

Road Trippin'



by Wes Phillips

Late-afternoon sun cast long shadows across the rolling northern California hills as Adam Sohmer, NHT's PR guy, and I motored toward the Napa Valley. Sounds idyllic, doesn't it? The skies were clear, the humidity a perfect 35%, and we were cruising through some of the most beautiful landscape on the planet. But it was also work.

Do anything long enough and it becomes a job. I'm not putting my work down by calling it a job—in my book, the difference between being a professional and being an amateur is that a pro does his best even when he doesn't feel like it. Fact is, a lot of people might even ask what I have to kvetch about getting flown to exotic locales and treated to a few days of being Mr. Big Shot. It's nice, all right, but it ain't real—I'm *not* a big shot. I'm just useful.

Factory tours, visits from audio designers, even long dinners at fancy restaurants—all the stuff some folks think is evidence of the too-cozy relationship between manufacturers and audio reviewers—are chess matches. A lot of information gets spread around, and my job is to separate the real news from the press release. And that is work.

Bad Trip: Here's an example: Years ago, a certain manufacturer of high-end digital gear felt that *Stereophile's* measurements were intrinsically biased against its CD players because our subjective assessments of their components were always overwhelmingly positive, while our measurements of those same components were just as consistently mildly critical. You'd think that wouldn't be such a big deal—the firm's products consistently wound up in Class A of *Stereophile's* "Recommended Components"—but apparently our technical criticism stuck in this company's craw. How do I know this? Mostly because the manufacturer spent more time in "Manufacturers' Comments" debating the measurements than feeling the love—and because *Stereophile's* then-publisher, Larry Archibald organized a dinner at the Consumer Electronics Show to "clear the air."

Oh yeah, add CES to the list of work-not-fun things we reviewers get to do. After a day of frantically running around identical hotel rooms disguised as "listening rooms," we got to "relax" with a bunch of guys who were convinced we had it in for them. It was a disaster.

Them: You don't understand digital measurement.

Us: Explain what it is we don't get.

Them: You're not capable of comprehending it, so why should we try to tell you?

[Repeat for four hours.]

The lesson we took away from that dinner wasn't that they were smarter than we, but that they thought they were too smart to fail—and that when the test results didn't match their expectations, they'd throw 'em out in favor of a batch that did. I might not have been as smart as they, but even I knew that was dumb.

Good Trip: I'd visited NHT about 10 years ago, so I knew the trip wasn't going to be an ordeal, but I wasn't sure what I would learn, either. I knew NHT had a new owner, Vinci Labs, which in this case meant that it now had manufacturing facilities in China and digital-engineering and driver-production facilities in Denmark. I wondered how much of NHT was left in Benicia, California.

The short answer: its heart and soul. And *that* turned out to be the real story.

Longtime audiophiles probably know NHT best from its flagship 3.3 loudspeaker or its ultra-affordable SuperZero, and the company still manufactures real-world, affordable, high-performance loudspeakers. However, as much as NHT honors the marketplace niche it at first carved for itself, its future incorporates expansions into the worlds of digital signal correction—such as its Xd loudspeaker system—and electronic components, such as its soon-to-be-released Controller preamp-and-surround-sound processor (\$2700) and five-channel 200Wpc Power⁵ power amplifier (\$2000).

But that's the future. I was talking about *now*. When we rolled into NHT's industrial park, I felt as if I'd been there before. I had—sort of. When I was last there, the company had occupied a different building in the same complex, but the difference between one sheet-metal structure and another is so slight that I kept experiencing déjà vu.

That changed the minute I walked down the hall. Passing international sales manager Michael Kirschmann's office, I did a double take. Kirschmann had at least five guitars racked in

there—not to mention a bass, nine effects pedals, several combo amps, heads, and cabinets, and a Kiss clock on the wall. Next door, pro-audio manager Don Basse's office contained three electric basses and a ton of amplification. Brand-marketing VP John Johnson had drums everywhere. Visual design manager Bob Hopkins had keyboards, guitars, and a desktop editing rig in his office—and managing director Chris Byrne had a beautiful custom Fender Strat by his desk.

