

Sex with a Proper Stereo

By Hope Heyman

The audiophile is a man with a mission: he's searching for the ultimate pieces of audio equipment. No sacrifice is too great, no act of faith—a sort of technological audio-da-fe—too demanding. The audiophile will travel the long road to the almost-perfect audio system barefoot. Audiophiles exist—and flourish—in New York, one of the great audio capitals of the world. The search starts here.

But there's a catch. Sometimes the purpose of the search—music itself—is overlooked in the quest for equipment. The gadgets and the gizmos usurp the music and seize center stage.

"My whole life is audio. I treat it like a mystical experience. At night, when I'm listening to the system, I turn off all the lights. I run the fiber optic lamp on the subwoofer for my eyes to focus on. The walls collapse. You're totally absorbed in the music." It's Bob Katz talking, a freelance recording engineer. In his leap of frustration and faith from the merely good audio system to the sublime, Katz regularly rips up, alters, and modifies most of

his equipment.

Katz's apartment has been conquered by audio. He lives on the Upper East Side in a tiny three-room railroad apartment jammed with audio equipment, bits of wire, clippers, and tools. The entrance door opens onto the kitchen, which is teeming with oscillators and tool kits. In the center of the kitchen is a tiny table heaped high with electronic bits and pieces and the exposed guts of an open reel tape recorder. Almost as an afterthought, some of the electronics have been pushed aside to clear an area for eating meals.

Behind the door is Katz, a young man with light brown curly hair, who leads the way through the kitchen and into the second room, where his bed, tucked into a corner, is watched over by several home computers hooked up to monitors.

The small living room is guarded by two huge, ghost-like draped figures in the center of the room—speakers. Between them is a large square box—a subwoofer. Much audiophile equipment—like the system is this room—is outsized.

The living room is dark. The windows are shut and the curtains drawn on this sunny fall day. Behind the curtains is a four-by-six-foot plywood sheet, which Katz says dampens low-frequency resonance.

Asked why the windows are shut, Katz's eyes widen in surprise at the naivete of the question. "I don't open windows," he says. "It picks up outside noise. I just seal them up."

In addition to the towering speakers, the tiny room is filled with two rear speakers, five open reel tape recorders—some of them the size of little refrigerators—an NAD preamplifier, a Thorens turntable, and something called an ambience extraction system. And that's just some of the stuff. It's all wired together in a tangle of black cords—over 40 cables in all—through a patch box. Katz figures out how much all this is worth on a Hewlett-Packard programmable calculator.

