

May/June 2007  
Volume 6 Issue 3

Recent and  
Upcoming Events

# WILSON® AUDIOFILES

**April 12 - 15, 2007**  
HDI Show 2007  
Moscow, Russia  
Trent Workman Attending  
with Wilson Russian Distributor  
Ultima  
St. Petersburg

**April 12 - 15, 2007**  
Festival Son & Image 2007  
Montreal, Canada  
Peter McGrath Attending

**May 8 -12, 2007**  
New York HiFi Show  
Peter McGrath Attending

**May 7 - 18, 2007**  
Hemisferik Audio  
Australia and New Zealand  
Dealer Shows  
& Dealer Training  
with  
Trent Workman

## Authentic Excellence: Invasion of the Brand Snatchers

by John Giolas

*Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future.*

- Albert Camus

Magic and magic acts became an immensely popular form of entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The great music halls in Great Britain and Europe, as well as Vaudeville acts in the U.S., often featured magicians as the main draw. The core of any magician's art was of sleight of hand, also known as prestidigitation ("quick fingers") or legerdemain (from the French for "lightness of hand"). But it was the grand and ambitious stage acts that captivated the hearts and imaginations of audiences during the era. Magicians made their fortunes and acquired their fame performing never before seen illusions. It was an age of innocence where humankind was still capable of feeling wonder and surprise.



Harry Houdini (Born Ehrich Weisz)  
1874-1926  
Magician, Escape Artist

There was an understanding—a pact of sorts—that existed between audience and magician. The audience paid for the performance fully knowing what they were witnessing was not real; they weren't seeing magic but instead the result of a skilled performer perpetuating an illusion. The audiences, not inundated by the marvels of high-tech gadgets that have jaded our own generation, were awed and thrilled by what they saw. The fact that they did not know how the illusion was done only heightened their sense of wonder—and greatly increased the level of entertainment.

Unfortunately, sleight-of-hand techniques can also be used to cheat in gambling games, in street con games such as the three-shell game, or to steal. In some instances, magicians claimed supernatural powers, as was the case with the performances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century spirit mediums. This less savory use (abuse) of legerdemain and magic craft gained momentum during this time. Spiritism (later called spiritualism) - the charlatan act of communicating with the dead - became all the rage. Utilizing some of the same skills employed in legitimate magic acts,

(Cont. on pg. 2 as "Mediums")

## Mediums (Cont. from pg. 1)

magicians posing as spiritual “mediums” conned their patrons into believing they could communicate with their deceased loved ones. During the séance, a table would lean and tilt apparently of its own accord. Participants (called sitters) might feel a cold breeze on their faces, items might materialize apparently out of thin air, and musical instruments might play mysteriously. Finally, the medium would speak under the ostensible control of a spirit, relaying messages from the dearly departed. The magician posing as the medium changed the rules in order to exploit his customers; what was actually illusion was falsely portrayed as real.

Largely because of these illicit spiritists, the term “sleight of hand” frequently carries negative associations of dishonesty and deceit, and is also used metaphorically to describe marketing strategies designed to intentionally hide some portion of the truth.

I have often described my approach in our current ads and brochures as the anti-marketing marketing campaign. Wilson’s marketing strategy has succeeded because it employs a principle rarely seen in marketing: sincerity. It is based on this straightforward premise: the more you know about Wilson, the more you’ll understand how different we are. We simply set out to tell our story truthfully. I have to admit that I was caught off guard on how exceptionally well it was received. Wilson continues to receive literally hundreds of emails, phone calls, and warranty cards commenting positively on the ads and brochures. But not everyone has reacted positively. The current marketing climate has taught people to be wary – even cynical. I think this is because even the most scrupulous marketers employ some illusion to create an image that enhances their brand. But like the audience attending legitimate magic acts, the buying consumer knows that what he is observing is an illusion. Does wearing Calvin Klein’s Obsession really make the wearer more sexually attractive? Most high school boys wish it were so easy.

