

VALVE AUDIO COMPANY PROFILE



As the background scene to this article would suggest, the man behind Valve Audio was a sibling to this vast and arid, yet hauntingly beautiful and quiet part of South Africa called the Bo Karroo. Black nights with perfectly clear skies and stars so bright that it seemed you could touch them, nights spent sitting on the stoep outside inhaling the vastness of the universe. All of this was home in the formative years, when vacuum tubes were slowly being replaced by solid state and man was on the verge of landing on the moon. The Russian Sputnik was one of those bright stars and the adrenaline infused rush it heralded in the race to eventually be the first nation on the moon was followed over the then "state of the art" FM radio which was usually part of a complete radiogram occupying a much revered space in the house. This was the space where Schalk Havenga, founder of Valve Audio, spent many a happy childhood hour listening to old 78 rpm and new fangled 33 rpm cutting edge technology. At least in Noupoot, the town of his birth and entire school career, this was considered a privilege.

Prior to FM transmission technology, the usual means of radio transmission was by short wave and medium wave. Schalk remembers the early years lying on his stomach, peering through the wooden slats of the receiver's cabinet at the two solder eyelets on the large speaker cone, moving and vibrating in unison with the music or voice. To his inquisitive young mind these looked suspiciously like baleful eyes in the dark inside of the cabinet, which just had to be investigated in due course. These quests for knowledge were usually conducted when no-one else was around as the removal of the hardboard rear panel to the cabinet would be tantamount to sacrilege!

The rows of "canned fruit bottles" glowing in the dark inside of the cabinet, the sweet smell of ozone around the odd anode cap, and the complexity of it all left a lasting impression on a very eager, very impressionable young Schalk. These forays into the inner sanctums of different pieces of equipment, the newly acquired tape recorder, even the Clinton petrol engine on a homemade bore hole pump that Schalk's father Daniel made "because it could be done", instilled a love for technology and a "hands-on" approach to things technical.

A close friend was the first to really get tucked into experimenting and building things electronic. A loudhailer from an old Popular Mechanics magazine was enthusiastically tackled by John and father Daniel, as it would be an ideal piece of equipment for the recreation club meetings of which Daniel was the chairman. A radio amateur, Burt Marais, call sign ZS2LF, was also instrumental in the early

formative years as many an hour was spent around his radio shack. Terms like modulator, rf and if stages, amplifier stage etc., soon became less daunting as their functions and uses became clear.

This initial interest in electronics, and particularly audio electronics, was nurtured and developed over years of experimenting and exposure to specifically audio electronics.

A brief period of training and working at the Hartebeespoort Tracking station, loading tape drives and punching buttons was followed by a foray into the digital world which lasted about five years, where experience was gained on peripheral and mainframe computers.... Stuff that filled vast rooms with rows and rows of cabinets. Tape drives standing shoulder to shoulder for metres, hard disk drives that would put locomotive wheels to shame humming away in their own sealed atmospheres. Nixie tubes displaying vital information with numerical precision. Monitors with an eerie green luminescence, desperately trying to communicate a soul that the computer simply did not have. It was an impersonal and unsatisfying environment. One that could not keep Schalk away from audio.

An advert for a technician by Hi-Fi Installations was seen as an opportunity, one that was grasped with both hands. The successful application for the position led to the final move to permanent audio insanity!

Working as a repair technician for quite a number of years for one of the "Grey Lions" of the audio history in South Africa, Albert Meyburgh, Schalk was exposed to basically all the mayor brands in the hi fi trade of that era. Names like Bedini, SAE, Beveridge, Audio Research, Dayton Wright, Dynaco, Quad, Leak, Marantz, NAD etc. Invaluable experience and expertise was collected and stored away in the "audio banks" of Schalk's learning curve.

In later years, Schalk partnered up with long time college and friend, Gunther Graef, to form a highly successful audio repair company called Hi-Fi & TV Services. In 1994, Jeff Rowland of Jeff Rowland Design Group, paid a visit to the workshop as a courtesy call as Hi-Fi & TV were the service agents for the JRDG products in South Africa at the time.

What followed was a very inspiring discussion for Schalk, who learnt from Jeff that he basically also started out as a service agent, progressing to modifications and eventually manufacturing. Parallels were drawn in Schalk's mind, comparing backgrounds and similarities. In fact, so inspired was Schalk, that about a year later he floated Valve Audio and released the first tangible fruit of that decisions, the Black Widow, a hybrid design power amplifier capable of 200 watts per channel. The Black Widow received an enthusiastic review in the local Audio Video journal, AVSA, and was snapped up as an instant success and remains until today an active model in the product lineup.

It follows that as Schalk grew up during the years where both vacuum tube and solid state was applied to audio technology, that a trade mark of Valve Audio would be the marriage of these two technologies. Solid state could never fully replace or force out of existence vacuum tubes for reasons too obvious to even debate. Therefore, Valve Audio has become a manufacturer of a range of premium quality hybrid amplifiers employing the best of both worlds in extremely affordable packages from the smallest of basic integrated amplifiers, to very complex pre/power amplifiers in both single-ended and balanced designs.

In developing the Black Widow, more lessons were probably learnt than in all the preceding years. For Schalk, lesson number one was that you actually know less than you think you know. Bravado soon gave way to humility as Schalk was down sized right back to basics. At least now, approaching



the project with the correct attitude, brisk progress was made. The Black Widow eventually took about two years from concept to product. This included many long nights prior to registering Valve Audio late 1994.

Mechanical design for the Black Widow was done by a friend who understood the art of CAD, with a keen sense of electronics and the enclosures associated with it. CAD proficiency therefore was another part of the learning curve for Schalk. Today, all designs are done in-house.

All Valve Audio amplifiers are hand built to exacting standards, following tight control measures to ensure a consistent product. Face plates are hand brushed prior to screen printing of the legend which is also done in-house.

The photo to the left shows Schalk and a very proud father Daniel at the very first Real Hi Fi Show that Valve Audio ever attended. Daniel had been the pivotal inspiration for a young boy, with a firm belief that everything is possible if you set your mind to it.