

# SOUND EFFECTS

Deja Vu Audio builds the best-sounding private audio system in the world—outfitted in extremely rare (and expensive) components.

by Jennifer Ashton Ryan

**H**i-fi audio store owner Joshua Turney was helping a customer when a new client wandered into his La Jolla, California, shop on the recommendation of a friend. The 50-something businessman was looking around in the front gallery of **Deja Vu Audio West** ([dejavuaudiowest.com](http://dejavuaudiowest.com)), the new West Coast counterpart of the original **Deja Vu Audio** ([dejavu-audio.com](http://dejavu-audio.com)) in Virginia. Turney finished the demo with his other client and went over to talk to the businessman, who said he was shopping around for a custom installation.

"His family and I spent the afternoon, well into the early evening, just listening to Miles Davis' *Sketches of Spain* on a Deja Vu Audio restored reel-to-reel playback machine and the *Getz/Gilberto* bossa nova album on a restored Deja Vu Audio Vintage Collection Garrard 301 turntable," says Turney, who left a career on Wall Street and opened his San Diego store in December 2016. "And he was pretty blown away."

The businessman returned the following day to flesh out details for a hi-fi commission at his home in Mexico. To put it simply, he sought out Turney and his business partner Vu Hoang to build him the best-sounding private audio system in the world.

As the owner of Deja Vu Audio, Hoang, tells it, "the customer heard our Vintage Collection system at Josh's place, and he fell in love with it. But that system is only like \$150,000." Building the world's best-sounding system would require Turney and Hoang to raise the bar on every front. "This project

is maybe the fifth million-plus-dollar system I've done," says Hoang. "But I've never seen anything else like it."

With enough funds to lease a space outside Washington, D.C., audio wizard Hoang opened before he could buy any components to fill his shop and soon earned his first custom commission in 1995. Hoang's decision to leave medical school to pursue a career in hi-fi was about to pay off.

"I got the break of my life when a customer came in and I asked him what his budget was. He said 'I don't have a budget,'" but I insisted he give one, so he said 'Okay, \$250,000,'" recalls Hoang. "I said, 'Well, for that kind of money, I need to go see your room. I need to get to know you more.'"

The customer, a billionaire CEO, invited Hoang to his house to see his current system and learn more about his taste in music. "His taste in music seemed empty, no soul. I didn't think he'd appreciate what I could do for him, so I told him that I was not the one for him," says Hoang. Not used to being told no, the customer pushed on, detailing his current \$200,000 system, the number of engineers he hired to install it, and the room's expensive finishes. "The system sounded like crap, so I told him, 'No, I'm not going to do it for you,' and I left."

Four days later the customer returned with an envelope containing a letter for Hoang and \$30,000. The letter stated that he wanted him to build his system and that the money was to communicate he was serious." Hoang, unimpressed, finally told the customer: "If you want me to do this, we have to go listen to live music." ▸



## The experience is like walking into a concert from a bygone era.

Every Thursday for months, the client flew Hoang to New York City. "We'd go to Carnegie Hall, we'd go listen to jazz, we'd listen to different styles so he could appreciate music for himself," says Hoang. "The performances trained his ears, teaching him how to listen, how to appreciate jazz, classical, and the blues. Then, when he deserved it, I built a system for him."

Hoang had a much different reaction to another client commissioning the world's best-sounding audio system. He didn't seem to have anything to prove, he just wanted the best. When the client flew Hoang to Mexico to survey his property and pinpoint an exact location for a standalone listening room, Hoang stopped him at the tennis courts.

"This is exactly like Roland-Garros," Hoang said, amazed. The customer, an avid French Open fan, assured him that it was, having ordered 1.1 tons of red clay from France. "As much as he loves tennis, he loves music," says Hoang. "He also has one of the world's biggest Lego collections."

Working with the client's architects, Hoang devised an intimate, 10-seat listening chamber shaped like a 1956 Mille Miglia Ferrari headlight. At first the client pointed to a picturesque setting by a lake for the room, to which Hoang objected with space concerns. "Then he told me they would dig out the existing hill to make room; it

wouldn't be a problem," Hoang says. Construction started over the summer of 2017, and Hoang expects to be installing components by August of 2018.

As soon as Hoang and Turney understood the scope and purpose of the listening room, they started filling it. "Spending a lot of money, that's the easy part of a project like this," says Turney. "Getting something that's of real and historic value, that's what is rare." While a lot of retailers carry very expensive audio equipment, few are able to source and retrofit vintage components. Hoang has three pickers in Italy, two in France, six in North America, one in New Zealand, and a few in Japan. "When I get desperate I go to Japan and I buy vintage pieces at a really high price. The Japanese are way ahead of us; they've been collecting these parts since the 1960s. I started this race way behind in the mid-1980s."

