

On Sunday, June 30, 2013, the monthly meeting of the Audio-Video Club of Atlanta was held at the Virtual Properties meeting room in their beautiful new location in Duluth. Our presenter was the Grammy Award winning mastering engineer Paul Stubblebine, co-founder of The Tape Project of San Francisco. Paul travelled from San Francisco to play and discuss examples of his 15 ips, reel-to-reel master quality tapes they produce, and give us highlights of his 44 year professional career. Also featured were several well-known professional reel-to-reel recorders from the era when these were the best sources for home music. There were about 25 members and guests present, including one new attendee.

John Morrison was up first with a few club announcements and gave hearty thanks to Paul for coming to Atlanta to be with us. Chuck Bruce then introduced Paul to the attendees.

Paul briefly described his long career as a mastering engineer, more than 44 years now. He has mastered for Reference Recordings, Mobile Fidelity, and others including mainstream labels. He gave the audience a quick lesson in what mastering engineers do. In the early days of recording, they would do all the mixing while the musical performance was happening. Now, there are three stages of recording, recording the instruments (sometimes separated by distance and time), mixing engineer who mixes all these recordings into a stereo master, then finally the mastering engineer whose job is to take that master and "tweak" it into a finished project ready for the manufacturer. Paul has been a mastering engineer since 1973 and in the music business since 1969.

Paul then gave a brief history of The Tape Project. It started with him making reference tapes for folks to use at tube (equipment) conferences to show off their work. At these conferences many expressed that these tapes were the best source that they used. So Paul and two partners started the Tape Project in 2005. They take original master tapes, license them, and create master quality tapes for their subscribers to own and playback on their reel-to-reel tape machines. These tapes are essentially "custom made" after Paul re-masters the original master tape. They are expensive (but worth it!), and are delivered on 15 ips 2 track stereo format using the IEC tape curve, either on ¼ or ½ inch tape.

It was then time to listen to these fantastic tapes. The decks used was either a Technics reel-to-reel deck with ¼ inch tape (supplied by Nick Arroyo, club member) using an outboard Bottlehead "Tape Head" pre-amp supplied by Paul, or an Otari deck (2 track, ¼ inch tape) supplied by Pablo Reina. The club speakers were used along with two subwoofers supplied by Marcus Tunis (same ones we saw in May). An EAR 912 tube preamp and EAR 890 tube power amp drove the speakers. Several different types of music was heard, from jazz to rock to classical, and they all sounded great. The room was quiet as those attending were practically spell-bound (it seemed).

After listening for about an hour, Paul said a few more words on how the Tape Project selects the music it is going to sell. They come up with a wish list of great music, then go try to see if they can license it and if the original analog master tape can be found and used. He gave us horror stories about how many original stereo master tapes are simply lost, destroyed by fire, or are physically damaged in some way. Sometimes the Tape Project has to try to restore the original by using tape restoration techniques. Paul also mentioned that he likes to let the music "flood over him", not skip around, and tapes allow him to experience this. He did mention that the tape format has some inherent flaws which the Tape Project overcomes by keeping the number of generations low for those tapes that go to his customers.

Then more great music was heard using other tapes Paul brought for the remaining time of the meeting!

The club again gives many thanks Paul for coming out to see us including all that travel time, to those who brought their reel-to-reel tape decks and their personal equipment (Nick Arroyo, Bob Williams, Pablo Reina, Sam Papadas, and Marcus Tunis), and to those who assisted in the setup and coordination of the meeting (especially Bob Williams), including Jennifer and Dennis for the refreshments (as always).

Thomas Horner  
Secretary, A-V Club of Atlanta