

The Absolute Sound's High-End Audio

Hall of Fame

2023's Inductees

THE IDEA OF honoring those men and women who've been instrumental in creating the high end has its roots in TAS' series of large-format books, *The Absolute Sound's Illustrated History of High-End Audio*. While researching *Volume One*, TAS writers and editors developed a renewed appreciation for the achievements of the pioneers who laid the foundations of this great industry. To honor these visionary engineers, entrepreneurs, and journalists, we decided nine years ago to create *The Absolute Sound's* High-End Audio Hall of Fame.

For the inaugural round of inductees in 2014, we asked our writing staff to submit a list of candidates. The criteria were simple: Who had the greatest impact on audio's evolution from laboratory experiment to consumer product? Who shaped the high end most profoundly, either through technical innovation, business acumen, or a combination of both? Since we wanted to focus on those men and women who built the high-performance consumer-audio industry, we omitted the technical pioneers—Edison, Berliner, Blumlein, de Forest, Williamson, et al. (We celebrate them, and other great inventors, in TAS' *Illustrated History* series.) Each year we will add three more individuals to *The Absolute Sound's* High-End Audio Hall of Fame.

The following nine pages showcase the lives and seminal accomplishments of the most significant contributors to high-quality music reproduction in the home. Today's high-end audio industry would be unimaginable without them. **Robert Harley**



spring-damper systems and thought that with the proper critical damping and isolation, that woofer wouldn't have blown.

"I decided to make a suspension system for my Linn, then a platter, and suddenly realized I should design an entire turntable from scratch. This was 1984. I had just started a small retail audio business out of my house. I had a great job with Teledyne Corporation and had my eye on the presidency of my division. I wasn't looking to get into the business of making turntables for a living—I thought perhaps three or four people would want to buy my product. I made the prototype and was only expecting that it would never skip because someone walked into the room and, perhaps, that I'd *maybe* hear a small difference in the bottom end. That was all I was looking for. When I cued the first record—

Thelma Houston's *I've Got the Music in Me*—I was absolutely shocked. Her voice was so effortless and out of the speakers. I started demoing the table in my small retail dealership, and everyone who heard it wanted one. Word got around, and [Krell co-founder] Dan D'Agostino talked me into exhibiting it at CES with him. I showed the prototype and walked away with 50 orders. It was crazy."

That turntable was the Basis Audio Debut, which quickly gained critical acclaim and commercial success. A year later, Conti quit his day job to focus on Basis Audio. More models followed, along with a tonearm (the Vector) and then a second tonearm (the SuperArm).

The Vector exemplifies Conti's imaginative approach to design. Before the Vector, there were two main types of pivoted tonearms: unipivots and those with gimbal bearings. In a unipivot, a hollowed-out cup on the arm rests on a sharp point. In a gimballed bearing,

two sets of bearings are oriented at 90° to each other, much like in a navigational gyroscope. Unipivots are prone to dynamic azimuth error; that is, the arm rotates slightly when encountering record warps, changing the relationship between the stylus and groove (azimuth). Gimballed bearings don't have this problem, but the bearings can "chatter" if not tight enough or introduce excessive friction if too tight.

As Conti related to me, "I was working on a gimbal-bearing design and had the idea to side-

Armando (A.J.) Conti

(1957–2016)

Perfection Personified

Robert Harley

MANY DESIGNERS have created great-sounding products and built iconic companies, but we've singled out Basis Audio founder A.J. Conti for induction into *The Absolute Sound's* High-End Hall of Fame because he exemplifies the highest ideals of our industry. Combining equal parts passion, fanatical attention to detail, and a love of music—along with serious engineering chops—Conti's innovative designs and perfectionist aesthetics set a standard that is a model for the audio business. In the process, he built one of the seminal companies in the American high-end-audio renaissance. More than that, Conti's lifelong dedication to improving LP playback was not driven by the desire for commercial success but by the intrinsic beauty he found in superior engineering. His purity of intent transcended mere commerce.

Conti's rise from a high-end-audio consumer to one of the world's greatest turntable and tonearm designers began with a happy accident. He recounted to me in a 2007 interview how he came to start building turntables.

"The audio bug bit me when I was about 10 years old, and by my early 20s I had a nice system with Snell Type A speakers and a Linn turntable. I didn't know that there was a high-end industry and didn't read *The Absolute Sound*, but I lucked out to get such good equipment.