Of much greater concern to the future of high-end audio is the current trend of what I call “brand snatching.” Large Chinese companies are systematically acquiring British and American audio brands. (This is not limited to the audio world; a Chinese company recently acquired the defunct British car manufacturer, MG, with the intention of manufacturing cars under that brand name

in the PRC.) The trend goes something like this: Large Chinese manufacturers seek out and ultimately purchase (for pennies on the dollar) once great high-end brands that are either in financial crises or have actually failed. Subsequent to the purchase, they begin marketing the “resurrected” brand using a strategy that calls to mind the Spiritists of the late nineteenth century. Canny use of marketing sleight of hand generates the illusion that they are actually channeling the spirit and culture of the deceased company. With a clever bit of marketing prestidigitation they promote that they are rescuing these companies, positioning themselves as saviors altruistically salvaging iconic companies from the dustbin.

After the purchase has been made, all significant manufacturing and design is moved to China. These facilities typically benefit from government subsidy and employ extremely cheap labor; they are production houses literally looking for something – anything – to produce. The marketing process continues: the next strategy is specifically designed to parasitically exploit the remaining brand equity of the acquired mark. In the process, notions such as passion, culture, and history are treated as commodities to be bought and sold – and ultimately leveraged. And in the guise of exalting the acquired company’s wonderfully textured histories (and playing on the nostalgia of the audio community), the new owners position themselves along the continuum of that history without any apparent delineation. It’s as if by purchasing a brand, the

purchaser gains the right to call another company’s history its own.

Disturbingly, some circles of the high-end press are the unwitting accomplices in this grand illusion, becoming an accessory to this marketing sleight of hand. Elaborate (and fully paid) press junkets to country club-like Chinese manufacturing headquarters are choreographed and skillfully orchestrated. The Chinese manufacturers successfully set the stage for their grand illusion. The press has been successfully misdirected by clever marketing legerdemain (look here while I pull the rabbit from over there) into asking (and answering) the wrong set of questions. It has been remarkable to read some of the articles that come out these junkets; they read

**(Cont. on pg. 3 as “Press”)**

## the last quarter inch

In our series of ads, we’ve set out to show you the process that underlies the creation of every Wilson Audio loudspeaker. There is one final piece to the story.

Our commitment to the quality of your listening experience doesn’t end when you hand your money to the dealer. That’s because your authorized Wilson dealer will come to your home and set up your new loudspeakers in your listening environment. It’s not something you have to cajole the dealer into doing; every Wilson dealer is trained in a unique set-up procedure devised by Dave Wilson himself.

Every room is different, and nothing will impact the quality of your final listening experience more than how the loudspeaker is positioned in that singular space. But every room has in common, what Dave Wilson has dubbed, “zones of acoustic neutrality.” These are definable spots where room-induced effects like slap echo, standing waves, and comb-filter effects are minimal.



A process of vocalization is used to determine the outer boundaries of the zone of neutrality. The resulting space (usually less than two feet square) is taped off into a workable grid.

Using a familiar recording, the installer will systematically move the speakers within the grid until everything coalesces—voices sound timbrally accurate, spatially focused, and coherent. The final placement involves adjusting the speakers in increments as small as ¼ inch! Usually without the need for additional room treatment, the deleterious effects of the listening space have been effectively neutralized.

What awaits you then? Music without the subtle veils of distortion that our brains recognize as the indicators of reproduced—as opposed to live—music. It doesn’t take a pair of “golden ears” to recognize when these veils are removed.

However we try to define it (and the one given is that it will resist language), the revelation of music’s numinous enchantment becomes the readily available experience of every Wilson Audio loudspeaker owner.

