

## 1. Tell us something about your first contacts with audio equipment.

There is the saying about the great Chinese candle, or the apple never falling far from the tree, and it was no different for me: In South Africa where I grew up my father was a recording engineer in his professional life, and at home he was always building and modifying stereo equipment, so I learned to solder at an early age. He was always trying to improve his own listening system, and took us to live music concerts, and so I have been around music and audio since then.

## 2. Tell us more about company history: founding and splitting in VTL and Manley Labs.

The original concept of VTL's design came from the recording studio when my father (David) was a recording engineer, designing and building equipment that he felt sounded the best. Utilizing the best circuits and design knowledge from the recording and playback chains, he originally conceived VTL products for accurate and musical playback in the home. He designed and built the first models around a very simple circuit concept, and since then all VTL products have conformed with these basic foundation concepts:-

- Scalable design from a core circuit concept
- Simple circuit with tube amplification and long tube life through lowered idle current draw.
- Solid-state power supply with large energy reservoir
- Push-Pull design
- Proprietary wide-band output transformers

Briefly, the history of VTL is as follows:-

1979 Early models based upon original recording playback designs. Initial sample amplifiers brought to the USA in approximately 1980 by David for successful evaluation and re-design of power transformers for 120V.

VTL started in the UK in approximately 1983 by David Manley with preamplifiers and power amplifiers, initially marketed in Germany, Australia and the UK.

In 1986 David brought over the first VTL products from the UK to exhibit at the Chicago CES, with a 50W stereo amplifier, 100W monoblocks and 2 preamplifiers. Luke joined David at the show and together introduced VTL to the US market. VTL's demonstration at that show captured the attention of the industry, and the decision was made to expand production and manufacture in US under the management of Luke.

In 1986 – 1987

Luke started importing VTL in Rhode Island, marketing to the US. Compact 50W and 100W monoblocks replaced the initial amplifier models, and US market demand exceeded the UK production capability. David moved from Britain to start manufacturing VTL products in the US in February of 1987.

With many new orders at the 1987 Summer CES show the decision was made to move west – to California. VTL relocated to Montclair, CA in the Los Angeles region, and the model lineup expanded quickly, with two additional preamplifiers and higher-powered monoblocks, including the 300W de Luxe monoblocks.

The US and international markets responded very well to VTL's becoming a US brand. Many rave reviews followed. Customers recognized the value proposition and the exceptional sound and reliability of VTL products, and VTL introduced the highest powered tube amplifier in continuous production: 500W This amplifier was the predecessor of the long-time favorite amplifier for many audiophiles, the 750W Reference monoblock, all of which are still in service today.

With many local support vendors the manufacturing facility and staff continued to expand quickly, and VTL moved to nearby Chino to into a larger facility, that VTL still occupies today, and several of the original staff from Montclair are still with the company.

1988 -- 1992

Many different models were introduced, including the first digital to analog converters with tubes, and the products and sales continued to expand. A new brand called Manley was launched, with certain hi fi products from the VTL range, and a professional studio range of products. David built a recording and mastering studio to make recordings that were recorded and mastered and played back through a complete chain of David Manley designed products, from microphone to loudspeaker, including the cables. Record label known as ViTaL was launched, with a catalog of 20 titles of recordings made by David in his studio.

1993

The VTL company continued to grow rapidly, but with too many diverse product lines and markets, and Luke and David decided to split the company: Luke took over VTL and David formed Manley Laboratories to focus on professional equipment for studios and the Manley brand.

The two principals went their own directions and two companies continued with no relation or similar identities between them.

VTL was re-configured to be a purely high-end company, with a strategy to elevate the brand above the low cost high value position to one of higher value and dramatically enhanced high end performance.

1993 – the Re-engineering Years

Luke re-built VTL with

- Strong storefront distribution network in the US and international markets.
- Stream-line and modernize the product line.
- Instill Quality and Control process into Manufacturing – invest in MRP II Software
- Build a strong engineering team with specialized expertise amongst each engineer.

Re-engineering -- Results

- Improve Product quality
- Consistent build quality
- Fully tested products
- Shortened feedback loop from the field
- Greater Customer Focus
- Close working relationship with dealers
- Products appeal to music lovers rather than equipment lovers

VTL raised the bar for highest power tube amplifier in continuous production again with the introduction of the wildly successful Wotan 1250W monoblock, widely recognized to be the most reliable high-powered amplifier that could drive any loudspeaker, and all of which are still in service today.

With just two preamplifiers in the line VTL was more known as a power amplifier company, but was not so well known for preamplifiers, and the decision was made to develop a true Reference preamplifier that would be as unaffected as possible by any external influences and would offer predictably linear and transparent performance into any load. The fully balanced TL-7.5 was introduced approximately 5 years later to wide critical acclaim and customer acceptance, and VTL was well on its way to becoming a real contender for the Reference position in tube electronics.

