

On the Road (in San Francisco)
by Jules Coleman

Please forgive me: I couldn't resist the title – especially since my destination was San Francisco. Berkeley, actually, but I am sure Jack Kerouac had a warm spot for Berkeley as well as for the city by the bay – or as natives are inclined to say, The City. I had started my teaching career at the ripe age of twenty three at the University of California – Berkeley, teaching an undergraduate introductory course on ethics and political philosophy and a graduate seminar on epistemology. I was prepared – emotionally and intellectually – for neither. The undergraduate class was a modest disaster I am sure; the seminar very likely an academic disgrace. But both had their highlights.

I arrived in Berkeley full of enthusiasm and excitement and committed above all else to having my students like me. I wanted them to think of me as hip or cool or some such thing. And so I decided that I would teach my introduction to ethics and political philosophy course around the theme of 'civil disobedience.' Nervous about the first day I rehearsed my opening lecture many times. I can still recall almost word-for-word, the opening lines of my very first lecture. 'We begin with civil disobedience. There are two kinds of questions one can ask about civil disobedience: one analytic, the other normative. The analytic question is, what is distinctive of civil disobedience: that is, what distinguishes it from ordinary kinds of law-breaking? The normative question is, under what conditions, if any, is it justified?'

I was so proud that I could get these two or three sentences out without hyperventilating. No sooner had I finished, however, then a young man midway back and near the door, stood up and without waiting for me to call on him began an harangue of me that at the time felt like it lasted half an hour, but probably only lasted a minute or so. He began as follows: 'You _____ mother fucker; what do you know about civil disobedience. Have you ever burned down a bank (the answer unsurprisingly – had I had enough capacity to breath and speak at the time – would have been 'no; I had withdrawn before they reached maturity savings bonds from my Bar Mitzvah at the bank in order to buy my first car in Berkeley, but that was about it as far my mischief with our financial institutions had gone)? Have you ever been clubbed over the head by a cop with a nightstick? Just what the fuck do you know about civil disobedience? (I confess, dear reader, that by the standards being imposed on me at the time -- and perhaps by any plausible set of standards --I knew very little indeed – about civil disobedience or anything else for that matter.)'

I was left speechless, pinned figuratively and metaphorically against the blackboard behind me, I called the rest of the class for the day off. I rushed out of the room, tears welling in my eyes, sought out the chair of the department and begged for a transfer from the introductory class on ethics and political philosophy to the one on epistemology and metaphysics. My request summarily denied (such verbal assaults in the classroom were common at Berkeley if not in my graduate classes at

Rockefeller University), I did the only thing a young man could under the circumstances: I called my mother, cried and told her I wanted to come home.

Later I thought better of it and soldiered on – so to speak – though I did change quickly the subject matter of the course to the most deadly dull (at the time) subject in all of ethics: meta-ethics. Yes I tortured my students with concerns about whether our moral judgments were apt for truth or whether instead they were best analyzed as prescriptions or expressions of one sort or another. I had to find other means to establish my ‘cool.’

Epistemology is not typically the sort of subject likely to spark political uprisings unless of course one is teaching it at some or other Parisian institution or in the Department of Cultural Studies or Rhetoric in which the very concept of rationality is called into question as a dubious and suspect ‘way of knowing;’ where the concept of belief is not associated with what one might ordinarily think of as its cognates: truth, fact, justification, evidence and the like. Still my course had its disconcerting moments, when for example the young and beautiful woman who was to become my wife decided that along with her sister, she should sit in the seminar. I had difficulty saying ‘no’ so I didn’t. Apparently the subject matter was inadequate to maintain their interest beyond the first few minutes of each session as both young women turned their attention instead to taking on the local newspaper’s crossword puzzle of the day.

I returned to Berkeley several years later this time to teach as the first philosopher in the Jurisprudence and Social Policy Program, a novel PhD granting program within the Boalt Law School. The program was founded by two academic giants: the sociologist, Philip Selznick and the then Dean of Boalt Hall, the criminal theorist, Sandy Kadish.

And therein lies my reason for making the trip from New Haven/New York to San Francisco/Berkeley. I had come to celebrate the 30th birthday of the JSP Program and the publication of a new book by Philip Selznick. New books are rarely the occasion for public celebration in the academy, though it is more common these days than ever for schools – especially law schools – to trumpet every minor work as an intellectual achievement worthy of headline coverage in TLS; and more than a few professors cannot resist the temptation to throw massive parties in honor of their latest publications. The days in which we just do the best we can writing the best we can and leave it up to others to judge the nature and scope of the contributions we have made are long gone. It’s too risky a strategy. One needs not merely to produce, but to control the press on what one has accomplished. After all, why leave it up to others: what do they know; and they could get it wrong; and anyway no one knows as well as you do what the real significance of your work is.