Wilson Audio · Authentic Excellence



2233 Mountain Vista Lane, Provo, UT 84606 · 801-377-2233 · wilsonaudio.com

## Press (Cont. from pg. 2)

more like travelogues and less like journalistic think pieces. I have yet to see any thoughtful writing on questions of authenticity, excellence, and the implications of dishonest provenance that are intrinsic to brand snatching companies. Ultimately, these press pieces (perhaps unintentionally) service the corporate mindset that promotes image over substance.

The press has also largely ignored the much stickier issue of geographic origin. For whatever reason, it has become politically incorrect to question the influence of culture on a product. It seems self-evident to me: would a Ferrari still be a Ferrari if the cars were made in China? Part of Ferrari's intrinsic *Ferrariness* is the Italian origin of their cars. The experience of a Ferrari automobile is fundamentally predicated on an *objet d'art* envisioned and subsequently lovingly constructed by artisans. The hand-stitched Connolly leather seats create a visual, olfactory, and tactile experience completely singular to Ferrari (others seats may be equally great, but are fundamentally different). The seats themselves rise above utilitarian function and become art objects in and of themselves. The hand-assembled motor with its race-bred roots – and heritage – creates an experience that far exceeds the notions of horsepower and swift forward motivation. A Ferrari engine is an art form appreciated at many levels; it is a treat for the eyes, the ears (there is a good reason Ferrari owners seek out underpasses and tunnels), and is felt in the form of a not-so-subtle kick in the backside. Like all things high-end, Ferraris can be appreciated and experienced on a myriad of levels and from many perspectives – these are but two examples. But isn't part of this experience the very *Italianness* of it?

It is not to say, of course, that authentically high-end audio (or high-end products, for that matter, in any category) could not originate from China or other emerging markets. In the late sixties and early seventies, Japanese companies were engaged in the acquisition of faltering high-end brands such as Marantz, Sherwood, and Fisher. It was a dark time for the high-end. Back then, two magazines, *Stereo Review* and *Audio*, dominated the mainstream press. Julian Hirsch was the primary equipment reviewer at *Stereo Review*. His hallmark was the contention that all equipment, regardless of price or level of execution, essentially sounded the same. Each Hirsch review followed the same tedious path strewn with mind-numbing measurements ultimately leading to the same inevitable conclusion: the gear under test neither sounded better nor worse than any number of equally good, competing brands. In the newsstand next to *Stereo Review*, *Audio* magazine featured Leonard Feldman who, in conjunction with promoting his testing facility, Feldman Labs, was spreading a similar message. Mired as the press was in this strange version of audio socialism, questions of authenticity, passion, and excellence were simply irrelevant. The notion of excellence was almost anathema to Hirsch and Feldman, treated as a grandiose pretence perpetuated by specialty manufacturers. During this era, excellence was devalued, mediocrity heralded.

It was in this manured field of audio socialism where the seeds of brand snatching were first sown, led by young Japanese

companies trying to take a short cut to legitimacy. In the context of the specialty market, what does the notion of “brand equity” really mean? Can it really be bought and sold? Companies with cultures rooted in authentic excellence acquire reputations congruent with that culture. Their brands gain cachet and “equity.” But legitimacy, passion, excellence, and vision that reside at the center of great specialty endeavors – their brands – are not purchasable commodities. Thus, most of the brands snatched during the seventies were quickly sucked dry and discarded. Those few that survive today have been entirely redefined and, as such, are no longer seen as high-end.

Of course, high-end products are not necessarily more likely to come from one specific region or culture over another. But it is true that all high-end products are influenced by the regional culture from which they originate. And, as we all know, since the early seventies, many great *original and authentic* high-end companies have emerged from Japanese culture. Like all passion-driven endeavors (as opposed to those motivated by greed or expedience), the Japanese high-end comes from a genuine place and is inspired and sculpted by their unique culture and history. The fact that the products are uniquely Japanese, just as a Ferrari is recognizably Italian, adds to the anthropomorphized persona of the product. Where else, for example, could the magnificent Koetsu phono cartridges, inspired by the Samurai tradition, have originated other than Japan?