NHT is seriously into music: making it *and* listening to it. They're not unique in that, but music making is never far from the minds of the NHT guys. In fact, even though many of the staff—I almost called them *bandmembers*—actively play in bands, they get together about once a month for a company jam. I was there for one late-afternoon session, and those guys play well together.

Actually, that was the other thing I got from my visit: NHT has a teamwork ethic that I suspect is not unrelated to its collective decades of learning to *play* together. It's not something you can fake: The guys named—and everyone else there—really love what they do.

Heavy Trip: I don't think that was the message NHT meant for me to take away from the trip, but that's what makes these things a chess match. The message I *think* I was supposed to glean from the trip was that Vinci's muscle put the company in a position to rocket to prominence in mainstream audio by applying high-end muscle to the problems involved in putting speakers in rooms. By that, I mean that there is a very small percentage of the population who would look at a ginormous loudspeaker and think, *I gotta get me one of those*. With Vinci Labs' experience in digital processing, and products such as the Xd loudspeaker system, NHT very well may manage to overcome the you're-not-putting-that-in-my-living-room problem.

I'd heard a preproduction sample of the Xd in a New York hotel room and suspected it wasn't for me. It sounded okay, but . . . I wasn't excited. After reading Kal Rubinson's review in the November 2005 *Stereophile*, and John Atkinson's Follow-Up in the January 2006 issue, I was intrigued. I suspect a lot of my indifference was "innovation fatigue." After all, the Xd put most of a whole hi-fi system into a single purchase: You got speakers, stands, subwoofer, cables, amplifiers, and a complex and adaptable digital crossover, all in one swoop. Add a source and a volume control and you're done.

But for a reviewer, that's an almost un-supportable number of variables to change in one go. My mind reeled—and my hat was off to Kal for even attempting the review.

I began to reconsider all that when Chris Byrne offhandedly mentioned that the Xd's digital crossover allowed NHT to attempt crossover slopes

that were practically impossible in what he called "the physical realm." That's when it hit me just how revolutionary a concept the Xd system was. Maybe this professional should have done a better job when he didn't want to.

As it happened, NHT had an Xd system set up—not for the visiting big shot, but in their "dealer education" listening room, where the company trains its dealers to set up and optimize the Xd.

In a room of real-world size, the Xd, which looked a tad "different" in a hotel room, actually fit right in—it didn't scream *hi-fi*. I could see it in *my* living room. The speakers and stands were sculptural rather than boxy, and the subwoofer was unobtrusively off to one side. *Obviously not optimally set up*, I harrumphed to myself. Then the music began.

Whoa! Keith Greenberg began playing guitar and Dayan Kai chimed in on dobro, and they were *right there*, big as life and all but visible. Then Greenberg started singing, and *I* was so there, wherever there was. (Turns out *there* was Cookie Marenco's Extended Sound Environment; you can get the record at bluecoastrecords.com.) I'd been resisting *this*? What am I, crazy?

Okay, I consoled myself. *You know that small monitors do acoustic music and vocals well. Let's see how they integrate with that sub.*

It wasn't the Xd's ability to produce big, brawny rock'n'roll that floored me (although the system could really crank); it was when I felt the floorboards flex when Billy Drummond nailed the kick drum on Jerome Harris's *Rendezvous* (CD, Stereophile STPH013)—that wasn't just sonic, it was physical.

That was when NHT's and Vinci's Andy Regan walked in and said, "You know, for a room this size, we really ought to be running *two* subs."

Who on earth would need two? *Besides me*, I quickly answered myself. I was starting to understand why Kal had concluded that "The NHT Xd is the best thing to come down the pike in a long time." I gotta get me one of those.

Checkmate! But I don't feel as though NHT played me—I'm pretty sure they just let me see who they really are. And I really liked what I saw—and heard.