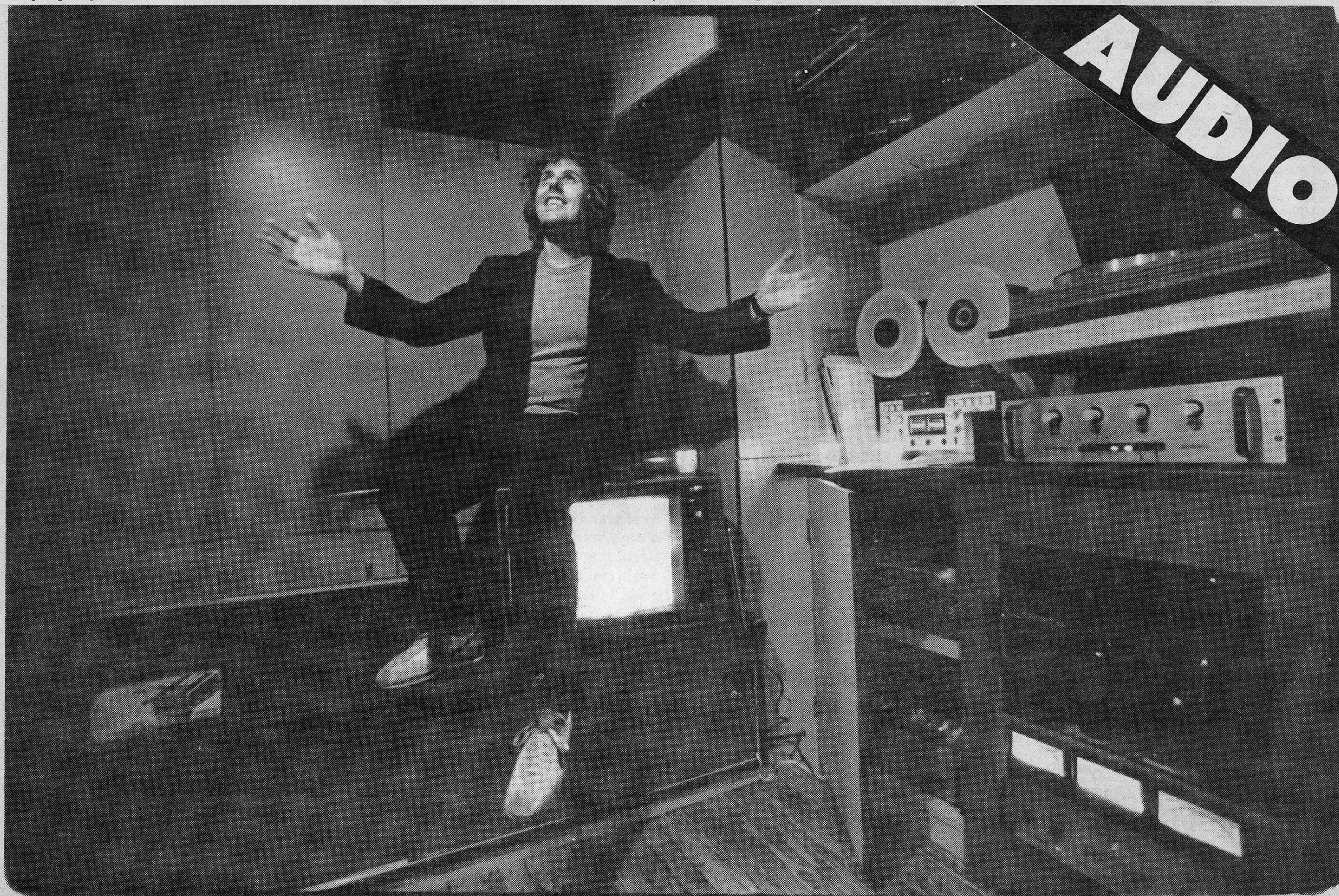
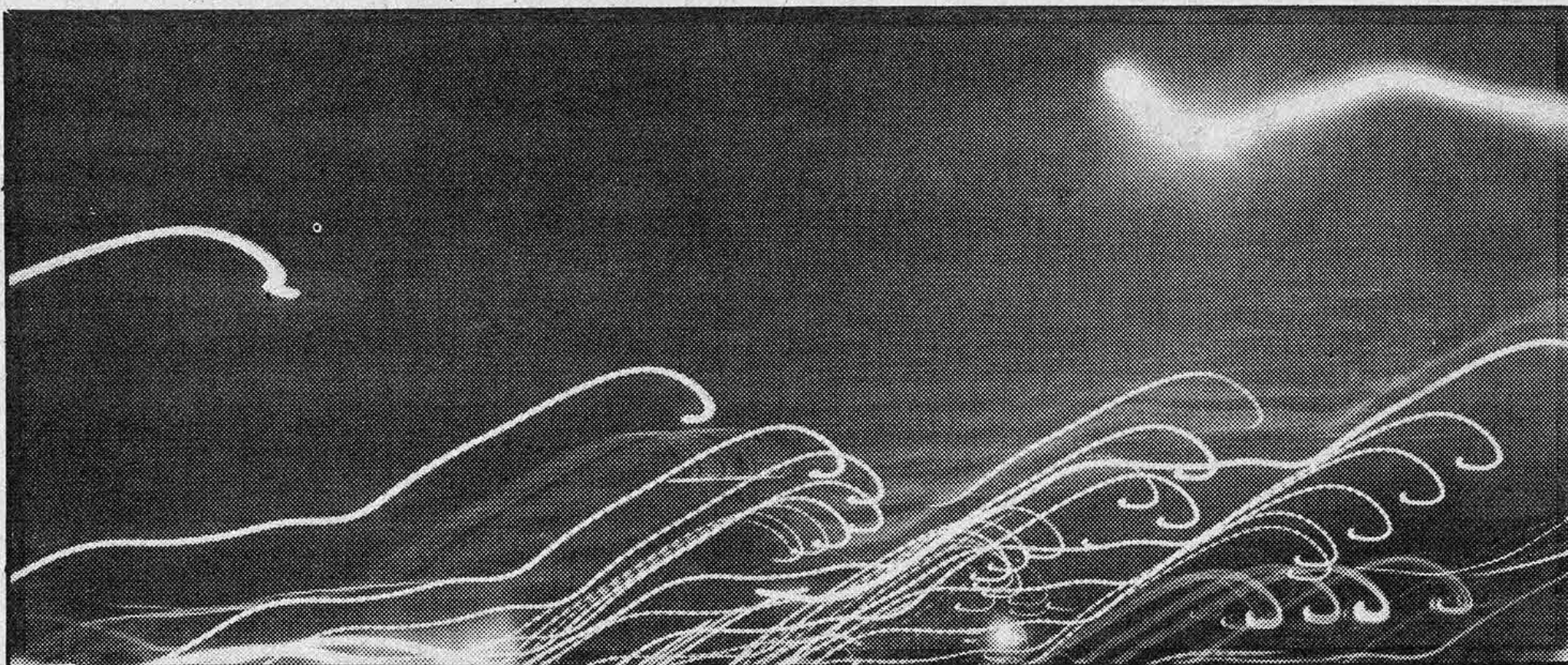
"Hm-m-m, two bills for that—a lot of these things are real bargains. I paid \$700 for the Dahlquist speakers—." He punches

