

Beatles, Pink Floyd Engineer, Alan Parsons Rips Audiophiles

Alan Parsons, producer, musician and sound engineer of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, says audiophiles overpay for equipment while ignoring room acoustics.

In an exclusive interview with CE Pro, [Alan Parsons](#), renowned sound engineer for Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* and for the Beatles, says hi-fi pros focus too much on equipment and brand names, when they should put more energy into room acoustics. He also says some surround-sound systems “really aren’t that bad.”



All this from the audio wizard behind *Dark Side of the Moon*, and the name sake of the Alan Parson’s Project.

Parsons broke into the music industry in the late 1960s when he was hired by Abbey Road Studios to work as an assistant engineer. As an assistant engineer, Parsons’ career started at a point where most music lovers only dream of reaching - working on the last two Beatles’ albums.

As a full-fledged engineer, Parsons worked on projects with Paul McCartney and the Hollies, but it was his efforts on the benchmark album *Dark Side of the Moon* that launched his career.

Throughout the rest of the 1970s and 1980s, Parsons released several albums under the name of Alan Parsons Project (APP). The 1990s marked a shift in direction for Parsons that was highlighted by his dropping of “Project” from his band name.

As he entered the 2000s, Parsons continued to release new music, which includes his first foray into the electronica genre when he released 2004’s *A Valid Path*. Parsons’ latest project is an instructional DVD package entitled [The Art and Science of Sound Recording](#). The multi-disc DVD set is designed to educate music engineering students and music enthusiasts about the technologies and techniques that are driving the recording industry.

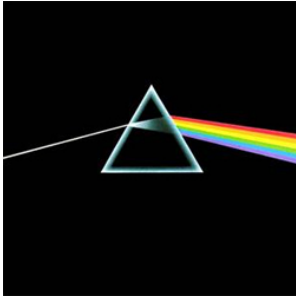
Your career has spanned decades and it includes your work with The Beatles and Pink Floyd. Back when you worked with these artists, what did you learn from them that you still find useful today?

You couldn’t ask for anything better than those projects. I learned a lot from George Martin and I also learned the art of engineering from some of the best engineers at EMI/Abbey Road. Every session was an experience that I could say to an extent was an influence.

If you had the digital tools of today available to you when you were making *Dark Side of the Moon* would you have done anything differently?

I think it was a sonic statement of the available technology of the time. It’s a difficult question to answer. Had digital processing been available then, it may have been different; certainly some of the

effects would have been easier to create. I think it was a well written and executed album and we all did a good job; we were a good team and made a good album.



Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*

How do you separate music listening in terms of your profession and as a pastime of entertainment?

I don't listen to much music recreationally - it's almost always for professional applications. I do listen in the car, but that's about it.

Do you have any advice for those that would like to develop their professional listening skills to hear things more like audio professionals such as yourself?

[The art of listening is the key](#) to any kind of career in this business. My training at EMI/Abbey Road was thorough in how to listen. I learned how to discern minute differences in pieces of equipment, and it helped me to appreciate what I was hearing. As you become experienced on a pro level you become fussier about how things sound and how certain pieces of equipment behave.

You've been on record as saying that surround sound offers listeners a much more immersive experience for music. Can you clarify/explain why you feel this way?

Yes, I think it's surprising that it hasn't taken off. Back in the 1970s, the science of producing four channels of music for vinyl was very inadequate. Now that we have the technology to do 5.1 surround, I wish there was more interest in using it for music as well as film. Not enough music people are interested in it. Surround is to stereo what stereo was to mono; it makes a huge difference.

What do you think about the market evolution that has seen the CD format losing sales while the vinyl and digital download categories increasing their respective sales?

I'm not sure vinyl is selling beyond audiophile purists, and I'm not really one of them. I'm reasonably happy with the quality of CDs, but I'd really like to see high-resolution downloads become more widely available.

It is encouraging to see people listening to high-resolution audio. Eventually it's going to be an all-download world ... computers dominate our lives these days. We are just going to have to be tolerant of the longer download times. It's just the way it is.

Do you think that sound quality is driving this trend? Are people tiring of low-resolution sound and compressed recordings that lack dynamic range?

That may well be. The majority [of consumers] are happy with MP3, but they don't know what they are missing. Being fast and free are priorities, and that's why MP3 is popular. There's another damaging situation: You can complain about iTunes and subscription sites being damaging to copyright owners and having inferior audio quality, but one of the worst culprits is YouTube.

You can look for any record ever made and it's on YouTube for free - usually with crappy audio - and let's not even mention the video content that's out there to go with it. I sense there will be a huge copyright court case over the content on YouTube someday.

