

On Saturday, February 6, 2016, the monthly meeting of the Audio-Video Club of Atlanta was held at The Audio Company in Marietta Square. Our hosts were Gordon Waters, Keith Sequerra, and Jim Krumpke, and we had a special guest speaker, Kevin Hayes from Valve Amplification Company (VAC). This meeting featured a great presentation from Kevin on amplifier design and the products of his company. We also got to listen to some very high end equipment in several showrooms in the shop. There were over 50 folks present (an excellent turnout), and multiple new faces.

Up first was John, president, at 2 pm. He thanked our hosts, Kevin, and also Chuck who worked hard to set this up. There were several announcements about upcoming meetings and the Headphone "Canlanta" meeting in May (an all-day event). He reminded members that many have a March annual dues anniversary, and that the web site will email them their "invoice" 30 days before they are due. There is a 30 day grace period after their due date before their "members only" access to the web site will be turned off. We then held nominations for President, VP of Industry Relations, and Secretary which will be elected at the March meeting. John Morrison and Dennis Juranek (current VP) were nominated for president, Chuck Bruce for VP of Industry Relations, and Tom Horner for Secretary. The web site will email members for their votes.

After John, Gordon introduced our speaker, Kevin, from VAC. His more than one hour fascinating talk focused on the state of amplifier design, the history of VAC, how VAC voices and produces their very high quality tube amplifiers, and their latest innovation, the VAC iQ Continuous Automatic Bias System.

Kevin founded VAC in 1990 when he was told his "homemade" amps sounded better than most commercial amps. He had built Heathkits in his teens, and discovered that he was disappointed in the sound of solid state amps. The company now has about 20 employees in their Sarasota, FL location. Kevin personally listens to each product before it is shipped to make sure it sounds the way he designed it. VAC only makes tube amps because Kevin believes that transistor (solid state) amps are not as detailed as tubes, and that tubes better reflect the input signal (a better foundation to build upon). They also manufacture highest quality preamps and integrated amps. Their website is www.vac-amps.com.

Kevin discussed the "attacker's advantage" of the product innovation curve. At first it is hard to come up with a new innovation, then there is a "ah-ha" moment (a jump in results), then slowly slight better results over time after that. The curve resembles a '_' with slowly rising straight line after the ']''. However, other new innovations may stop the innovation work being done on the "older" technology. This is what happened with tube amps when transistor (solid state) amps came out.

When designing his amps, Kevin listens to the prototypes using various types of speakers (dynamic, planar, and electrostatic) with different interconnects (speaker wires) to make sure that the amp is bringing out the best of each of these. He told us how the wiring inside the amplifier, even wiring with the exact same specifications yet from different manufacturers, can make that amplifier sound different. He gave a shout out to electric guitar players who kept tube amps "alive". He discussed their iQ Bias System which has been in development for 20 years and is now being rolled out in several products, and the engineering design behind the system. He told us that they could not prove mathematically why the system improves the sound, but consistent listening session results shows that it works.

After Kevin's presentation, the many folks present listened to the products in the showrooms of the shop. The systems included products from several manufacturers.

First system:

Speakers were Focal Grand Utopia (\$200K retail)

VAC Statement 450S power amp (\$44K retail)

Transrotor turntable (not sure which arm or cartridge, \$30K retail)

VAC Master Preamp (\$40K retail)

Unknown speaker wires and interconnects (but high quality for sure)

Second system:

Speakers were Tannoy Kingdom Royal (\$93K retail)

VAC Signature 200 IQ power amp with iQ Bias system (\$14K retail)
Clearaudio Innovation Wood turntable (not sure which arm or cartridge, \$32K retail)
VAC Master preamp (\$40K retail)
Unknown speaker wires and interconnects (but high quality for sure)

Third system:

Speakers were Focal Scalia Utopia (\$34K retail)
VAC Signature 170 IQ power amp with iQ Bias system (\$10K retail)
Turntable (not sure which arm or cartridge, \$11K retail)
VAC Signature Mk 2 preamp (\$23K retail)
Unknown speaker wires and interconnects (but high quality for sure)

Wow, what sound!

The club gives many, many thanks to our hosts Gordon Waters, Keith Sequerra, and Jim Krumpe of the Audio Company, and to our speaker Kevin Hayes from VAC. Also, thanks to everyone who brought the refreshments. It was one of our most heavily attended meetings ever!

Thomas Horner
Secretary, A-V Club of Atlanta