

Thomas DeVesto

Founder, Chairman and CEO, Tivoli Audio

BY NANCY KLOSEK



Tom DeVesto, founder of Tivoli Audio, worked at building his reputation as an audio industry innovator long before he ever got involved in producing a single model. Well ahead of his own involvement in the manufacture of high-performance audio gear at Advent, his years in hi-fi retailing brought him the recognition from his suppliers as a marketing genius. But early on, he developed a Champagne taste for well-reproduced music that was hard for someone fresh out of the Navy, and of modest means, to satisfy.

The pursuit of high-fidelity audio in the late '60s was ordinarily the province of hobbyists with the financial wherewithal to feed their habit for sublime music reproduction. That was part of the reason DeVesto had to settle for buying a lower-priced compact system at an appliance store, one that paled in comparison to the gear his buddies had brought back from overseas. "I went to a local hi-fi store and they had products there from a company called KLH, these compact music systems that sounded as convincing as some of the bigger, more expensive hi-fi equipment. I bought it, and that was my first real hi-fi. And that system would live with me the whole time I was in college."

Soon, DeVesto started and ran a small chain of hi-fi stores in his North Carolina college town, and branched out to build concert P.A. systems for artists including Jimmy Buffett, Alice Cooper and Helen Reddy. DeVesto's acquisition of the Model 20 would eventually lead to a 30-year business relationship with the "K" in KLH, the late Henry Kloss, an Audio Hall of Fame member and nationally acclaimed inventor. The acquaintance dates back to 1976, when DeVesto sold his company, moved to Boston and started working for Advent.

Tom Hannaher, president of ZVOX Audio, who was at Advent then and in charge of dealer advertising, recalled that DeVesto had stood out to him as a storeowner before he even came on board. "He had three stores in North Carolina, but Tom, unlike most small dealers, promoted by doing really interesting things. So I used him as my example dealer in an advertising seminar at CES. He's always been interesting. He's not a boring suit-and-a-tie, go-to-work, do your job and go home type of guy. He doesn't fit into a cookie-cutter mold of anyone's opinion of what somebody in this business ought to be. He thinks differently, and has a more open mind that doesn't go down a predictable path, the way everybody else tends to."

DeVesto's time at Kloss, where engineering efforts produced the fabled Novabeam projection TV, spanned 1978 to 1985. "I left there and eventually, Henry and I partnered again and started Cambridge SoundWorks, went public, sold it, and I sat out my non-compete and started Tivoli Audio in 2000," he said.

DeVesto said he counts Kloss as someone who has had "a far-reaching impact on me. Early on, I learned from him an approach to problem solving. But when he'd come up with an idea, he'd also try to come up with what was wrong with it—because if you could come up with that, it didn't matter how many good reasons there were to do it. It was about finding the fatal flaw in an idea. It was a philosophy I adopted early on, and still use today as a major part of how."

Executing this philosophy with Tivoli has resulted in far more hits than strikeouts in product design, development and marketing. Signature products like the Model One AM/FM table radio, the PAL (Portable Audio Laboratory) radio and the company's latest, the NetWorks global radio, are sold through Tivoli's Web site directly and via unconventional channels for audio, including specialty lifestyle stores like Restoration Hardware and Nordstrom. "The key to our marketing is finding the right distribution through which to sell these design-oriented but high-tech products," he said. "Tivoli's business these days has become as integrated with design as with technology." The area where he lives, on Lake Como, is not far from Milan, a center of European design and fashion. DeVesto said he plans to use the venue of a design fair in Milan this spring for his next big product initiative.

At that show, DeVesto said, what's in store from Tivoli will be "something that will really rock the consumer electronics industry in terms of design. We've been responsible in the U.S. for moving people away from black and silver."