No one likes to see once-great high-end companies fail. We want to believe that greatness is enduring and timeless. So should we be concerned about these brand snatchers? Aren't they providing a service to the audio industry by rescuing these troubled or defunct businesses? Won't they ensure that these great brands continue?

I recently had a long conversation with an old friend whose company mass manufactures the bulk of their goods offshore, specifically in China and India. He is adamant that globalization is inevitable. All big corporations are doing it. My friend maintained that Wilson's ideas on the specialty culture are outdated and do not reflect the reality of the world market. His strong contention was that globalization is the only way a company can maintain their competitive advantage. If you can make your goods cheaper in China, you are insane not to. You're leaving money on the table and giving the advantage to your competitor. Finally, in a good-natured way, my friend suggested that Wilson's notions of the artisan guild are quaint, squarely residing within the realm of antiquity.

Dave Wilson has asked this question of his own company: Would the experience of owning a Wilson loudspeaker be the same without the dedicated, passionate guild of people who work so closely with Dave to execute his vision of excellence? His continued loyalty to this gifted band of craftsman makes clear the answer.

I have written before that the principles inherent to corporate, shareholder-driven cultures are not only incompatible to specialty markets but are **(Cont. on pg. 4 as “Principles”)**

## Principles (Cont. from pg. 3)

ultimately corrosive to them. And by the same token, modernity (especially in business trends and cycles) does not equal excellence anymore than old-world craftsmanship equals antiquated. High-end, at its best, is a wonderful admixture of old world ideas and high technology. At Wilson, tradition, history, provenance, and the artisan guild comfortably sit alongside cutting edge technology and execution. A tradition of excellence and craftsmanship with the appropriate measure of modern technology and business thought define an important part of the high-end business model. But more than this, in order for anything to be called high-end, the product and company must be *authentic*. Hyperbolic marketing can never successfully displace substance. High-end products survive – even thrive – because the story told is always congruently and irrevocably tied to a compelling experience.

It is troubling, then, that those who question authenticity of origin (as opposed to origin itself) are labeled as politically incorrect. In fact, those that defend the inauthentic and ethically challenged practice of brand snatching trot out the pejorative label “Xenophobia” to euphemistically pigeonhole anyone who questions the dubious notion that one can purchase and subsequently import a (deceased) business culture. It is ultimately ironic that a philosophy that recognizes and honors the contribution of a regional culture to greatness is intentionally mislabeled as xenophobic.

Dave Wilson is an artist. His medium of choice is the loudspeaker. What does it mean to be an artist? In its broadest meaning, it is the physical expression of creativity or imagination. The word art comes from the Latin *ars*, which, loosely translated, means “arrangement.” Art is commonly understood as the act of making material works (or artworks), which, from concept to creation, hold a fidelity to the creative impulse. ‘Art’ is distinct from creative work driven by necessity (i.e. vocation), by biological drive (i.e. procreation or sustenance), by greed, or by any undisciplined pursuit of recreation. All this being said, it remains that art will always elude description. But we all naturally intuit that one who purchases the rights to sell reproductions of Picasso’s paintings, does not and cannot purchase Picasso’s vision or talent. On the other hand, Picasso could mentor an apprentice who may go on to make his or her own (assuming the apprentice has talent, passion, and vision, too) art in that tradition. Mentoring requires an immersion in the culture of the original artist. And a great deal of time.

But even with today’s immensely sophisticated technology, our ability to instantly access and utilize any kind of information, and our ability to exploit the world’s resources, it is still simply impossible to purchase the culture, history, and passion that reside at the heart of any high-end company.

As séances reached the height of popularity in the early twentieth century, a group of magicians (most notably Harry Houdini) began debunking self-proclaimed psychics and mediums. These magicians’ training in the art of legerdemain allowed them to expose the frauds who had even managed to successfully fool many scientists and academics. They knew that the spiritists that used their magic skills to promote false ideas out of greed threatened the legitimacy of the entire magic industry.

