you imagine how many people got introduced to high-quality music reproduction through that? Briggs in the UK did something similar. He organized comparative listening tests between live musicians and the reproduced music.

**JD: How did you become interested in music in the first place?**

ETD: That goes back to my junior college years. My next door dormitory neighbor would play classical music and I had never heard that music growing up in the south. I thought: "What is this?" The guy would go on the street car to the Quincy library every week to borrow 78s. They were heavy and four minutes per side. I remember how heavy the Messiah was! He also had to go to the music building on campus and borrow a player. He had to return them the same day, so he played them several times on that day. Later on, you could buy equipment from a place called Radio Shack at 167 Washington Street. Fairly soon, there was a second Radio Shack and this leather dealer from Texas bought them and expanded the chain. I worked for them in grad school; they had a policy that they would build something like a

preamp, all tubes, copper-coated chassis, and 1% film resistors, put it in box, fly it over to Tokyo, and sell it for \$39.95 and make about 60% on them. They sold them like hot cakes. They also sold Bozak speakers, Janszen electrostatics, and Ampex 320's to the Boston Symphony. This really spread the interest in live music, classical music throughout the country. I used to gather friends on Saturday evening, listen to Boston Symphony on my Altec Lansing 604Cs in open back boxes. All of us sat around and listened to the broadcast. Now, Boston Symphony is a phenomenon as a prime source of classical music, organized by a layman, not a musician. He had the Sydney music hall built with architectural and acoustical advice from Sabine, based on scientifically derived acoustical principles. Sabine later developed the Sabine reverberation equation.

**JD: I wonder whether you are a printer, a publisher, or an audio amateur?**

ETD: Well, I am what is officially known as a dilettante! Like a butterfly, going to one thing after the next. I've taken courses at Swarthmore in Cobol programming, even!

You remember, when I worked for the *Episcopalian*, I had been going to Washington regularly where they typeset the *Episcopalian* in lead, and at that time the whole issue of machine typesetting coupled to a computer was very much in flux. I went to a seminar about typesetting and picked it up. We were paying wages for someone to do the monotype typesetting for the *Episcopalian* to the tune of \$27,000 a year at that time. I made a pitch during the quarterly meeting for the publishers of the other religious magazines (there were nine of them present), and I said, look, I think it would be smart for us to set up an electronic typesetting facility pool. There were already two or three systems available at the time. They didn't do it, but I convinced my boss to lease a Selectric Composer for the *Episcopalian*. I said, instead of having this lady type in all manuscripts, then have to correct it in whiteout, and type in the words again, why don't we have her type it in the Selectric Composer. You had to type it in, then run it again with corrections

when it does the justification. My boss looked at me one day and he said “if there is one thing that makes me sick it’s an editor who tries to sound like a printer!” I didn’t say anything because I had been a printer 25 years before that already.

One disadvantage of computer typesetting is that anyone can do it, which means that the true art of typesetting is slowly being lost. At one time I wrote a letter to *The Economist* because their kerning was out of whack. These electronic machines do kerning beautifully, as long as you specify it sensibly. *The Economist* was placing the period far too close to the numeral before it. So you couldn’t see whether it was 1.0% or 10%. This is a simple example, and often it’s worse. With computer typesetting, you can do anything, and anything, nine out of 10 times, is ugly.

After we came to Peterborough, we bought our first computer in 1980 I think it was, from Ohio Scientific. The day we set an entire page with all the characters and symbols on one piece of paper was a very exciting day.

[Mr. Dell takes out his small notebook again and writes something down. Intrigued, I asked what it is, and he confided that he “collects words,” words that strike him as interesting. He now writes down *de-tail* (accent on the 1<sup>st</sup> syllable) and *de-fence*; earlier it used to be *de-tail*, *de-fence*.—JD]

**JD: Did audio give you an excuse to become a printer/publisher, or did you get so excited about audio that you wanted to tell the world about it?**

