

Seeking High Fidelity

In a Low Fidelity World

Dan Ofstedal -Mar 25, 2026 ¹

“They call me the seeker, I’ve been searching low and high.” — The Who, The Seeker

I went to high school in Storm Lake, Iowa, a nicer-than-average town which — as advertised — sat along a lake. As a teenager of 15, I worked in a Super Valu, stocking shelves and carrying out groceries. I was eager to work so that I could earn money. I was eager to earn money so that I could buy a stereo.

My parents listened only to classical music, but I was a rock n’ roll fanatic. And almost equal to my love of music was the idea of owning fine stereo components. I subscribed to Stereo Review and High Fidelity magazines, and stayed up late poring over the stereo mail-order catalogue from Warehouse Sound in San Luis Obispo, California. The pictures of those amplifiers, with their glowing lights, made me think that something perfect—even transcendent—was out there, possible, attainable.

The word “fidelity” comes from the Latin *fidelis* — faithful. So high fidelity audio means faithfulness to the original sound, to the source signal. At fifteen, I understood it only in the musical context. It would take me much longer to understand what I was really trying to be faithful to.

I saved my money and did buy a stereo system, including a Pioneer SX-750 receiver from Warehouse Sound. And I was happy. I listened to records and tapes with friends. I listened to records and tapes alone. In my room at night, I would listen to albums by The Stones, The Who, Zeppelin, and Rush.

Fast forward several years and I am married, have a baby girl, and am selling my stereo components and speakers at a garage sale. I am doing my best to simplify, to downsize, to make room. And I did make room. Room for more children and the happiness they bring. Room for other work and endeavors.

My love of music continued, of course, albeit heard through car speakers, boom boxes, borrowed stereo components, and Bluetooth speakers. And I thoroughly enjoyed the music. But I never completely lost that feeling, that hankering, that longing, for the perfect components that could match the music itself; that could perhaps enable the music to transcend, and me along with it.

And so recently I decided to do just that: assemble the perfect stereo system, where each of the components is perfectly matched and tuned, so they become more than the sum of their parts. I researched ohms, capacitors, and amps. I took deep dives into the history, technology, and the philosophy behind each component.

Because I wanted an audiophile system but didn’t want to pay the audiophile price, I searched Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, and local used stereo shops. I went on quite a journey. And I discovered that what I was seeking wasn’t just something to play music on.

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The Amplifier



“And no one showed us to the land / And no one knows the where’s or why’s / But something stirs and something tries / And starts to climb toward the light.” — Pink Floyd, Echoes

Nelson Pass grew up in Northern California in the 1960s, and by the age of 14 was building speakers in his garage. He continued to develop audio equipment while getting a degree in physics at UC Davis. He was eccentric, an innovator, and in 1985 he designed the Adcom 555 amplifier, which revolutionized the industry. At 200 watts per channel, it was a beast, a giant-killer. Nelson Pass continues to this day to innovate and pursue the perfect, most transparent sound in an amplifier.

I drove to a southern suburb to buy the 555 from Joe, a 60-ish man who retired in 2020 and now spends his time buying and selling vintage audio equipment. With pride, he showed me his own vintage system, which he was continuously upgrading. The amp he sold me had been his personal amp for several years, and a technician had just thoroughly inspected, tested, and serviced the unit.

I now owned a piece of audio history.

The Preamplifier



“Vibrations reach on up to become light / And then through gamma, out of sight.” — The Moody Blues, The Word

I needed an Adcom preamp to match the 555 amp. The preamp is the “brains” of the system. The turntable, CD player, and other music sources all plug into the preamp, which sends the signal to the 555 amp. I drove to the home of Jeff, on a small lake in a southwestern suburb. I had arranged to meet Jeff there on a

Saturday morning at 10:00. But at 8:30 am an email arrived: he had to drive to the airport to pick up his daughter, who was flying in from New York City a day early to avoid an approaching snow storm. He told me he would leave the preamp outside, and asked me to leave the cash under a rock. I did so, and drove away, preamp in hand.

The Speakers



“Hark now, hear the sailors cry / Smell the sea and feel the sky / Let your soul and spirit fly / Into the mystic.” — Van Morrison, Into the Mystic

In 1960, at the age of 12, Jim Thiel was a serious piano student and was also repairing audio equipment. He went on to study physics at the University of Kentucky and began an obsession with achieving the truest, most authentic sound possible from speakers, notably solving the problem of time and phase coherence. He went on to design and build speakers that are lauded to this day. If you set up Thiels correctly, you can close your eyes and “see” the singer standing right in front of you, between the speakers. One such speaker is the Thiel SCS4T, which also happens to be a thing of beauty.

I found a pair for sale in a northeastern suburb and drove there to meet Kris, the seller, on a Monday afternoon. He stood with the door to his 1960s split-level home wide open. He was affable and eager to explain his own system. The Thiel speakers had to go to make room for his new speakers, which stickered for about the price of a new car. He explained that his living room was strictly for music. The family room, downstairs, was the high-end home theater—two very separate endeavors.

The audiophile “old guard” believes that 2-channel stereo is the only true path to high-fidelity, and that home theater is different—and inherently inferior. From that point of view, listening to the Beatles’ White Album in surround sound is an act of artistic vandalism, like watching Casablanca colorized by a computer.