The wizardry of Hoang's work is in the details. He's been known to spend hours swapping fuse holders in and out of components, listening to how each one affects sound quality. "Everything has to be done right, down to the wiring inside," says Hoang. "I essentially gave up a medical profession to listen to fuse holders," he laughs, explaining how in the Roaring Twenties EPA regulations allowed for certain chemicals and metals to be used in the manufacturing of audio parts that today are illegal. "I don't care how much you spend on modern-day ones, even using gold and platinum. Wiring must be pre-WWII," says Hoang. "Vacuum tube sockets make a big difference in sound, so we scour the earth to find original sockets that still work."

Based on the client's listening habits, Hoang chose a specific speaker system, woofers, an amp, a preamp, a turntable, a CD player, and cables. Some of the components could be ordered new while vintage pieces would be sourced and retrofitted by Hoang and his team of specialized vendors in Italy and England.

"We're incorporating an approximately 150-pound Western Electric horn made for theaters back in the 1920s and '30s," says Hoang. "Madison Square Garden incorporated six similar 16A horns hanging in the rafters at one time." The enormous 15A horn works with a Western Electric Mirrophonic system from the golden era of theater audio, plus G.I.P.Laboratory field coils, Western Electric 4181 woofers, a Western Electric 555 receiver, and Western Electric 597A horn tweeters. "I spent a lot of time going to music halls like the Lincoln Center, listening to the rooms, getting inspired. It's going to sound like a live event rather than a stereo system."

The experience for the listener is like walking into a concert from a bygone era. Two rows of art deco seating will furnish the center of the wood-paneled room, where industrial-looking speakers and the horn are pointed at precise angles. When the music comes on, the listener will be transported again by the musician playing. "The purpose of a listening room isn't for background music," says Hoang. "You go in, listen, destress, and let the music carry you somewhere else."

For their client's eclectic taste in music, everything from jazz and vocals to classical and dance, Hoang and Turney are amassing a vinyl collection worthy of the world's best-sounding system. Hoang owns 35,000 records and Turney's personal LP collection is valued in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. To play the collection, the system will feature an Audio Note TT3 Reference turntable paired with a Reference tonearm and a Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum MC cartridge.

"Audio Note from England has been around since 1973. They do things the old-fashioned way, including melting their own metals," says Hoang. Three motors power the lightweight turntable mounted on a frame machined from aircraft-grade aluminum. As the most ductile, naturally inert aluminum available, the material enables a broad, rich sound that is extremely true to the sound intended at the time of the recording.



### COMPONENT WIZARDRY Building a vintage system from scratch.

#### Speaker System

Western Electric Mirrophonic system with G.I.P.Laboratory field coils; Western Electric 4181 woofer unit; Western Electric 555 midrange with 15A horns; Western Electric 597A horn tweeters.

#### Amplifier

Deja Vu Audio Ltd Vintage Collection 300B amplifier with genuine Western Electric transformers and parts.

#### Preamp

Deja Vu Audio Ltd Vintage Collection Western Electric preamplifier.

#### Turntable

Audio Note TT3 Reference turntable with Reference tonearm and Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum MC cartridge.

#### CD Playback System

Audio Note CDT Five transport with Deja Vu Audio Ltd Vintage Collection digital-to-analog converter with Western Electric tube output stage.

#### Cables

Audio Note Sogon cables.

The system also goes to great lengths to ensure digital volumes sound as true and as warm as possible. The chosen \$300,000 CD playback system by Audio Note works with a Deja Vu Audio Ltd Vintage Collection digital-to-analog converter with a Western Electric tube output stage.

To a trained ear, analog playback and digital playback sound worlds apart. But the difference is also something anyone can feel. "The nervous system responds differently to analog sound," says

Turney, who as a teenager spent hours in Hoang's Virginia shop listening to music and learning about components. "When you're listening to even the best digital system in the world, you're still listening to a computerized rendition of an analog signal." All recorded music starts with a musician playing in front of a microphone. After the sound of the instruments goes into the microphone it can either stay analog or it can become digitized.

"There will always be something lost in

translation," says Turney, who describes the client's listening room as he and Hoang's dream setup. "Digital can sound very good, but you're never going to be fooled into thinking there are actual musicians playing in your home. After 10 seconds of listening to a song on their iPhones, people skip around. When you listen to an LP or a reel, you find yourself just listening to the music and your mind kind of shuts off. Music isn't some disposable commodity. It's supposed to actually mean something, and it used to." ♦