Well, Philip Selznick has no need to trumpet his own accomplishments, but in this case what was special and worthy of celebration was the fact that Philip is over 90 years old and nearly blind. And the work he produced at this late stage in his career (that’s an understatement: for many in the academy, anything post-tenure

constitutes the twilight of their career) captures and expresses well the overarching themes of a dazzling career that has spanned over 60 years. He's been up to this stuff for longer than I've been up – period.

Celebrating Philip, staying at Sandy Kadish's home, revisiting my beginnings in academia, together were reason enough to make the trip.

Booking myself on an earlier than necessary flight I realized that I would be arriving in SF on Monday at around noon whereas the plans in Berkeley had activities beginning in the early evening. What to do?

I get out to SF at least once or twice a year, normally to give a lecture or two and to visit galleries I am fond of, and then to head off up or down the coast – to the wine country, Mendocino or Santa Cruz, Big Sur or points further north or south. Galleries and museums are normally closed on Monday and it occurred to me that I had not visited Matt Rotunda and his salon, Pitch Perfect, since he had moved locations from his large loft apartment to an industrial/commercial building on Brannan between 2nd and 3rd a stone's throw from ATT Park: the home that Bonds built and Zito milks.



the listening room at Pitch Perfect

I got Matt's email from Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports, and after exchanging a few emails, Matt and I planned to spend much of Monday afternoon together unhurriedly listening to music in his new space. I had not heard directly from anyone who had been to Matt's place but the word I got indirectly was that it was a wonderful space and everything sounded really good in it.

I don't make it my business to do 'road trips' as others, like Jeff Day and Mike Lavorgna have done – both for 6moons. But I have enjoyed reading their encounters with audio systems in situ, especially Michael's. I know Michael and he and I have listened to a number of systems together and I have a pretty good idea of what he finds compelling in music and in its reproduction. I don't know Jeff well at

all and don't have a feel for his ear so it has always been harder for me to connect with his reports – though I have enjoyed reading them. Like most reviewers and audiophiles, I have listened to a lot of people's systems in situ, and I am often puzzled and sometimes dismayed by what I have heard. Still, it never fails to please me to hear how excited people are about their systems and to see first hand the joy their systems bring to them.

But I had a special reason for going to Matt's beyond the opportunity to visit with him and to compare the sound in his new venue with that in his loft. I have been thinking a lot recently about what is most musically important to me in reproduction in the home. I had been formulating tentative conclusions about contemporary speaker design. And my reference system had every component in an all Shindo reference system, save one, the Latour loudspeaker. I owned the full Shindo Garrard analog set-up, a Catherine preamp (which falls below both the Giscours and the Petrus, but which is nevertheless one that is said to mate well with my amplifier), the 300B Ltd monoblocks, Shindo interconnects (among others) and Auditorium 23 speaker cables (again among others). I have owned and listened to a number of wonderful speakers in my system – well actually not that many wonderful ones. Most recently I have had the Aspara Reference in for review and it was the first speaker I have had in that allowed me to hear what my electronics and front end were about: I mean to really hear. But that experience only whetted my appetite to hear what a full Shindo system with Latours would sound like. I have given up hope of owning a pair myself, not just because the cost is beyond my reach at this point, but also because I am aware that the time is not too far in the future when I will be moving out of the big house in which my wife and I raised our family to a smaller home that is more suitable to our current needs and lifestyle. So I had an itch that was longing to be scratched and the opportunity to scratch it was right in front of me. Seemed like a reasonable thing to do.



I had heard the Latour loudspeaker a couple of times before and was very impressed, but my listening was limited and one of the rooms in which I heard it was too small for it. At Matt's previous place, we listened more to the SoloVox than to the Latour. In fact, I am not sure we listened to the Latour at all – and if we did, it was only briefly. So I was ready, and I had no strong priors. I was open for anything, but to be honest, I would have been surprised had it not sounded good.

But my real interest was to see Matt, have him show me around his set-up, listen to music and see if what I heard confirmed my current thinking about audio.

Let me begin then by getting one point out of the way quickly so that it does not become the focus of this essay. After listening to Matt's system – much of which is very similar to my own – I came away wishing that I could own the Latour: wishing that I were ten years younger or a little richer. The story is that Ken Shindo only thought to build a speaker so he could display what his electronics are capable of. If so, then his electronics are even more extraordinary than I have always taken them to be. No speaker is perfect, and neither is the Latour, but after listening for half an afternoon, the last thing on my mind was to see if I could identify what was less than ideal about it. That's all I'll say here about the Latour itself. I urge anyone who is serious about spending a considerable sum of money on an audio system to find a way to listen to the speaker at Matt Rotunda's where it is optimally set up. It is not a speaker for everyone, and it is a speaker than needs a big room, but what it does is unlike what any other speaker in my experience does, and that is this: it allows you to be completely at one with the musical experience. You do not find yourself listening passively or critically. You are completely immersed and transposed – not to some faraway recording venue, but to an immediate musical experience. Along with the rest of the system, the Latour made it impossible for me to adopt a point of view or perspective outside the musical event. There was no opportunity to comment on it, talk about it, listen to it, gain distance from it or the like. It was emotional, cognitive, physical immersion: not being engulfed in a soundstage – but being immersed in an experience.