This drove the need for a new design in power amplifiers, and the Siegfrieds were born, instantly solidifying VTL's position in the Reference category.

Since then VTL has released a new product design every year, building upon the successes of the legacy products with trickle-down designs, and increasing VTL's position in the upper high-end.

### 3. Could you describe philosophy of VTL sound to us?

The VTL sound originated in the amplifier designs that my father used in his professional life, and he was always of the opinion that vacuum tubes sound closest to the live music he heard when he was recording. This is because of the vacuum tube's inherent technical superiority over transistors, explained in more detail at <http://www.vtl.com/pages/whytubes.html>

There are several aspects to this sonic characteristic:-

Dynamic, musical sound with powerful bass punch and a richness in the mid-bass with an extended, clean top end.

To do this we adopted the following VTL Product Philosophy in all of the designs we have ever made, and it is true to say that VTL products all conform to the VTL 'family' sound. The characteristics of this are as mentioned above, and as we continue to refine our products, VTL amplifiers are now well established as modern sounding tube amplifiers, with the identifiable family sound across the entire product line.

A modern amplifier should be as neutral and transparent as possible, and the VTL sound is described as:-

- Purity of sound that comes closest to live music, conveying the emotions of music, due to the requirement for very little error correction, or negative feedback
- Full range sound with controlled bass and extended top end

The VTL sound is lively, fast, dynamic, with tonal quality as close to live as possible

#### 4. Could you tell us more about VTL manufacturing plant and production process?

Our factory is based in the city of Chino in Southern California to the east of Los Angeles, in an area that has a very large support industry for manufacturing. All of our R&D, product development, and engineering are done in-house by our engineering team, and a select group of vendors are responsible for delivering various custom parts to us such as metal work, cosmetics, etc. We maintain a list of high quality vendors who can deliver parts to us that meet our quality guidelines.

All of our products are manufactured in-house in California, and our Quality process is the most important factor in our manufacturing process. Everything we do goes through inspection and quality control, from incoming parts inspection, to final products assembly. This is a 100% inspection process, and only products that have successfully passed all of the QC processes (including the listening tests) are signed off for final shipping.

Our manufacturing process emphasizes consistent and repeatable build process and using documentation to aid us in every step of the assembly process. As a result, we have detailed documentation on the PC board assembly, mechanical assembly, electrical assembly and testing of each product that our production team uses in every aspect of their work.

We have written quality and audit systems in place to ensure repeatability of manufactured products, as required by various safety certifications around the world, including European CE, Chinese CCC and Korean KETI and Thai safety certifications.

We have also implemented all lead-free solder systems throughout, and all of our products conform to the RoHs standard.

#### 5. In your opinion, what are most important differences between VTL and other audio products?

- Superior sound quality
- High value, high quality, affordable products.
- User friendly, combining the best of solid state technology to make tube amplifiers more modern and easier to use.
- Lasting value products with long shelf life
- Attractive, modern look
- Easy integration with modern two channel and multi-channel systems.

#### 6. Could you tell us something more about Siegfried monoblocks: main idea, development and unique solutions?

The main idea for the development of the Siegfrieds was as in the Reference TL-7.5 preamplifier, to develop an amplifier that was as unaffected by external influences as possible, utilizing all that we at VTL know about the art of amplifier design.

The following is from the information released for the Siegfrieds when they were first introduced. I think the main ideas behind the design are described below:-

“Incorporating the ‘tube-smart’ technology that VTL’s engineering team had been developing over a three year period, Siegfried is a breakthrough, both in technological innovation and sonic performance. It provides continuous real-time feedback of important performance parameters and automatically self-adjusts to maintain optimum settings, using software control to dramatically extend tube life.

Sound quality has also been taken to a new level with increased dynamics, more realistic instrumental timbres, and a harmonic richness nearer to live music. Sleek new cosmetics complete the package.

With our new ‘smart’ amplifier, we have truly put technology in the service of music, and with all of the guesswork removed from the amplifiers’ operation, the user can simply sit back, relax, and enjoy the music. Siegfried is VTL’s answer for those who want the musicality of tubes along with trouble-free operation.

Founded in the USA in 1986, VTL is a world-leader in quality tubed amplifiers for music reproduction. The company emphasizes progressive technology, user friendliness, and natural-sounding electronics, in a range of products designed to get people closer to their music.”

## Siegfried Technology

- Precision regulated high-tension supplies and huge energy storage for fast, dynamic sound with deep, precise bass, and effortless sound
- Fully logic-controlled Automatic tube biasing and comprehensive Fault Sensing to shut down and notify user of any fault, with tube identification.
- User diagnostic information – tube time, total time, line AC, temperature, tube condition via front panel
- Comprehensive control and easy integration with central control systems via RS-232

## 7. Please share with us your plans regarding future VTL products: improvements, new products, new technologies?

While I obviously cannot be specific about future new products, we remain very focused on two channel products, and our skill set involves analog amplifier design: amplifiers, preamplifiers and phono stages, so we stay within those boundaries. Our master plan involves creating new technology to add onto our core technologies in the following areas:

1. Improvements in Sound and Performance – sonic improvement comes first and foremost in all of what we do
2. Improvements in Performance – greater ease and flexibility to drive a wider range of speaker types and work with other pieces of audio equipment, power supply technologies, etc.
3. Improvements in Usability and user-friendliness.