"I was playing music at a family get-together when someone walked across the room and the footfalls were picked up by the turntable and blew the woofer in one of my Snell speakers. I thought back to my first year in engineering school [Conti had a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering—RH] where I learned about mass-

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load the arm—put more weight on one side—so it leans to one side, which takes up any bearing slop. Then it struck me that I could do the same thing with a unipivot—make it lean in one direction, let it fall over, and give it something to fall over on: a lower bearing. There's no way that any stylus could possibly pull the side-weighted tonearm up off the lower bearing. It's absolutely dead perfect in azimuth and stays that way during the entire play of the record."

That simple yet brilliant innovation is the foundation of the Vector and SuperArm tonearms that have enjoyed decades of acclaim. (Andre Jennings, Wayne Garcia, and I all use SuperArms as our reference.)

I came to know Conti through his several visits to my home to set up turntables for review. To give you an idea of his fanatical pursuit of ultimate performance, I'll share with you a single example that can serve for many.

While setting up the 2800 turntable in my listening room, Conti began talking about the importance of consistency in a drive belt's thickness. I was skeptical that tiny thickness variations—a thousandths of an inch—in the drive belt could affect the speed stability of a 20-pound rotating platter with its flywheel effect. Conti not only explained the physics to me, but he brought with him several belts of varying thickness uniformity. All appeared identical to the naked eye. The sonic differences between the belts were easily audible, not as pitch variation but rather as image solidity, soundstage size, reverberation decay, and clarity. Conti explained, beginning by stating a common misperception: "If I don't hear speed instability with a turntable, then it's below threshold—so who cares?" But long below the point where someone might recognize fluctuation of the actual tone, the phase is changing, because that tone is slightly changing frequency. It affects the decay of instruments and is quite easily audible. The music sounds clearer without speed fluctuations.

"When you measure something for 20 years and keep improving it, a thousandth of an inch starts to look like a mile. Sometimes we laugh because a belt that varies in thickness by one thousandth of an inch is completely unacceptable to us now; yet that variance is one-quarter the thickness of a sheet of notebook paper.

"I talked to all kinds of manufacturers of belts, and no one wanted to even attempt to make tighter tolerances than we were getting with our existing belt manufacturer. So, I brought belt-making in-house and designed a specialized machine to grind belts to precise tolerances. We achieve thickness uniformity—on a production basis every day—of ± 0.6 microns [*the diameter of a human hair is 75 microns.* —RH]."

How did Conti know that every belt that shipped with a Basis turntable met that extraordinary precision? Because he measured each one. Himself.

I doubt that anyone could make a business case for a small specialist turntable manufacturer designing and building belt-making equipment and spending the time and money to realize that kind of belt precision. But Conti valued performance above all else, not for competitive advantage but simply because he found an elegance and beauty in superior engineering.

In September of 2016, Conti called to tell me, with genuine enthusiasm, about a new turntable he had just finished designing and was about to put into production. This new turntable wasn't simply a better version of the designs he'd been building for the past 30 years but a *sui generis* creation that represented the culmination of his life's work.

This new turntable started life as a one-off modular platform for Conti's development work. It could accommodate up to four tonearms of any length and

weight, and the major components could be easily swapped out so that each component's performance could be evalu-

ated independently. As with other designers, A.J.'s goal had always been to reduce a turntable's distortions so that they imposed as little of themselves as possible on the music. But in precisely what ways his turntables departed sonically from absolute neutrality was an unanswered question. He realized that he needed an absolute reference against which to compare the sound of his turntables and tonearms, particularly for this new platform.

Three years before his phone call to me, A.J. hit upon an idea that set him on the quest of a lifetime: to create a turntable that was so sonically transparent that it sounded virtually indistinguishable from mastertapes—a tall order, to say the least. The only way to pursue this audacious undertaking was to rethink from first principles every aspect of turntable design and to continuously compare the sound of the turntable under development to the sound of mastertapes. Time and cost would not be limiting factors.

Conti thus bought two top-tier open-reel tape machines (Ampex ATR-102s) and had one of them modified identically to the ATR-102 at Bernie Grundman's mastering studio. He also acquired 1:1 transfers of first-generation mastertapes from audiophile labels, along with lacquers cut from those tapes and LPs derived from those lacquers cut by Grundman. Now fully equipped to pursue his quest to make a turntable that made LPs sound like mastertapes, he embarked on the engineering challenge. He said of this approach: "What better way to hear where you need to go, or if you achieved equivalency, than if you have the lacquer, a copy of the mastertape that cut the lacquer, and the most neutral and sonically truthful means to play those tapes, a studio mastering tape deck?"