in some more numbers. "We're somewhere around \$10,000," he says. "And change."

Afflicted with the restless and the relentless search for the best possible stereo system, Katz has altered much of his equipment. The speakers are covered with bedspreads because Katz has removed the grilles, the outside cloth covering the speakers. He says the grilles affected the sound, but the bedspreads don't. Inside the speakers are new tweeters, and Katz plans to replace them eventually with ribbon tweeters ("to smooth out the highs"). He has replaced the original Thorens turntable tonearm and frowns at his rear speaker system, which according to him is not up to snuff.

Katz, who by now is itching to demonstrate his system rather than answer questions, bumps into a speaker while turning off the lights. Immediately he drops to his knees, pokes his head under the Indian cloth bedspread, and makes some sort of adjustment. This ritual done, he puts on Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* (my request).

Continued on next page



Audiophile Jim Galate worked his way through six systems. And on the seventh one he rested. And he saw that it was good.



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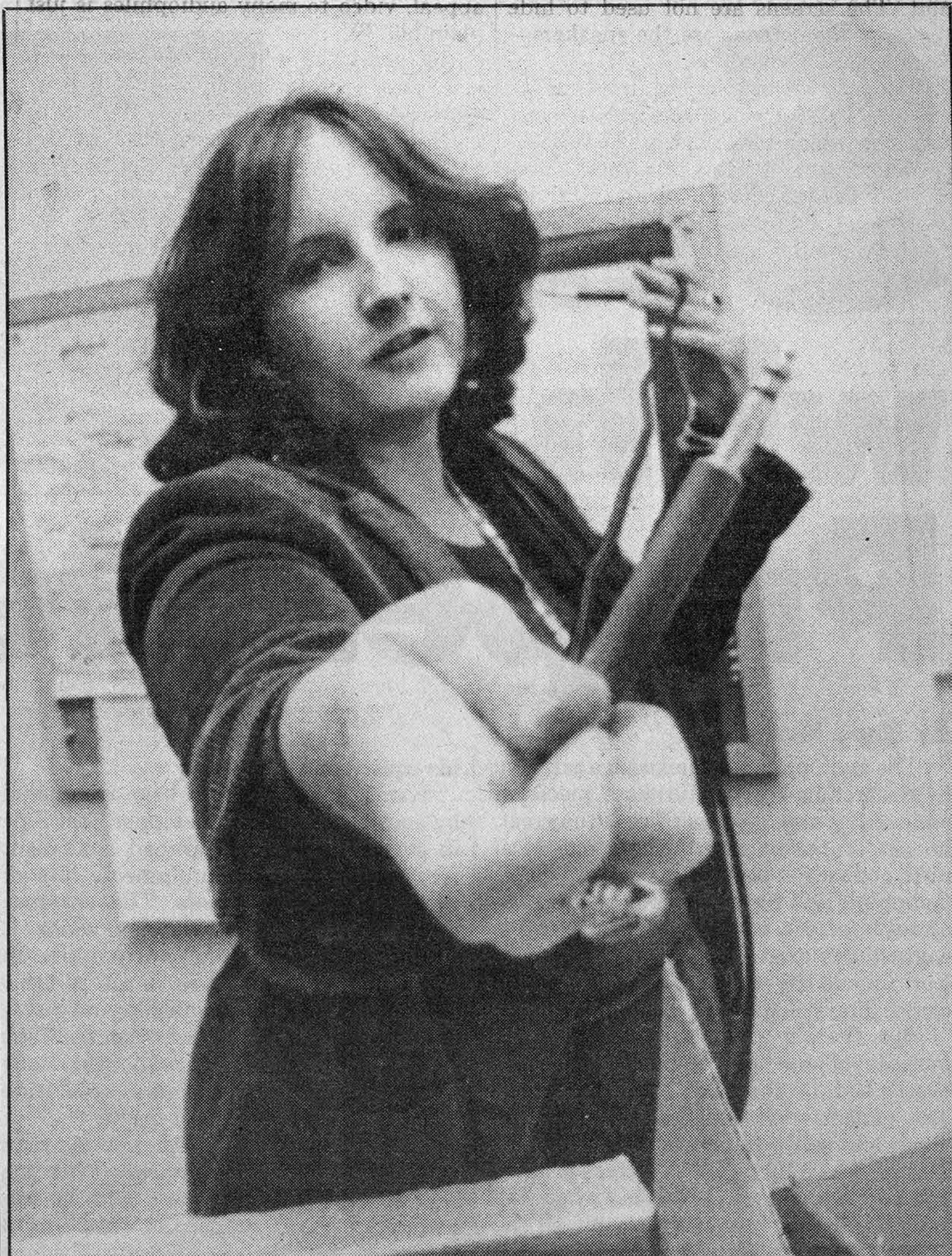
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Women audiophiles have a difficult time finding a sympathetic ear. Above, Pam Peterson.

