

What Really Counts?

By: Blaine Peck

Here is something many of you might be able to relate to. If you are getting ready to build a deck or do a project in the kitchen, things like wood, nails, screws, saws, hammers, (aw heck, you get the idea) come in really handy. You wouldn't venture into the task without all the proper supplies and tools. Once you have all the right tools which, of course, includes a certain level of skill and expectation you can proceed with the job with a modicum of assurance that, if done in the proper order, you will be relatively close to your goal when you complete the job. Okay, so this isn't a home improvement newsletter and if it were I wouldn't be writing for it. In fact, I fall into the category of more money than time or skill when it comes to those tasks. Actually, no matter how little money I have I think I still do, but let's move on.

So, if I'm not talking about those kinds of projects, let's talk about updating your home stereo or adding home theater. I'll ask the question, what really counts? Is it better speakers (many beginners' first thought for improvement), more powerful amp, better CD player or pre-amp? Or worse yet is someone trying to tell you that you need to upgrade your cables? You can go from lamp cord to those crazy cables that look like you could power New York with them. When your significant other sees them he/she instantly hates them (another one of those Venus & Mars things) and when he/she hears how much they cost he/she laughs the kind of laugh where you know you've already lost any bargaining position or, worse yet, the war. No matter what the component, you can find tables of people during any lunch hour (somewhere) arguing about which is the most important one to upgrade. They ask finely tuned questions like "well, what kind of music do you listen to?" or "how many watts per channel do you have now?" Don't get me wrong, those are interesting questions in the right context but certainly not the only concerns when you are venturing into the journey of a new sonic future.

As I close in on the final (yeah, sure!) phases of my current upgrade journey, I have learned a lot about upgrading. I have learned that after years of being a transistor man I really love tubes. I also learned that each component you upgrade gives you a mixed message. You get the excitement, if you do it right, of what new horizons you can reach with your existing collection of music, but you also learn about the other weak links in your current sonic chain (by the way, that usually happens anywhere from 1 to 5 days after your most recent system change). It is directly proportional to how much money you have warming up your wallet. The less money you have, the fewer "weak link" questions you ask.

What happened in my case was, in a desire to listen to more music I decided to take some of my existing components (then 10 years dormant in terms of changes) and work toward a home theater set up for the family with an ear on also improving the stereo sonic experience. Since the decision was made I have sold off much of my excess recording studio equipment. There are two reasons for that. First off, my stereo has made one more move in its exodus from the living room. It only settled in the family room for a few months to lose to QVC and children's programming and has now moved into the basement. Secondly, I needed the old studio control room as an entertainment room and the cash from the recording gear so I had to rid myself of the space consuming equipment.

I initially purchased a Pro-Logic processor, multi-channel amp, a powered sub, center channel and experimented with numerous cables and interconnect systems (which is a whole story in itself). Most recently I upgraded my stereo

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power amp (tube based of course - smile) and added a stereo tube preamp, two full range front speakers and spent even more on cables, not to mention the "spiked" rack of shelves for gear and pedestals for the speakers. Sold a bill of goods you ask? Not a chance! If there is one thing I can say I learned that sums up all the truths about listening systems it would be "Everything Counts". As I sit on my deck (I had it built for me several years ago) and write this, I am still in shock over my latest step. I just filled the pedestals of my new Vandersteen 2Ce's with sand. I stood them back up, reconnected them and powered up my gear to experience a real awakening, an illumination. Everything was even tighter than before! I loved the sound before I did that but now the location and character of each instrument and voice was clearer and cleaner. WOW. I bought 100lbs of dry sand (smallest bag in paper) for \$3.82 and it made my stereo sound that much better. Cool deal!!

You can bet as I finish this upgrade project I am going to dig into every opportunity to tweak the system. Positional tweaks, vibration isolation, new kinds of Merlot (oh yeah, that can even help), you name it. That is what you can do with your spare time when you aren't listening to all the great music that's out there. Believe me, not only will you fall in love again with all your old favorites, you will find some new choice selections in your current collection. And that doesn't even take into account the vast amounts of untapped music you are unaware is even out there. Just think, in the future, your conversations may change from gear to music itself. Now that is a target worth shooting for. Never forget the target! It's better musical experiences. Don't get hung up on the process. Get in and then get out. The process is just part of reaching the goal. However, while you are there remember that everything counts in building your system. Ultimately it's the sonic experience that counts the most.