By now, a theme was emerging. Joe was always upgrading. Jeff inherently trusted me — a fellow audio guy — to leave the cash. Kris was moving on to speakers worth a car. These men were not hobbyists dabbling in electronics. They were seekers — restless, relentless, convinced that the next component would finally close the gap between what they had and what they could hear in their heads. These audiophiles never simply buy the components, assemble the system, and stop. They are constantly looking for that upgrade to fix what they perceive as the weak link in their system. And when they fix that link, they identify another. It’s a process without end — the same relentless seeking that drove Nelson Pass and Jim Thiel.

The Subwoofer



“And it’s whispered that soon, if we all call the tune / Then the piper will lead us to reason.” — Led Zeppelin, Stairway to Heaven

Subwoofers were once a fringe product in the audiophile world. In the 1990s, home theater popularized them because they emphasized the “thump” as the dinosaur approached on screen. I searched high and low for the perfect vintage subwoofer, but late one night I realized that perhaps the perfect system didn’t have to be uniformly vintage. My setup could have heterodox harmony.

In the 2000s, advances in technology resulted in subwoofers that were precise, working together with the main speakers to make a more accurate sound, not just a bigger boom. The company SVS was started in 1998 by three guys working together in an Ohio garage, a new generation of innovators. They built a 12-inch cube that uses dual-opposing physics to disappear into a room while still rattling the windows. They only sell direct to consumers, and I became one of them. They had an open-box model, and I saved \$200.

This was the one component I bought without a handshake, without a living room tour, without a story. An online form, a shipping label, a box on the porch. And yet it fit perfectly — which felt like its own kind of lesson about staying flexible and looking for mismatches that actually match.

The CD Player



*“We are will and wonder, bound to recall, remember
We are Born of One Breath, One Word.
We are all One Spark, Sun becoming. — Tool, Pneuma*

Ken Ishiwata grew up in post-war Japan. As a child, he played violin, and at the age of ten built his first amplifier. He went on to a long career at Marantz as a kind of “acoustic alchemist” who would fine-tune amplifiers by changing out a single capacitor. He famously said, “I don’t make the sound, I reveal it.” After leaving Marantz in 2019, Ishiwata chose to collaborate with the family-owned audio maker Rotel. He wanted to prove his philosophy one last time, by adding his magic to a Rotel CD player and amplifier. Before they were released, Ishiwata died, and a “tribute” label affixed to the front of those components.

I found a seller, Jim, who had both the Rotel CD player that I wanted and the Rotel amp that I didn’t need. He wanted to sell them both to a single buyer. He lived in the west metro, and agreed to bring them to my home so I could demo them. Jim is a 60-ish retired cop from a northern suburb, who drives a silver Subaru Outback. He was upgrading his system (a familiar refrain), and explained that he was considering the purchase of a CD player with an MSRP in the thousands, as well as a tube amplifier, a serious upgrade. We

talked about stereo components, connector cables, and CDs versus record albums. I became the buyer of both components, and I have officially become yet another audio component flipper (or hoarder).

The Complete System

“We are stardust / We are golden / And we’ve got to get ourselves / Back to the garden.” — Joni Mitchell, Woodstock

At this point, I have to pose the question: what is it that we are all chasing?

Fidelity — Faithfulness. These men — Joe, Jeff, Kris, Jim (and many others I met on my quest); Nelson Pass, Jim Thiel, Ken Ishiwata — were all, in their own way, trying to be faithful to something. To the original. To the source. To the signal as it was meant to be heard, before the noise and interference crept in.

We all know that the transformative essence of the music is always available. I’ve had profound experiences listening to an AM radio in a Ford Pinto, or even the tiny speaker in my phone. In those moments, the beauty didn’t depend on the “ohm” or the “capacitor.” The music itself did the job. Transcendence isn’t something we manufacture; it’s a frequency that is always broadcasting, whether we hear it or not.

And yet we continue to chase fidelity. Something in us believes that what is here is not quite enough. The ego insists that we are unfinished, incomplete—that with just one more upgrade, one more refinement, we will finally arrive. Like an audiophile diagnosing a weak link in the chain, we assume the problem lies in the equipment — in ourselves — a never-ending endeavor.

The truth is that we spend our lives looking for something that we already have. Like Ken Ishiwata fine-tuning a circuit, we don’t have to create or find meaning; we only need to reveal it by removing the noise.

What we are after is High Fidelity Living: living with the understanding that we are always part of the signal chain—connected to nature, to each other, and to everything; that we are always in the right place at the right time. When we drop our ego—the “signal noise” of judgment, anger, and fear—the distortion fades away. We stop feeling like separate parts and become the music itself. Realizing this, we can be “in the world, but not of the world.” This is freedom.

In this state of “High Fidelity,” the bass is always beautiful, the treble is crystalline, and the speakers eventually disappear entirely.

We realize we don’t need to find “the Garden.” We are already in it. We always were.

The forests are always echoing with laughter. We just need to be still enough to finally hear it. Actually, we aren’t just hearing it. We *are* it.

Of course, now that I’m really listening, I can’t help but notice that my turntable is starting to sound like the weak link in my audio chain. Time to do some research on turntables and upgrade. My next essay will be called “Wow and Flutter.”