Continued from preceding page

He can't sit still.

Twisting around to play with amplifie knobs, twisting back to tweak and nudge the ambience extractor, he's a living reminder that, for audiophiles, listening to music is a participatory event.

As I wind my way down the narrow staircase, Katz calls after me plaintively a sort of forget-me-not plea. "Don't listen to more than one audio system a day." Katz's Con Ed bill last month was \$129.

"I'm a reformed audiophile. I don't nerd out over it," says Elliot Fishkin, owner of Innovative Audio in Brooklyn. A well-designed and luxurious store, Innovative Audio—along with Sound by Singer, American Audiophile, and Lyric Hi Fi, among other stores—are the saltlicks of the New York audio world. Audiophiles tend to make weekly visits to audio stores to touch and play with the equipment and ask owners endless questions.

Fishkin, brown-haired, brown-eyed, is sitting in the high-end room with his little white dog at his feet, surrounded by Quad ELS-63 electrostatic speakers which resemble large, flat wire wastepaper baskets. His sad eyes mirror his regret over his past audio obsession.

"Everything that came out, I would read about. I would get everything. You'd always want to have the best. I would lose sleep over my system. Is it good? Does it work right? I'd worry if the tubes were good." (Tubes have been replaced in most audio equipment by solid state integrated circuits. Many audiophiles maintain that vacuum tube electronics have a warmer, less harsh sound and will pay \$4000 and \$5000 for the best tube gear.)

"I wouldn't worry if the tubes were working properly, I'd worry about the manufacturer of the tubes and where the tubes came from. Now I'm less materialistic than I used to be. I realize that it doesn't mean much—this stuff," he says as he waves a hand about his store.

Fishkin's technician, Jay Gillman, bent over some electronic equipment in the back room, is also a reformed audiophile. He chimes in. "You become jaded. You

lose sight of the whole reason for buying the equipment. You become more and more neurotic."

"Does this take a lot of money?"

Jay shakes his head sadly. "I emptied out a bank account."

"But that doesn't mean you stop," Fishkin interjects. "It's like being an alcoholic."

"You have to reach a peak," Jay says. "You have to burn yourself out with it." Jay stops, looks up from his equipment, and smiles. "You're talking to two reformed audiophiles."

Unlike other audiophiles and other high-end store owners, Fishkin believes it's quite possible to put together a good-sounding system for \$600 to \$700, an indication of his apostasy.