Do the high-resolution capabilities of formats such as DTS-HD Master Audio and two-channel digital audio like 24-bit/96kHz allow engineers more freedom to be creative on top of their ability to provide a more detailed audio experience?

Engineers will always go for the highest-quality format available. I don't think consumer enjoyment values suffer much if we have to use slightly lower-quality delivery formats. TV, however, sounds dreadful - particularly in America.

Television [broadcast engineers] need to find a way to make their sound better. It's compressed; it goes through several generations of degradation and it can even fall out of sync. I'm very sensitive to the synchronization of sound and video. On cable and satellite, half the channels are out of sync to some extent - sometimes way out. I would like to think the technology to fix the problem would be readily available.

DTS has always strived to improve sound quality over other existing formats and they are responsible for the limited success surround has had [in music].

What is the biggest thing that both electronics dealers and enthusiast consumers should do when setting up home theater/sound systems?

You get what you pay for. But having said that, there are some decent budget surround systems you can buy that really aren't bad. Everybody has their budget; the hi-fi world will tell you if money is no object you can get better results out of every component - even the surface the amplifier sits on. Pro sound people have different expectations; they are only concerned that a piece of gear works and allows them to do their job. Hi-fi people spend huge amounts of money for tiny improvements, and pro sound guys will say, "I can spend half as much and get the results I need."

I'm simply not very familiar with the latest domestic hi-fi equipment. I don't go to hi-fi tradeshow and I don't have sophisticated equipment in the family areas of my house for music, but there are things

that make sense like good speakers and a decent amp. But I dare say there would only be a small improvement if I bought a \$20,000 amp. I can live with what I have.

I do think in the domestic environment, the people that have sufficient equipment don't pay enough attention to room acoustics. The pro audio guy will prioritize room acoustics and do the necessary treatments to make the room sound right. The hi-fi world attaches less importance to room acoustics, and prioritizes equipment; they are looking more at brand names and reputation.



You have a DVD box set called the Art & Science of Sound Recording. Why did you decide to make this box set, and does someone need to be an aspiring sound engineer to learn something from this set?

I think anybody who has had a curiosity about what goes on in a recording studio will enjoy it. Anyone that has a vague interest will enjoy it because it is entertaining. We made it more as an educational aid for people in training at colleges for recording technologies. We've had a lot of interest from those

types of schools, and many are putting it into their curriculum. We can't ask for more than that.

Some of my contemporaries have said they enjoyed it, and I learned from making it too. The program is based around interviews with other recording professionals and it provides a variety of perspectives.

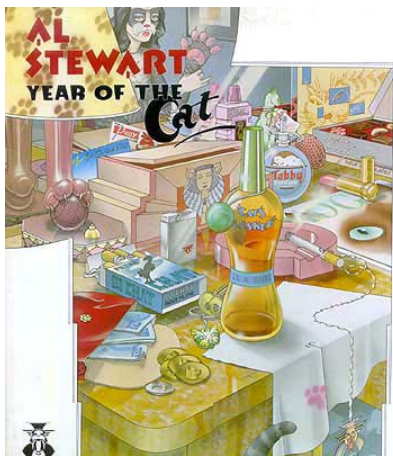
What do you think is the most misunderstood part of the recording/mixing process that audiophiles don't understand that you address with the box set?

I think what perhaps critics don't appreciate is that there is a lot of luck in getting a good sound. It's not all about the equipment, spectral response and compressing. It's all about the quality of the musicianship, the songwriting and the sound reaching the microphone ... that's crucial. It's often been said, "garbage in means garbage out," so if that's the case you won't get a good sound.

Everybody strives to get perfect sound and we work hard to get the best sound we can. A certain artist or song or style of music will sound a certain way. It would be ridiculous for me to make a Jonas Brothers record using the techniques and procedures I normally use. The techniques used to make many modern pop records involve a lot of compression and that's what those consumers want, according to the labels. A lot of the processing that audiophiles criticize is a style thing and part of the music itself.

What essential Alan Parsons recordings would you recommend to electronics dealers and enthusiasts to show off their music and home theater systems?

Dark Side is a benchmark in terms of audio quality and it's not something I decreed - the industry said it. I'm proud of that. A couple of my records, Al Stewart's *Year of the Cat*, and I think, possibly *Pyramid* [Alan Parsons Project] were some of my finer moments sonically.



Dave Grusin has made some incredible sounding recordings. When it comes to purely being entertained, I would not criticize anyone's sound; it's all about song writing, performance and talent on the production team. If you get all those, you have a winning formula.

By Robert Archer, February 09, 2012
CEPro Magazine