**ETD:** This fascination with audio reproduction occurred before I really became fascinated with music. As soon as the LP came out, I bought a small clamshell player from Columbia. I got a lot of chances to compare things, when I worked for Radio Shack, which at the time, had great equipment. I wrote to WXCR and said that there was too much distortion in the latest Columbia records, so they called me and invited me for lunch with a few station guys. We went into a room with a Voice of the Theater and a Brooks amplifier, put the record on, and put

it all the way up. Then I realized that musicians hear things very differently. Listening to this music at full blast, they couldn’t have heard the distortion if their lives depended on it! The love of music is my prime mover, and I also like to read a good electronics article. Like a nice 20 W power amp you could build yourself. I think the difference between the original Dynaco 70 and my Brute version was mainly due to the large separate power supplies for each channel in the Brute. I didn’t have the right test equipment to verify it, although I did collect some Heathkit test equipment at the time. Reggie (Reginald Williamson) would say, you know, that Heathkit generator is a nice piece of equipment but it needs fixing. I loved building kits, and in one of my early issues I carried a visit to Heathkit, showing all the girls putting all these parts in separate bags. There was a relation to my Brute because the early Heathkits had lots of surplus military parts.

**JD: How did you find authors?**

**ETD:** I was amazed how authors appeared, like out of nowhere. I have an author file of 850 authors! Also, I kept an eye out for articles in other periodicals like in Europe. Over time, I got introduced to Peter Baxandall and Peter Walker by Reggie Williamson, who always was a good source of interesting articles. We also had a deal with *Wireless World* where we used some of their material and we printed a one-column ad for them as payment.

**JD: How did *Voice Coil* start?**

**ETD:** Well, in the late ’70s you began to see a lot of articles on speakers as people started to explore Thiele-Small parameters. It started in Australia in the late ’60s but didn’t appear here in the AES journal until the early ’70s. So this started to percolate and at a certain point Gary Galo send me a copy of the *Loudspeaker Design Cookbook*. Vance Dickinson had already published it before I found out about it. I sent it to Robert Bullock and things began to happen. I am not sure about the sequence but I became convinced that

there was enough interest in speakers to support a magazine on its own and I started it in 1979 and it was well received. It started a speaker DIY movement by people like Madisound who were very expert on the subject. Then Bullock’s reviewed Vance’s book. So I contracted Vance for a revised version, we published it and it began to sell it, and Elektor in The Netherlands translated it and started to sell it as well. We had some attempts to have a Turkish and Polish language version but that didn’t succeed. But *Speaker Builder* eventually became as large as *Audio Amateur*.

Then I had a special section on tubes in *Audio Amateur* in 1989, and that was well received and we started *Glass Audio*. But, in publishing you don’t want to go to press unless you have advertising, and we actually had fractured our audience. So in 1999, we decided to bring the three magazines together. Lots of people were disappointed, but it was a necessity.

**JD: Has the editing that you need to do changed over those years?**

**ETD:** There are authors who need a lot of editing. There are authors who want to write for you who are smart enough to first study the magazine. I am still amazed that there are people who have never seen the magazine who want to write for us.

We don’t like the passive voice. If you write scholarly papers, you must be invisible, but we write for human beings and you are addressing them as clearly and concisely as possible. Getting the right analogies to make that clear to potential authors who don’t know as much about it as you do is the trick. But, sometimes I have a whole list of things for the author: could you write captions, could you do this, that. Some guys are really spectacular, do everything just right, and you don’t really have to do anything. Sometimes people have little habits. For instance, I don’t like infinitives, split left, right, and center. I’m not too strict on grammar, but some authors, who should remain unnamed, have certain circumlocutions that they use like “the reason for that is this” instead of “therefore.”

My mother was from North Carolina and they have a tradition of good speech, and I think I picked up on it. I have a facility for finding the right words. I speak extemporaneously without great difficulty. I try to leave the flavor of people's text intact, but I find the right words easily. I think text ought to read well. I think of text in terms of its being read rather than as prose. The verbal form of language is the primary one, but good writing can also carry a great deal, and always has an appeal to the senses.

So, these are some of my principles in this, but that said, I am much divided in my mind about principles. One of my favorite quotes is: "The first thing a principle does is kill somebody" or "This is my principle and I am standing on it!" I much more like that one principle of British behavior: "The importance of not being earnest."

