

Sound Design - Classic Audio and Hi-Fi Design
by David Attwood

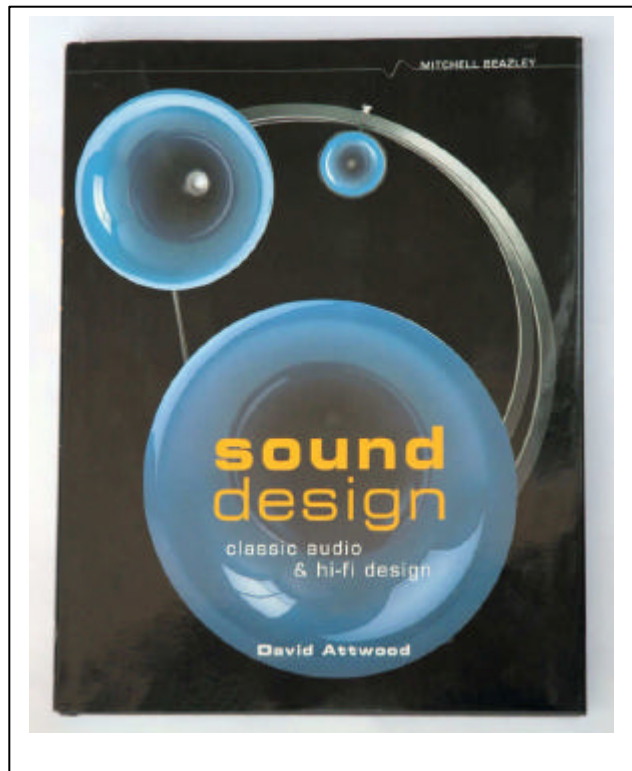
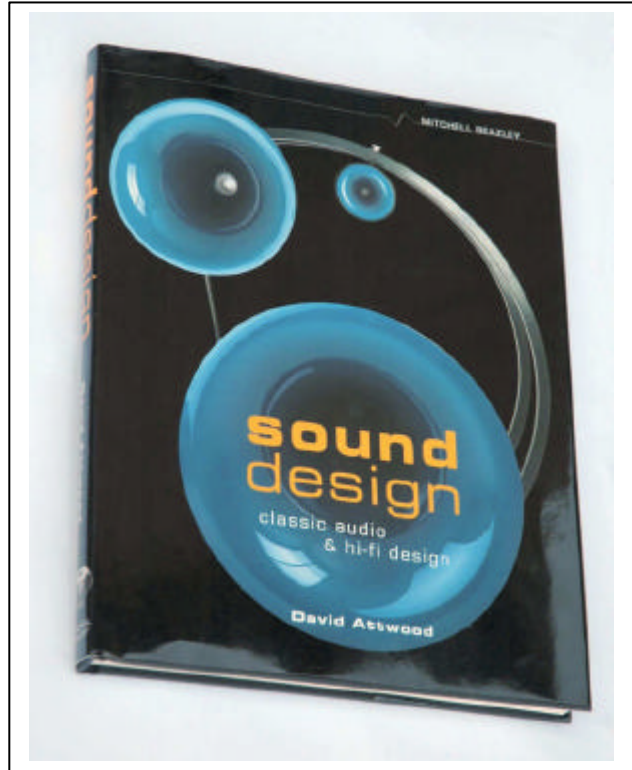
Reviewed by Neville Roberts

A few months ago, a book unexpectedly dropped through my letter box: a gift from a friend of mine who thought it would be of interest - and indeed it was. The book is a veritable treasure-trove of colour photographs that tell the story of audio from the beginning of the radio culture in 1945 to the digital revolution of the present day.

This is not a technical book. There are references to the technology, but only in passing and where they are used they help to tell the story. As such, this book will appeal equally to those of a non-technical background as well as the technically minded. In fact, there is far greater emphasis on the art and style of the equipment, and how it met a need or catered for a niche market at that time.