Part of the sound is owed to Matt's ability to set up systems, and the entire Pitch Perfect Salon is a testament to Matt's artistic sensibility, his musical acumen, his years of experience in audio sales and to his temperament, his comfort with people and his generous spirit. When I arrived Matt met me after I got off the elevator at the second floor. We walked into a very large room with very high ceilings. The dimensions are roughly. There were audio racks on one wall, display racks on the opposite wall, bookcases housing over a thousand LPs, modest wall treatments, an office nook, all wool carpeting and plywood under the speakers nailed into the hardwood floor below. The most interesting feature on display was the four turntables, all of which can be used. In addition to the latest offering from Alan Perkins of Immedia, the Spiral Groove, Matt could spin records from a Garrard 401 with Shindo bearing upgrades, fitted with the new EMT banana arm on which he mounts the EMT mono cartridge; a Garrard 301 with Keith Aschenbrenner's plinth, and a full Shindo 301 set up which is the same as I have. Matt has all manner of

amplifiers and preamps available for critical listening, though left to his own he is likely to play the Shindo 300B Ltd wired to employ the input transformer. Mine is not. Digital is provided by a Mac iBook feeding any of three of Gordon Rankin's excellent Wavelength DACs including the second iteration of the Brick, the third and all new version of the Coscant and the copper wired version of the reference Crimson.

Pitch Perfect represents a number of speaker companies including DeVore Fidelity, a long time favorite of mine as I reviewed and own the Silverback Reference, Verity, whose Parsifal line has always been among the speakers I most admire, and until they lost their North American distributor, Living Voice, a favorite with many UK audiophiles, in addition to the SoloVox from Auditorium 23 and the full line of Shindo speakers including the Latour.

You don't go to Pitch Perfect if you are looking for a solid state system, and to be very honest, you wouldn't be the right customer for Pitch Perfect if your tastes in speaker systems runs from Wilson to B&W to Avalon to Rockport and all points in between. That covers a lot of audio ground. In short, the vast majority of folks interested in audio are not potential customers for Matt, and that is OK with him and OK with the world. You go to listen at Pitch Perfect because you are drawn to what you take to be the promise and possibilities of mating tube amplifiers with very sensitive loudspeakers. You go because even if most of your listening is from digital sources, you cannot imagine music without thinking of analog playback – whether magnetic tape masters or turntables. You go to Pitch Perfect if you think that even if the older designs (from the WE speakers to the Altec 604e to the Siemens Klangfilms to the JBL Hartsfields and beyond) were not ideally implemented, the principles at work in them were abandoned too soon and that music playback has gone backwards and sideways more often than it has gone forward since. You go, in other words, because you think there may well have been something truer to the music in those earlier designs and you want to hear what manufacturers who agree with you have done in implementing those principles.

And if it weren't for the unpleasantness of having to waste a lot of time with tire-kickers, you would go because you are open minded and want to learn about other approaches beyond the conventional to creating enduringly satisfying musical experiences in one's home.

If my experience at Pitch Perfect is any indication, if you go, for whatever reason, you will not be disappointed. Your eyes and ears will be opened up – for some for the first time perhaps – and the way you think about music reproduction may never be the same again. How good is that?

Let me just mention a few things I picked up during my time at Pitch Perfect, and hopefully they will resonate with some of you. Others may think me nuts or beyond salvation. This is my experience, however, and I want to report it as fully and accurately as I can.

Before visiting Pitch Perfect, I had begun to entertain seriously the idea that the majority of audio commentators – especially those who repeat as if it were a mantra – that the gap between digital and analog is closing – are reporting what they hear, but that what they hear is an artifact of the systems they are listening to. It's not that they are listening to bad analog and very good digital, though that may be true in a few cases. Rather, almost everyone is listening through speakers that while they do not edit the sound or impose colorations in the way they once did or to the extent they once did, nevertheless impose homogeneity on the sound. I grant that modern speakers are less colored than their forbearers. I grant that there have been improvements in some respects in driver design and that cabinets are deader than ever and thus less likely to create unwanted vibrations.

What I won't grant is that modern speakers are for those reasons better, more accurate or more musical.