**JD: Mr. Wilde paraphrased.**

**ETD:** Yes, in fact, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of the funniest plays I ever heard. I keep on going back to it again and again, and I still enjoy it a lot. The summer theater here has a patio paved with bricks and people buy bricks for it and engrave them. My daughter Sarah bought a brick and it has my name on it and says: "A handbag!" (Pronounces "handbag" as a four-syllable word). I really love the way Lady Bracknell exclaims that! We're so lucky to have our summer theater.

**JD: Going back to do-it-yourself in general, why does that interest you so much?**

**EDT:** I believe that the building of things, the building itself, the act of building, is one of the most human activities you can do. There are a lot of things that distinguishes us from other creatures. Not that animals don't have tools, some do. But it's the building of things that's significant.

I think the best expression of that is on the front of harpsichords. It's either engraved, or painted on the cover of the keyboard or on the board below. It says: "[Name] has created me," where [name] is the name of the person who built the

instrument—and of course, it would be in Latin. That pushes the whole idea that this is something you have a creative relationship to. I don't think there is anything that replaces Homo Faber, Man the Maker. That's the whole point of it.

**JD: What's so great about audio do-it-yourself?**

**ETD:** Well, there are several aspects to it. There is the obvious money saving part, but also the fact that you can make your own equipment more reliable than commercial stuff, and when it fails, you can easily repair it yourself. But also I believe that building or constructing something yourself is a very satisfying human endeavor. My personal motivation is the music I listen to as well as the electronics and construction and fixing part. Slowly but surely circuits disappear inside chips, which is good for quality but not for the fun of DIY. One of the appeals of tubes is that you can actually "build the circuit," so to speak.

**JD: I wonder how many people are in DIY audio for the music or for the engineering.**

**ETD:** There's always some looking down the nose to those engineering types, as if they do not spend enough time with music or go to live performances. If you are serious about music, you ought to go to listen to the real thing once in a while.

**JD: But do you not think that reproduced music is a kind of art form on itself? If you go to a live performance, it's the total event—music, the ambiance, the well-dressed ladies, etc.—that determines your musical experience and you cannot ever reproduce that in your home. On the other hand, reproduced music, when done very well and well recorded, could exist on its own as art, but it is not the same as live music and it never will be.**

**ETD:** But music recorded for reproduction in the home is often tinkered with, and people were not realizing how much this was being done. When the recordings Columbia did in the '70s came out on CDs, it revealed the extent

of embarrassing engineer manipulation. They made a lot of changes in the final mix, with multi miking. I remember an AES presentation by a former Columbia engineer admitting that the constant moving of control sliders was making the music pretty much unlistenable. This became evident after we got the resolving power of the CD. We found that our precious music was heavily doctored. Coming back to your original question, in terms of how these arts are valued, I find that the inner circle of not only professionals, but also very knowledgeable amateurs, nowadays show an intimate knowledge of these processes. They have a great regard for talented engineers who do the mixing with minimal processing of the signal.

I once sat through a musical recording of Petrusca by Decca in Montreal, in the cathedral. I was sitting in the control room. They had homemade mixers, adapted an Apple to handle the two video recorders. Lots of control tables and lots of mikes. But the engineer barely moved any controls through the recording.

**JD: What do you find so satisfying in the publishing vocation?**

**ETD:** I do like very much to communicate and interact with people. I don't know what would have happened had I pursued a clerical career. In retrospect, I don't think I would have had the required skill sets. Yet, publishing is a different way to communicate, and the great thing is, you get to read all the articles first! Of course, now the Net gives anybody the chance to be a publisher and this has had a great effect on people's ability to learn how to communicate and interact.

**JD: Mr. Dell, thank you for your frankness and your time. And, on behalf of many tens of thousands of readers, thank you for bringing us 41 years of interesting, intriguing and enjoyable articles! aX**

*Editor's note: This interview was recorded in the fall of 2009. Almost two years later, Audio Amateur, Inc. was acquired by the Elektor Group and Ed Dell retired after 41 years of publishing audio-related DIY journals.*