It is an intractable edict of marketing that no company venerated with the image of excellence will survive long term if that assertion is based on hyperbole rather than substance. Specialty businesses – and industries – thrive (or fail) in direct proportion to their ability to differentiate themselves from their cynical corporate counterparts. We do ourselves a disservice if we do not recognize and point out those that threaten the very qualities that make us special.

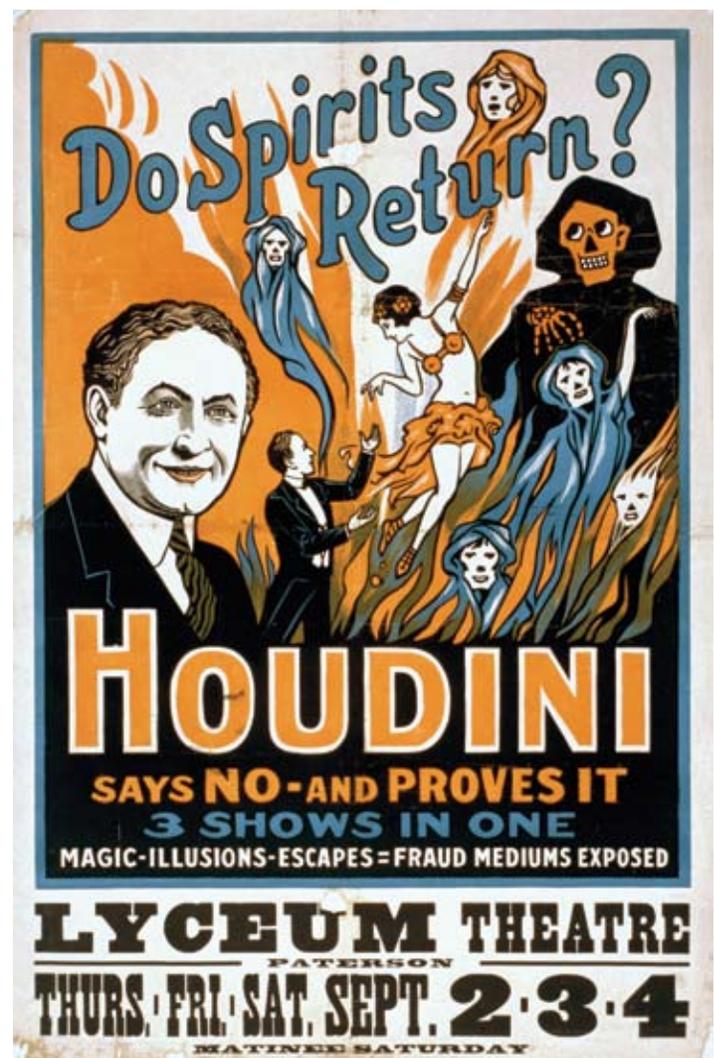
Perhaps this from a M\*A\*S\*H episode perhaps sums it up best:

Hawkeye strikes out with a beautiful new nurse at Rosie’s bar. Feeling rejected, he joins B.J. and Charles who sit along the bar. Charles decides he’ll take a crack and goes over to the nurse’s table. The two of them hit it off immediately.

*Hawkeye, amazed, turns to B.J. and asks: “What’d he try that I didn’t try?”*

*B.J. answers: “I don’t know. Perhaps sincerity?”*

*Hawkeye: “Yea . . . I can fake that.”*



The following is excerpted with permission from *Ultra Audio's* "TWBAS" posted March 1, 2007 at [www.ultraaudio.com](http://www.ultraaudio.com). *Ultra Audio* is a part of *The SoundStage! Network*.

