



MARCH AUDIO: THE BACK STORY

AUDIO ESOTERICA: *Your description of yourself as an engineer makes sense given your resume — how did it all begin?*

ALAN MARCH: I have always had an interest in electronics and audio from... well, from the age of 10, I suppose. I've always played with things, ripping them apart — and, when I was a youngster, breaking them extensively! But professionally, I got into electrical and electronic engineering when I joined Rolls-Royce after leaving school. That's Rolls-Royce Aero Engines, not the cars.

AE: *And what was the engineering side of Rolls-Royce engines — some pretty high-current stuff?*

AM: No, not not at all. It was electrical and electronic support for the factory, and I quickly moved on to the engine test site. There's a lot of electronics in the test rigs. When you test jet engines and develop jet engines, you have to collect and analyse data about how they're working, and that can be from temperatures, pressures, vibration, stress and strain. Now, most people might turn around and say 'what on earth does that have to do with audio?' But it turns out that a lot of the things that we're recording are audio frequency signals, very low signal levels, like a vibration transducer. So you've got to get the vibration signal — a tiny vibration signal — off the engine out of the testbed which, as I'm sure you can imagine, is a pretty harsh environment with lots of vibration; lots of noise. Get it and record it and look at it. So I have been analysing and acquiring and recording audio-frequency signals that just weren't music for decades. Basically like a recording engineer. But one important difference is that everything we recorded had to be absolutely accurate, because the data you're looking at could go back into the design of an engine. And if you record it wrong, or it's inaccurate, the worst-case scenario is an engine fails and the plane falls out the sky.

AE: *And you turn up on Air Crash Investigations.*

AM: Yes... so basically, very much like a recording engineer, using small signal amplifiers. And a lot of electronics that Rolls-Royce used was built in-house, because you couldn't buy it off the shelf. So I was very much involved with that, and low signal data processing and analysis, FFTs of signals coming from amplifiers, for decades. I worked on everything from the Joint Strike Fighter in the States to Concorde to all sorts of British military aircraft, across all the Rolls-Royce engines.

AE: *You must be a nightmare to sit next to on a plane, listening to every little jiggle.*

AM: Actually I'm probably the most relaxed person on the plane, because I know what's going on!

AE: *So then what?*

AM: I stayed at Rolls-Royce for nearly 20 years, travelling all around the world doing data recording on engines, doing my signal instrumentation, signal processing. I left them to work for a company called HDL, which provided digital recording systems specifically for the types of things that Rolls-Royce does. You might need to record hundreds of channels of data, and they developed a recording system to move Rolls-Royce away from analogue — because we actually used to record vibration signals on reel-to-reel tape recorders.

AE: *Wow. But don't knock it, reel-to-reel is still regarded as one of the best sources in hi-fi...*

AM: Yes! — but these were 28-track FM tape recorders. I became very adept at swapping reels over very quickly, because engines always have a habit of going bang when you stop recording! So I worked for that company developing the digital systems for companies such as Rolls-Royce, General Electric and others.

AE: *Did you find limitations in digital recording in those relatively early days?*

AM: Well the biggest issue we had was data storage. We created fantastic amounts of data, terabytes per day — these robotic tape systems would archive as you go along. You might be recording 256 channels at 80kHz bandwidth, and going 12 hours a day. So a lot of data. That's a lot more channels than your average recording studio...

AE: *So how old are you at this point?*

AM: Mid-late 30s, I suppose. And eventually, my wife and I decided we'd like to have a bit of a change, and we decided to emigrate to Australia. And that was literally 10 years ago tomorrow.

AE: *Congratulations!*

AM: Thank you. So I worked in engineering companies in Perth, doing things such as vibration analysis for mining companies on their rotating equipment, because some of them have gas turbines and motors. So you're looking at vibrations and things going on there. Also working in their noise and acoustics departments.

AE: *So that's how you ended up in Western Australia, that's where the work was?*

AM: Well my wife's an engineer, a civil engineer. So 10 years ago, it was the easiest place to start and get a job, because of the mining industry in Western Australia — so much engineering-based work is based in Perth — and we just stayed. We like it in Perth, it's a bit more sleepy than, say, Sydney or Melbourne!

After four years we got our citizenship, then after that I was feeling I'd done this for a long time, and perhaps I don't really want to be travelling up to the Pilbara doing engineering work, I want to do what I enjoy. And I want to be the boss! So I packed that in, and in 2018 started March Audio.

AE: *So that sounds like a sideways step into consumer audio, but presumably you'd been developing that interest over the interim period?*

AM: Of course. I've been interested in audio and listened to music since I was a kid; it's always been a hobby. Like probably everyone my age, I had a NAD 3020 amplifier, then I progressed through to Naim gear, Meridian gear... one of my favourites was my TAG McLaren.