The book starts out with an account of the development of portable AM radios utilising small, all-glass valves and printed circuit boards. In 1954, the Regency TR1 radio designed by Texas Instruments heralded the start of the transistor era. Already well-established names like Bush and Roberts Radio (no relation!) started using transistors in cases originally designed to house valve circuitry.

In parallel with developments in radio technology, portable record players were becoming a hit with the younger generation and the teenage market became the target for advertising. The book includes a variety of reproductions of the advertising posters of the time, demonstrating how celebrities such as Nelson Eddy were used to promote autochangers and the like. For the parents, the radiogram was the unit of choice and was a prominent piece of furniture in the home.



Moving through the book, there are tantalising photographs of legendary Hi-Fi equipment like the Garrard 401, the Quad QC11 control unit and ESL groundbreaking electrostatic loudspeaker, nestling alongside pictures of the Dansette record player and neo-modernist designs in bright primary colours.

The artists of the time get a mention in the section covering the development of stereo in the 1960s. Photographs of Bob Dylan and the Beach Boys appear alongside a picture of Ray Dolby and his contribution to noise reduction technology.

The downside of a book like this is that it does make one feel old! After the twentieth time of exclaiming “I remember that!” or “I used to have one of those!”, you realise how long ago it was that you proudly wired up your brand new Garrard SP25 as your first investment in Hi-Fi. This was the beginning of the expensive upgrade cycle which consumed all of a young student’s spare cash as the SP25 became referred to as ‘the lathe’ and required something more refined to support the M95ED cartridge!



As the '60s drew to a close, it is fascinating to see how the 8-track player was advertised as a sing-along / PA system - the first karaoke machine! However, it eventually lost out to the compact and more convenient cassette.

The section on the 1970s entitled “Decks and Disco” sees the advent of Hi-Fi separates. The pages are littered with images of units such as the famous Akai 4000D (I used to have one of those! Oops!) and Linn Sondek LP12. It was during the '70s that the cheap, semi-automatic record decks were replaced by the simpler, but better-made record decks from Japan, such as the Pioneer PL12D.

Once again, the artists of the time make an appearance and photographs of LP sleeves such as Pink Floyd’s ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ and David Bowie’s ‘Ziggy Stardust’ are on display. Technological developments were not limited to Hi-Fi reproduction, and Robert Moog’s ‘Mini-Moog’ synthesizer is featured as the first synthesizer that was small enough to be used on stage.

Headphones are not left out and offerings from Koss, Sennheiser and Stax are all featured. This brought back memories of the purchase of a pair of second-hand Stax electrostatics and hoping that the insulation of the earpieces was still intact!

Although by 1970, Hi-Fi had become a mainstream purchase, the book notes that video was competing with audio for consumer spending by the end of the 1970s.

The 1980s saw the birth of the compact disc and the introduction of digital technology triggers the start of a new chapter. However, vinyl was still big business for much of the decade and many great turntables are featured, such as those from the stables of Technics and Dual. The chapter includes a section highlighting the move from rock to dance music and from the concert to club music. Synthetic sounds were now the rage and the experimental German band Kraftwerk is featured.

The Sony Walkman range is covered, from the TPS-L2 cassette unit that was introduced in 1979 to the D50 compact disc unit in 1985. We also start to see 1960s valve design being revived in the 1980s with the launch of the Radford STA25 Series 4 commemorative edition amplifier.

The final chapter highlights the convergence in technologies of audio, video and computer. Some fantastic turntable designs are beautifully illustrated, such as the Dutch La Luce turntable which takes the idea of Hi-Fi as sculpture to extremes. Loudspeakers are not forgotten with photographs of the striking Avantgarde Trio horns by Klipsch and Voigt, the Blueroom Minipod and the B&W Nautilus.

This excellent book concludes with a glossary of terms used in the book and a useful bibliography of resources in the form of web sites to help in tracking down historic information and technical data.

The book is an extremely enjoyable read and will appeal to anyone with an interest in the history and development of Hi-Fi and audio reproduction.

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