## ***"The World's Best Audio System: Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 8 Loudspeakers*** *by Jeff Fritz*

"And despite all the 'breakthroughs' in speaker design that you'll hear about as you walk around CES or read about in the magazines, this classic loudspeaker still sounds better than almost any new kid on the block that I've heard, many of which cost much more than this venerable Wilson Design. In high-end audio in the winter of 2007, the WATT/Puppy 8, compared to much of its competition, is actually a pretty good deal.

"...My initial impressions were both positive and, considering some of my past purchases, a bit disconcerting. In most areas of sound reproduction, the WATT/Puppy 8 was much closer to the larger, far more expensive (\$135,000/pair) Alexandria X-2 – a reference-class speaker that I've enjoyed in the Vault for some time – than it had any right to for its size and price. There was no question that the W/P shared the attributes of its big sister, albeit on a smaller scale.

"...The seeming incongruity of small size and big sound also distinguished the WATT/Puppy 8 from other loudspeakers of similar size that I've heard in my room:

Like the ant you see carrying a crumb five times its size, the W/P8 had the ability to perform *much* larger than I would have thought from looking at it. . . .Perhaps earlier versions of the WATT/Puppy had this ability to play big to various degrees, but I don't recall hearing them do so with the ease and fluidity of the W/P8s – whatever I threw their way just flowed right through these speakers.

"...The soundstage was wall-to-wall, the bass remained taut and defined, and the vocals lost no presence or texture. It's natural to focus on this aspect of the 8s' performance, because it's an area in which so many audiophile speakers fail – most are either good at reproducing at low levels only music that's limited at the frequency extremes, *or* they come alive only when played at much higher levels. Few do both equally well, but the W/P8 is one of them.

"...The new tweeter sounded silky-smooth from the bottom of its passband to the uppermost limits of audibility. It displayed fine detail effortlessly, and sounded as if it is quite low in distortion.

"...All of this is to say that the quality you expect for the price is there in spades. Yes, \$27,900 is a chunk of change, but for that price you should expect and receive a first-class experience, and with the WATT/Puppy 8s, that's what you get. You can't just take these details for granted in the high-end audio industry; therefore, it's critical to point them out when they're in order.

"Another Wilson Audio speaker, another rave review. Are you surprised? I've spent more time in the Music Vault in the four months since the WATT/Puppy 8s arrived than I did in the preceding six months with other speakers I had in for review. That fact alone defines *my* experience. The WATT/Puppy 8 is superb on all counts. I'm sure it will find many a home in fine audio systems around the globe, and assuming proper setup and ancillary equipment, I can't imagine it failing to satisfy in any of them. From what I heard the pair of them do in my room, you can't consider speakers in this price class without giving the WATT/Puppy 8 a whirl. The Wilson tradition continues."

## **Check It Out: [www.wilsonaudio.com](http://www.wilsonaudio.com) Enters Phase Two**

Positive feedback continues to pour in about Wilson Audio's newly designed website. Clients and dealers alike have commented on the new color scheme, the fresh layout, the wealth of information, and the ease of navigation.

Phase two of the website development has recently been completed and activated. The major new addition in Phase two is the "Designer" feature, a feature much like the build your own portion of most high end automobile web sites.

To find the "Designer", select "PRODUCT" from the Wilson Audio home page. On the opening product page, click on any of the speaker names. When the second level menu appears, select "DESIGNER." In the main frame, you will see both a front and a back view of the selected loudspeaker. Click on one of the color buttons to the right, and the speaker color will change. The text appearing under "Paint Color" will indicate which WilsonGloss color you are viewing. The user also has the option to change grill color and hardware color. The Designer feature of the web site is a good place to begin determining loudspeaker finish color, but it is best for clients to view a dealer's color sample book before finalizing a color decision as the web only allows for close approximation and not exact matches on colors portrayed.