What they are almost without exception is roadblocks between the source and the listener. Most modern speakers, the best of which we can agree are uncolored and open, nevertheless make the music sound like it is constipated: it's a fight to get the damn shit out. This is a very different complaint than saying the sound is boxy. Some speakers make the box itself disappear, but even as they do that they cannot eliminate the effect of the music fighting like crazy to make its way through and out of the box. And just about every tool that has to work so hard to help get the music out ends up sounding more alike than different. This is especially true of tubes and solid state amps. What you hear more than anything else is strain. Everything sounds to me the way my guitar playing sounds to me. When I play guitar the music sounds like I've been working so hard to make it you never get to hear the artist's intention. You hear the effort and not the art.

And the situation is worse because most designers of modern equipment design their products and listen to them through exactly these kind of homogenizing designs. So they end up making amplifiers that sound alike and turntables that sound more like CD players (if not mp3 players). A true tube amplifier does not naturally sound similar to a solid state one; but one consequence of modern speaker design is that such amps sound more alike than different. A second consequence of such speakers is that designers who use them to design around are likely to produce amps that sound more alike than different – whether tube or solid state.

Matt and I listened to a lot of mono recordings, some dating back to 1947. The sound was so superior to most modern recordings, it was more depressing than revelatory. I had some previous experience with EMT tone-arms and this is the second time I heard the new one being used with a mono cartridge, and on both occasions the sound was simply glorious. Judging from his review, Art Dudley has had the same experience with the EMT tracking a mono cartridge. If your turntable can accommodate a second arm, I would encourage you to consider the EMT banana arm and especially a mono cartridge for it. You will be shocked at how great mono recordings can sound. (I won't even get into 78s at this point, but mono is just the tip of the iceberg of what you can discover.)

We listened to stereo as well as mono: Lightning Hopkins to Heifitz. I couldn't move from my seat. Didn't want to. At one point we switched to digital, and the digital set up we were using was terrifically good. I had reviewed the Wavelength Cosecant before and had happily owned one for a time. The new version is significantly better. We listened through the better still Wavelength Crimson. Digital was excellent, but it was in general so much less musically persuasive than vinyl. It's largely a matter of the software. In the first place, we had to turn the volume up considerably to bring the music to life. The sound collapsed and shrank by comparison. It was all of a sudden possible to detach from the experience. The experience was very good mind you, but it was not consuming. Frankly, I was happy to return to analog.

I am more convinced now than ever that the best audio systems immerse the listener in the experience. The key to the illusion of music reproduction is a sense of presence. The further the remove, the less palpable and believable the illusion. But if it is to be an illusion of a musical experience the system must get tonal shadings and the timbre of voices and instruments right. I heard that over and over again at Pitch Perfect, and the afternoon with Matt made the trip a success from the outset.

There are several different kinds of excellent proprietors of audio salons. Some have very broad selections of equipment and have a real skill at mixing and matching and finding combinations that suit particular customer's needs. They have a wide array of possibilities and they give their clients many options that will work for them. This is a real skill whose value should never be diminished. I know a few dealers like that and I admire them and the work they do for their clients. Hell, an honest dealer with a lot of experience with a broad range of equipment is a much better source of information for someone looking to put together a system than is any reviewer I know – especially me.

On the other hand, I have a penchant for a system approach. The sound you get in your home is the sound of a system, not the sound of component parts. In my experience, if you find a designer whose voicing speaks to you and touches you, then why not try to put together as much of a system as you can from that designer. Who cares if not every one of his products gets a Class A ranking or something equally ludicrous. The parts go together to sing in one voice and if that is the voice that moves you, why wouldn't you pursue that approach.

I know a few dealers who emphasize a system approach and by and large they represent manufacturers whose approach and voicing appeals to them. These dealers represent the opposite extreme, but their approach is equally valid and work experiencing.

Matt Rotunda of Pitch Perfect is one such dealer. The system he put together as his reference is as musically compelling as any I have ever heard. There are other ways to go. Matt wouldn't deny that; neither would I. But there is something very exciting about hearing what a system can do when all its parts are optimally connecting with one another. It is a special experience, and I am grateful to Matt for

providing me with the opportunity to hear that system – one that I can only approach but never I fear fully achieve.

By the way, the celebration for Philip Selznick and the JSP Program at Berkeley were worth the trip as well. Audio is great and I have nothing but tremendous admiration for the creative minds at work throughout the industry. But finding a person who has devoted his life to people, ideas and ideals – a person who has lived his life consistent with those ideals – is so rare in the academy that being in their presence – even if you disagree about both method and substance, as I have with Philip Selznick for thirty years – and being asked to help celebrate their lives and careers, that is a rare treat: rarer, in fact, than even a great audio experience. On the road in San Francisco/Berkeley, I had the great good fortune to experience both.