It was after three years of this development work that he called to tell me, for the first time, about his project and the new turntable. It was rare for A.J. to phone me, even though I'd been using his superb turntables for more than a decade (a 2800 Signature and later the Inspiration). A.J. told me, with great emotion in his voice, that he came far closer to his mastertape goal than he ever thought possible.

A manufacturer proclaiming that his latest product is revolutionary is nothing new. Believe me. After 34 years of full-time audio reviewing,

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I've heard my share of spin. Some manufacturers will say anything to get past the review gate. In fact, the hyperbole is often so over the top that it ventures into the humorous (I could tell some stories). But Conti wasn't like other manufacturers. He was such a perfectionist engineer that marketing hype simply wasn't in his DNA. I can count on one hand (literally) the number of designers who are universally and unflinchingly honest about the virtues and shortcomings of a technical design—theirs and others'. Conti's phone call wasn't a sales pitch from a manufacturer to a magazine editor but rather the enthusiastic sharing of a landmark achievement with someone who would appreciate that achievement.

Three weeks after that phone call I received the devastating news that Conti had died from a sudden heart attack at age 59. He had been the model of health and vitality. I was shocked and saddened—personally, for his family, and for the great loss to our industry.

Taking delivery of that turntable for review, which was named after his death the A.J. Conti Transcendence, was bittersweet. In front of me was this masterpiece—the culmination of his life's work—but he wasn't there to enjoy the moment.

With absolutely no bias of sentimentality, I can say that the Transcendence is a stunning achievement, sounding unlike any turntable I've heard. What's most striking is how the Transcendence seems to vanish from the playback chain, fostering the impression of hearing back through to the mastertape. Timbres are astonishingly lifelike, with a solidity and tangibility that have eluded other tables. The ultra-quiet background and spectacular retrieval of low-level detail combine to render space, bloom, reverberation decay, and the tail end of cymbal strikes with hair-raising realism. The Transcendence also has an ease, particularly on loud and complex passages, that makes you completely forget that you're listening to an LP. When you discover newfound musical meaning in well-worn discs, you know that the turntable is special. I've been visited by many industry veterans to set up products for review—these are guys who have heard the best of the best—and to a person they have been bowled over by the sound of LP playback through the Transcendence. I consider the Transcendence to be one of high-end audio's greatest achievements—in any product category. *The Absolute Sound* named the Transcendence the winner of its Overall Product of the Year Award in 2019.

The Transcendence also looks radically different from any other of the current “mega-tables.” Other six-figure turntables seem to incorporate in their design a need to make the turntable look “impressive” and worthy of the price tag to a potential buyer. The Transcendence brooks no concession to cosmetics. Remember, the Transcendence started life as a one-off development platform. Consequently, the turntable is 100% pure engineering and zero bling. But that uncompromising approach resulted in a beauty that goes much deeper than surface appearance; the beauty is its purity of intent.

Although Conti is no longer with us, his design genius and uncompromising ethos live on in Basis Audio. Conti's widow, Jolanta, vowed to keep the company going and has been doing so successfully for seven years and counting. She found in mechanical engineer Alex Bourque a kindred spirit, who shared A.J.'s fanatical attention to detail. His first all-new design, the \$13,700 Basis Bravo reviewed by Wayne Garcia in Issue 341, points to a bright future for the company. Conti's ethos is best summed up by his

THE TRANSCENDENCE IS A STUNNING ACHIEVEMENT, SOUNDING UNLIKE ANY TURNTABLE I'VE HEARD.

thoughts about the Vector tonearm. “The Vector isn't the most expensive product we make, but the payoff isn't measured in money. You end up being pretty miserable if money is how you measure

your life, or success, or happiness. The real payoff is when folks are thrilled, when they just love what you do.”

Folks have been thrilled by A.J. Conti's turntables for more than 40 years. He not only made an extraordinary contribution to high-end audio, but exemplified the highest ideals that make this industry great. We are proud to induct Armando Conti into *The Absolute Sound's* High-End Hall of Fame.

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