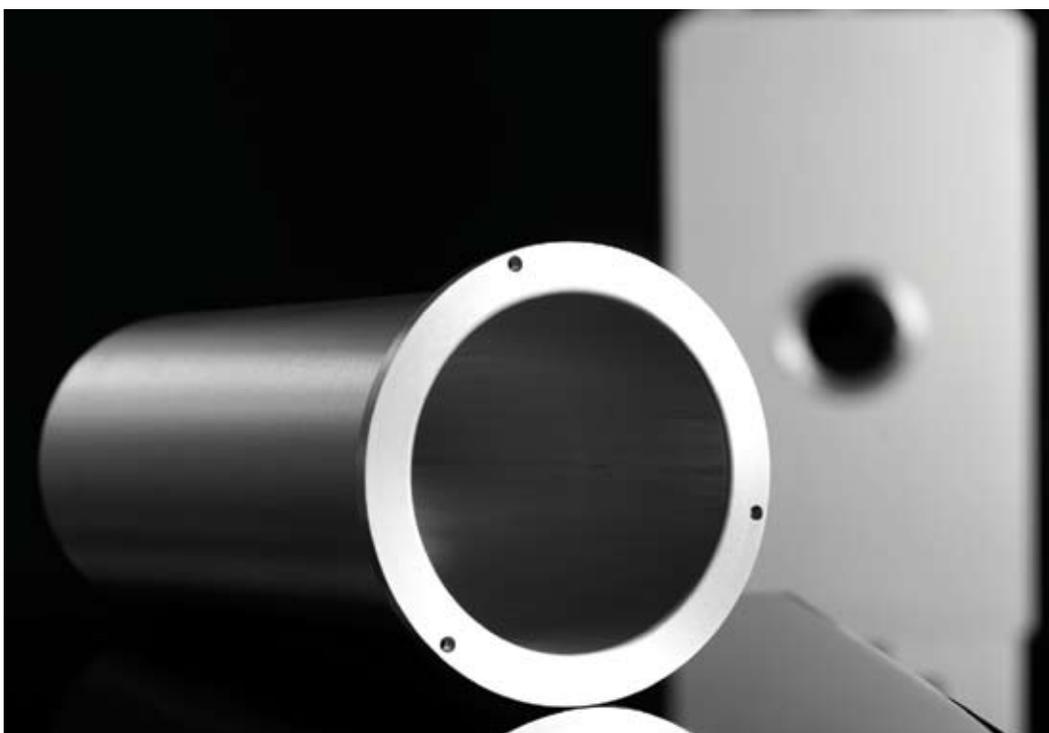
# extravagant

A survey of high-end speakers (including those in the increasingly crowded over \$40k market) reveals that most loudspeaker companies use injected-molded plastic ports. Some might conclude—given that a majority of reputable manufacturers find this solution adequate—that Wilson Audio’s approach is extravagant. Or even gratuitous.

All of the machined ports in Wilson Audio loudspeakers are milled from solid billets of aluminum.

They are undeniably striking examples of machine art. But are they necessary?

Is it necessary for a Swiss watchmaker to utilize precious stones in his watch movements? Or for a winemaker to insist on barreling each vintage in new French oak? Or, to ask the question conversely, would it be acceptable to put vinyl seats in a Ferrari?



These are the sorts of questions that inevitably arise when art meets commerce—the visionary meets the accountant. In this case, the question comes down to this: could Dave Wilson justify the cost of milled aluminum ports on aesthetic grounds alone, even if they imparted no sonic advantage?

Fortunately, Dave did not have to agonize over this choice. Together with chief engineer Vern Credille (who has an academic background in the arcane subject of air turbulence) they devised extensive testing protocols for port designs. After evaluating several materials, the scientific data and critical listening tests proved the audible advantage of the aluminum port.

The ports are just a very visible statement of Dave Wilson’s longstanding purpose—to pursue his vision of sonic perfection without compromise. Understanding that purpose, are machined aluminum ports extravagant? Yes, deliberately. Are they gratuitous?

You decide.

**Wilson Audio · Authentic Excellence**