"Can you get a good system for \$600?" repeats Elliot Goldman in disbelief. He is a salesman for Lyric Hi Fi in Manhattan. "There's no difference between a \$600 system and a compact from Sears." He wrinkles his nose in disgust. "You have to spend between \$2000 to \$4000, but then again, a \$100,000 system it's not going to be."

Lyric is the candy shop for the high-end buyer, and owner Michael Kay has been described by trade magazine *Audio Times* as the "high-end guru of hi fi." Modest looking from outside, Lyric carries the latest, most expensive systems. The store counts Isaac Stern, Marvin Hamlisch and Cat Stevens among its customers. The not-so-rich and the merely comfortable need not apply.

"This is the temple," Goldman says as he indicates with a broad sweep of his hand a roomful of high-end speakers and a gold-plated cassette deck. Like much audiophile gear, the equipment is huge. If this is the temple, by extension this is audio of the gods, and is reflected in its size.

Shape is different too. The Infinity Reference Speakers resemble the monolith in 2001. Also in the same room are cylindrical brown basket-like speakers which must be placed dead-center, according to Goldman. Against the wall are delicate folding screens, embellished with fine needle-

point. The screens are not used to hide speakers—the screens are the speakers—the Magneplanar systems.

Crouching behind the Infinity speakers amid a tangle of thick cables is a large black box which looks like a tremendous cockroach. It's a Mark Levinson pre-amplifier, which along with the Infinity speakers, a Goldmund turntable, and some other equipment is part of a system costing "about \$75,000 to \$80,000." Goldman adds, "As good as it is, it's not live music."

Not everyone is allowed access to the various temples of audio or into the fraternity of audiophiles. Women and non-technical men are made to feel—well, slightly uncomfortable, as if they had wandered into a high mass wearing shorts and a Batman T-shirt.

"Non-technical people can be overwhelmed in audio stores. You don't really feel that you belong there," says Pam Peterson, who is no slouch when it comes to the technology. Peterson is manager of the CBS Broadcast Center (long-term planning), and also one of the few female technical managers in her field.

The last bastion of male chauvinism could well be the ear: "There's a tendency to dismiss women in this field," Peterson says. "Women have different hearing—especially at the upper end of the scale. A lot of high-end speakers are designed for men. To me they sound as if the highs are overdriven. They sound screechy. Men have a tendency to dismiss women when women want more bass. They think it's gauche."

Although Peterson doesn't spend all her spare time or money on audio equipment, she does admit to feeling anxious when her sound system isn't hooked up. "The first thing I do whenever I move is set up the stereo system. It bothers me to go through the day without music."

"My stereo system is worth about two-and-a-half grand," she says, feeling that the extra thousands some devotees lavish on their systems are not worth the money. "The difference between two grand and ten grand is not eight grand's worth of improvement." Peterson is relatively at rest with her equipment, and unlike others, doesn't constantly shop for additions. "But once every two years," she says, "I binge."

Robert Kreisler, president of the New York Audio Society, tries to limit his audio shopping to once a week, which, he says, "is much less frequent than years ago." Sitting in his living room in Queens, Kreisler professes astonishment at the obsessed audiophile. "There are certain people who use audio as a means of escape. They over-emphasize it. The name of the game is enjoy."

But Kreisler—unlike many other audiophiles—is a family man and has managed to fit audio in his family's life. His son and his daughter are avid users of his system. His wife, Victoria, is somewhat less enthusiastic.

"Are you an audio nut?" she asks me. When told no, she nods in satisfaction and says, "Good."

As Kreisler plays his system, his wife neatens up, then disappears. Later, asked if she enjoys audio, she replies, "Yuck."

For many audiophiles, there's a high degree of anxiety involved in displaying their system—especially when the guest listener is an outside journalist. Audiophiles take care of their ears—it's their means of attaining a sort of perfection. If audiophiles are the ones doing the choosing, they are also among the chosen. The first requirement for seeking perfection is to be able to hear it, and those with this ability are said to have "golden ears." Even the Knights of the Round Table seeking the Holy Grail had to be among the pure of heart.

Audiophiles mostly scorn video—there's no such thing as "golden eyes." "I've got enough problems," said one audiophile when asked why he didn't own video equipment. You don't have to be among the select to tell a bad picture from a clear image. With all its mass-market

appeal, video to many audiophiles is just plain old TV.

