

2020'S INDUCTEES

THE ABSOLUTE SOUND'S HIGH-END AUDIO HALL OF FAME

The idea of honoring those men and women who've been instrumental in creating the high end has its roots in TAS's series of large-format books, *The Absolute Sound's Illustrated History of High-End Audio*. In the course of researching *Volume One* TAS writers and editors developed a renewed appreciation for the achievements of the pioneers who laid the foundations of this great industry. To honor these visionary engineers, entrepreneurs, and journalists, we decided six years ago to create a High-End Audio Hall of Fame.

For the inaugural round of inductees in 2014, we asked our writing staff to submit a list of candidates. The criteria were simple: Who had the greatest impact on audio's evolution from laboratory experiment to consumer product? Who shaped the high end most profoundly, either through technical innovation, business acumen, or a combination of both? Since we wanted to focus on those men who built the high-performance consumer-audio industry, we omitted the technical pioneers—Edison, Berliner, de Forest, Williamson, et al. (We celebrate them, and other great inventors, in TAS's *Illustrated History* series.) The final requirement for candidacy was that all members of the inaugural class be deceased—to allow us to concentrate on those giants past upon whose shoulders today's designers stand. The following year, and in all subsequent years, we've opened the Hall of Fame to designers and company founders both living and deceased. Each year we will add three more individuals to *The Absolute Sound's* High-End Audio Hall of Fame.

The following six pages showcase the lives and seminal accomplishments of the most significant contributors to high-quality music reproduction in the home. Today's high-end audio industry would be unimaginable without them. —**Robert Harley**



Alon Wolf

A Cat Who Took Chances

Robert Harley

“The only cats who matter are the cats who take chances.” —Thelonious Monk

The high-end audio industry was created by visionaries who shook up the status quo with a combination of innovative ideas, technical insights, and a relentless drive to succeed. Many such pioneers have contributed to high-end audio's long history, but over the past 15 years no person has better exemplified that spirit, or had a greater impact on high-end audio, than Magico founder Alon Wolf. His cutting-edge technologies and no-compromise ideals not only created Magico's acclaimed line of loudspeakers, but also forced the entire loudspeaker industry to step up its game to compete.

Alon came to America from Israel with a passion for music (he's an accomplished classical guitarist) along with a bent for technology and industrial design. He worked in advanced CGI

for big animated films such as *Shrek* and *Antz*, as well as on video games such as *Sims*. With access to state-of-the-art design tools, Alon explored various ideas in loudspeaker enclosures.

In the early 1990s he began building one-off custom loudspeakers for people he knew in the San Francisco Bay area. Some years later, one of Alon's customers, amplifier designer Jeff Rowland, told his Hong Kong distributor about Wolf. The distributor urged Alon to build an extremely high-quality, cost-no-object mini-monitor to fill the need for a premium speaker that would fit in the small rooms typical in Asia. In response, Alon designed the Mini, an ultra-expensive stand-mount that would ultimately put Magico on the map. The Mini, Magico's first production model, was built from layers of stacked birch ply, featured exotic drivers, and was easily the best-sounding small monitor yet created. Many decried the Mini's astronomical price, but none could fault its sound. A demonstration of the Mini at the 2005 CES convinced Jonathan Valin and me that Magico was a company worth paying attention to. Later in 2005, the Mini won the prestigious Grand Prix Award from Japan's *Stereo Sound*, and in the following year *The Absolute Sound's* Overall Product of the Year Award—the two most coveted prizes in audio.

When I visited Magico's 1500-square-foot factory in October, 2005, it was a one-man shop. Alon was building Minis, packing them into shipping cartons, and running the business single-handedly. On that trip, I also visited the home of a customer who

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had purchased Magico's other product—the then quarter-million-dollar (now nearly a million dollars in an upgraded configuration) Ultimate horn system. The massive Ultimate is a horn-loaded loudspeaker without compromise, and its sound was transcendental. (See my report on the Ultimate's design, and my listening impressions, at the-absolutesound.com/articles/magico-ultimate-loudspeaker-1/.)

Two years later, Magico moved to a 6000-square-foot factory as its product line expanded and demand for the company's speakers grew exponentially. The aluminum cabinets Alon favored were being made by an independent machine shop in San Jose, a 30-minute drive. By 2008, Magico had purchased the entire machine shop and moved the CNC machines to the Magico factory, so that all the speaker components could be built in-house. Magico speakers were so popular that the company even outgrew this factory, moving to a 20,000 square-foot facility in 2013. A recent expansion doubled that factory size to 40,000 square feet.

In just a few years, Magico went from a one-man shop making two products to one of the world's preeminent loudspeaker manufacturers. Countless other speaker companies had been launched during this period, but none

Feature *The Absolute Sound's* High-End Audio Hall of Fame

has come close to achieving Magico's success. Why?

Magico's meteoric trajectory has been the result of rejecting the status quo and creating new methods and technologies for building loudspeakers. The company is as far from a "me-too" manufacturer as it gets. Magico pioneered ultra-stiff enclosures made from aluminum with an extensive internal lattice bracing, also made from aluminum. It pushed forward the state of the art in driver design, first modifying off-the-shelf drivers and then creating cutting-edge drivers from scratch, using high-tech cone materials and new magnet structures coupled with Magico's "Elliptical Symmetry" crossovers built from cost-no-object components. Magico looks to high-tech industries for solutions that can be applied to audio; the use of graphene in loudspeaker diaphragms, pioneered by Magico, is a good example. These, and other, advancements were the result of extensive use of sophisticated computer modeling and Finite Element Analysis.

Despite Magico's advances in these areas, and its commercial success, the company has never stopped innovating. In fact, it leverages each accomplishment into more and more sophisticated designs and technologies. Significantly, Magico didn't identify itself by sticking to signature technologies, but rather adapted and explored new ideas, sometimes to the consternation of its customer base. A good example is the relatively recent move to monocoque carbon-fiber enclosures (coupled to aluminum sup-

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porting structures) that reduce diffraction and provide greater internal volume for the same exterior dimensions.

Behind the scenes at Magico is Yair Tammam, who joined the company in 1998 and is now Chief Technical Officer. Yair does much of the theoretical design work, employing custom software to model driver and loudspeaker behavior. Years ago,

Yair described to me how a software breakthrough allowed him to model a driver in the mechanical, thermal, electrical, and magnetic domains simultaneously.

Magico injected a jolt of adrenaline into the high-end loudspeaker industry, forcing complacent manufacturers to innovate or be left behind. The result has been an across-the-board elevation of loudspeaker performance.

Behind Magico's tremendous track record of great-sounding products, technical innovations, and commercial success are the high aesthetic standards, devotion to music, and relentless drive to succeed of Alon Wolf—a cat who wasn't afraid to take chances.