We will continue to trickle down the technology gleaned in the development of our top of the line products, and we will continue to develop our skills in phono reproduction, to build upon the standalone Signature phono stage we currently make, and the trickle-down internal phono stage in the TL-5.5 Series II.

## 8. Tell us more about influence of your spouse, Bea Lam, to your work?

My wife, Bea, has been my partner in life for the last 16 years. She was a customer of VTL when we met, and her deep love of music, audio and the piano gives her a very special perspective into the work we do at VTL. When home she enjoys practicing on her own Steinway grand piano and taking weekly lessons. Her approach to audio gear from the perspective of a hands-off music-lover has inspired me to understand and refine the target customer base for VTL.

On the manufacturing side her education as an Electrical Engineer and her training as a software development manager at Hewlett-Packard gave her an excellent understanding of Quality, team building and customers support. Her skills have brought about substantial improvements to our company since she joined us. Bea handles most customer interface, and from her days as a VTL customer she can really put herself in their shoes.

Moreover, with her help, we are able to incorporate critical listening as an important part of our development process, giving our engineers feedback during their development process, so that our products are developed iteratively, with listening and measurement. Final voicing of new designs and production units is a long and strenuous process that requires a lot of patience, and we are fortunate that Bea immerses herself into this ever so tirelessly.

Bea also manages the complete back-office business side of our company, scheduling orders and production resources, managing shipments, and handling dealers and vendor payments.

## 9. Can you tell us more about your reference system and recordings, and can you name some of your favorite pieces of audio equipment (not necessarily VTL)?

We have two reference systems, one at home and one at the factory. The factory system is based around Avalon Indra speakers and a VPI Scout turntable. Nordost Odin and Valhalla cables are used in this system.

Our reference system at home consists of the SME 20 Turntable with the Lyra Skala cartridge, dCS digital front end, and some different speakers that we have in house: Wilson MAXX2, the Rockport Aquila, Vivid Giya and TAD Reference 1speakers. This system is wired with all Transparent Opus cables.

This is not to say that I have heard everything, but all of the above components are among my favorite pieces of audio equipment, each for their different reasons, but the top components to me are the SME and dCS components, the Transparent cables, and the TAD and Avalon speakers. LP stands above CD for me.

The recordings that I love are probably too numerous to list, but a few that we use the most:  
LP and CD:

The Weavers, Live at Carnegie Hall  
Frank Sinatra, Swingin' Session  
Anime Salve, Fabrizio De Andre  
For Duke, Bill Berry  
Hope, Hugh Masekela  
Going Home, LA Four  
88 Basie Street, Count Basie Big Band  
Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club, the Beatles  
Communique, Dire Straits  
Beethoven, Piano Concerto No 1, Vienna Phil/Guilini/Michelangeli  
Deadicated  
Bruce Katz Band, Crescent Crawl  
Mark Knopfler, Shangri La  
Mark Knopfler and Emmy Lou Harris, All the Road Running  
Robert Plant and Allison Krause, Raising Sand  
Dave Grusin, Discovered Again  
Dave Brubeck, Take 5  
Royal Ballet Gala Performances, Ernest Ansermet  
Schubert Trout Quintet, Clifford Curzon Vienna Octet  
Elgar, Enigma Variations, Monteux/LSO  
Ella Fitzgerald, Let no Man Write My Epitah  
Fritz Wunderlich,  
Ahmad Jamal, Crystal  
Lou Reed, Magic and Loss

CD:

Ambar, Maria Bethania  
Del Temps y del Instant, Jordi Savall  
Schubert Piano Solos, Arcadi Volodos  
Gianmaria Testa, Montgolfieres, Alatre Latitudini, Extra-Muros  
Bill Charlap Trio, Written in the Stars

There are of course many more than this, but these are some of the recordings we use the most often in developing new products.

#### 10. How important and influential is music in your everyday life?

It is my feeling that anyone who is in the high end audio business must necessarily have music as an essential part of their everyday lives, and so it is with VTL. Listening to recorded music to evaluate a piece of audio equipment becomes a critical part of my work, and I count on the sound of live music not only as a reference point, but also as a means to renew my energy and passion for my work.

In addition to listening to music on one system or another almost on a daily basis Bea and I attend live symphony, opera, jazz and certain rock concerts regularly in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, and we also travel often to New York to hear special concerts there. I think we are very fortunate to live in two cities with major cultural events and be able to take advantage of the many world-class performances and halls in both cities.