The quest for perfection is a fluid process, and audiophiles frequently change systems and pieces. This type of rotating audiophile is best-represented by Ed Stone, a sort of worshipper of Our Lady of Perpetual Motion. Stone, a retired New York City detective (I later learn this is not his real name. He is a cautious man), trades or acquires at least one piece of equipment each week from his Brooklyn penthouse.

In his hunt for the best, Stone makes calls around the country and sometimes overseas. His monthly phone bills total over \$200. Stone also checks out the people he's buying from, and, careful man that he is, is reluctant to part with his secrets of how he finds his new stuff.

"I spend a lot of time on the phone," he says, leaning back on his couch in his large and, curiously enough, uncrowded apartment. "I'm always looking for something I can get rid of or pick up. Sure there are things I don't get around to doing. Sometimes I have to break a date with a woman to be available for someone coming over to do a repair. When something doesn't work, it can drive you to despair. You're willing to make some sacrifices to get it fixed."

Where is all this equipment? Is it in the closets? Is it kept in storage? As Stone escorts me to the door at the end of the interview, he gestures toward his large bedroom. Above the bed is a large canopy. At the side of the bed boxes of audio equipment worth thousands of dollars are neatly stacked up. The pile reaches to the canopy.

If Ed Stone represents the audiophile's quest for perfection, then Jimi Galate is a portrait of a man who has made peace with his audio equipment. A successful commercial and fashion photographer, Galate's impish good looks, shining eyes, and obvious pleasure in his stereo system are reflections of his satisfied state. Galate is a happy man.

"I've been through six or seven stereo systems," Galate says. "This is the result." We three—Galate's girlfriend, Galate, and myself—are sitting on Galate's brown velvet modular sofa. The combination of the music and the luxurious East Side apartment makes this listen a sybaritic experience.

The rock music is very good and very loud. (My ears will hurt for several days after this encounter.)

"At this level, change doesn't come rapidly," he says enthusiastically. "If you change something with your system, it makes an enormous difference."

It hadn't always been that way. Galate has paid his dues, in an auditory sense, with loss of sleep, the constant buying and testing and rejecting of equipment—the marks of an obsession. "I've been at that stage," he says. "It's constant frustration. I didn't go to work for weeks." Adds his girlfriend, "He didn't sleep."

"I slept," he counters, "but not very well. At that stage you go through—it borders on emotional sickness."

Galate is not interested in the technical side of audio, and it's obvious he is in it for the sheer pleasure and excitement. While playing different selections, he keeps up a running dialogue in my left ear about the music. "I'm not a technical audiophile. I'm more interested in the emotional experience of the music that's revealed in a flat disc." As I wrote down his components, which include Snell speakers, Linn Sondek turntable, Koetsu cartridge, Audio Research preamplifier, Bryston bass amplifier, and Tandberg open-reel tape deck, he peers over my shoulder to make sure I'm getting it right.

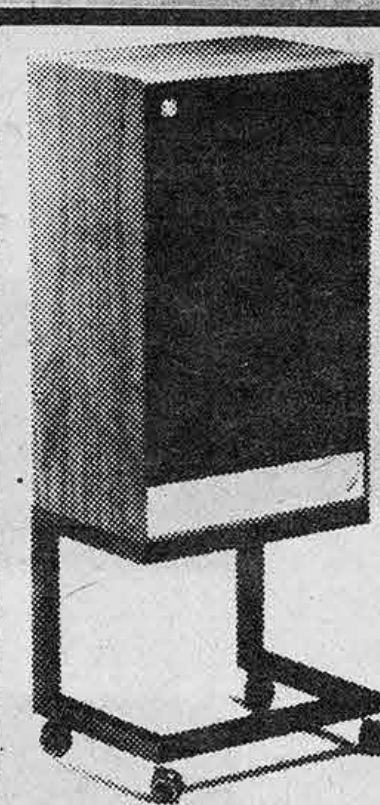
Galate gets up and bounces over to his components. He puts a Japanese record of electronic music on the turntable and a tape of German electronic music on the deck. He plays them simultaneously, happily switching from the German to the Japanese to demonstrate the influence of one on the other. Still switching, he turns to me and asks rhetorically, "Is it worth the \$15,000 to \$20,000?" He smiles. "You betcha."

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