AE: *Oh, that's a controversial one for me... we had quite a run in with Udo [Zucker, of IAG McLaren Audio, which lasted five years from 1998 to 2003] when I was at What Hi-Fi? — he was spectacularly arrogant about our listening rooms so we were moderately arrogant back. That was just as he took over Audiolab.*

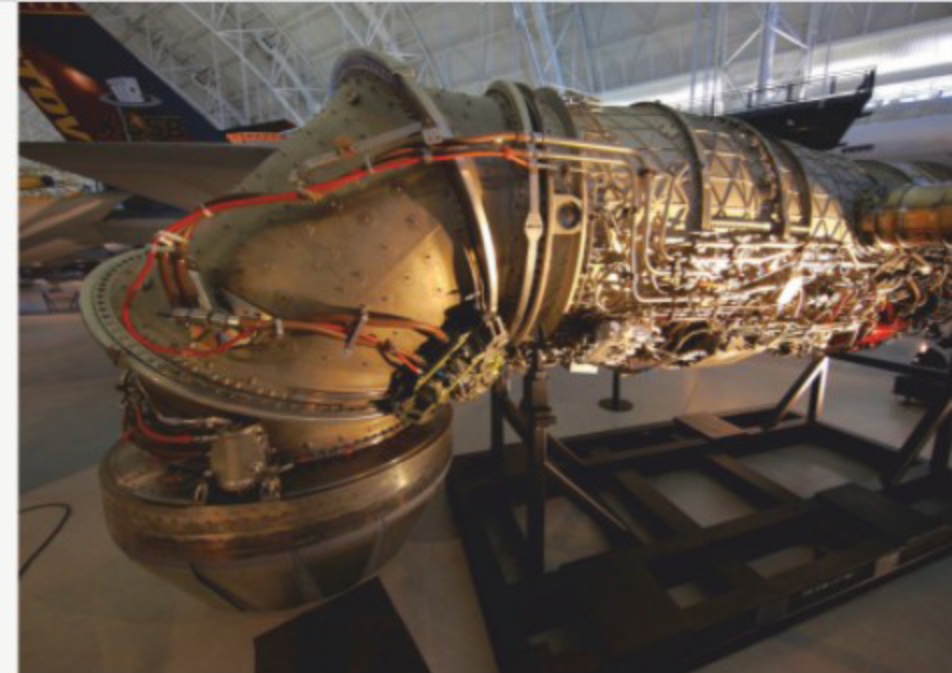
AM: That's right, I visited the factory and did some listening tests up there, which was very interesting. But I had that for a very long time, using it day in and day out for probably 10 years, and didn't sell it until it was about 15 years old.

AE: *So once you'd decided to do this, where do you start, to build a hi-fi company from scratch?*

AM: Well I did a lot of research, and I knew people. And with Class-D technology really moving ahead at a great rate of knots, power amplifiers seemed the place to start. So it was a case of developing the products — studying, generating relationships with suppliers and so on.

AE: *With a new product, a power amp, how do you differentiate it from anybody else that's using Class-D modules?*

AM: It's interesting, because it's quite a low bar for people to get over, to start banging these sorts of boxes out. And it's difficult not to be critical — I won't be specific about companies — but some of them really are just banging boxes out. They don't know what they're doing. They don't have the background knowledge of electronics and the signal integrity, and so on. Practically every single competitor to us doesn't even put r.f. filters on the front of the amplifier, they just connect them straight out to the outside world. And with Class-D, that's a problem, because r.f. noise getting into the amplifier can intermodulate with the switching signal, and then you get 'birdies' and noise in the background. So it's having a deeper fundamental understanding



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of electronics and signal processing and signal integrity that helps us differentiate ourselves.

And customer service as well — I enjoy interacting with customers. When people email me and ask 'what's a good amp to go with this speaker, for example, I go out and look up the impedance plots of the speakers and actually give an informed opinion about what's going to be the best amp for them. It's not just a case of saying 'Oh, go for our most expensive amp!'

AE: *How's it gone, and how long did it take to get moving? To have COVID happen only a year in must have been a bit worrying!*

AM: Yes. Well, by last Christmas we were selling a reasonable number of amps. It was fairly steady and regular — not huge quantities, but then we didn't have the capability to put out huge quantities of amplifiers at that time. Then it got a little quiet, in fact we began to get a bit concerned, but not long after, and probably just before COVID happened, sales really started to pick up. And during COVID, they just carried on increasing, and the figures have kept on going up and up, completely opposite to what we expected. Maybe it's because people are sat at home, you know, surfing the 'net, going 'what should I do? What should I buy?' We've certainly seen a big increase in sales. It's been complicated by supply issues, COVID delays — Purifi hasn't had any supply issues but Hypex shut its factory down at the start of COVID, so that caused some delays for customers, but when you explain to them what's going on they go 'fair enough'. I am just getting to the tail end of clearing that backlog.

AE: *Well then we'll leave you to it! Alan, thank you. ■*

Interview: Jez Ford

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