Subject: Herd Mentality
Posted by Wayne Parham on Thu, 24 Jun 2004 14:07:26 GMT
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Hi Martin,I've come to many of the same conclusions you have. There's been lots of times when I encountered this sort of thinking in discussions about loudspeakers over the years. It used to be, about 25 years ago, that sealed boxes were the popular paradigm. I think it is because electro-mechanical specs weren't absolutely required to obtain an acceptable result. But whatever the case, it seems like a certain vocabulary develops in enthusiasts circles, and then herd mentality tends to set in.The popular vernacular is both fun and annoying at the same time. It makes the choice of products become a sort of tribal ritual, setting the boundaries of the gang. In a sense, one finds that they're not so much deciding on what sounds best, as what gang they want to be in and what would be coolest with their peers. Dare I say maybe the folks that just walk in to a stereo shop and pick out something they like are more balanced than we who are so concerned? In my favorite audio obsession, loudspeakers, there are some very distinct gangs, each with their own distinct colors. The group I'm most familar with often uses horns in their systems. Personally, I always felt the high-efficiency gang was most reasonable and well-adjusted, but I probably felt that way because I was a member of that gang. Still, I always felt that a horn enthusiast tended to be fairly objective about his design choices.That said, horns have long been viewed as being colored. I think this is mostly because, if undersized, they are. But I've always liked a well-designed horn, one that was large enough and appropriately implemented to exploit their strengths and minimize their deficiencies. They can be made to have flat response and excellent performance if designed well.All designs have strengths and weaknesses, as I'm sure you'll agree. Horns are great at some things, but they have very definite weaknesses that must be addressed and designed around. So it was odd for me to find that some horn enthusiasts had become as prone to irrational fixation as the older acoustic suspension fans had been. I guess I see this kind of thinking as unsophisticated and uninformed.Here's another one I'm starting to see, and I think you'll identify with this. Tubes were made obsolete by transistors for the most part. Like everything else, there are strengths and weaknesses of both technologies, but transistors did tend to replace tubes, and the general public has forgotten about them. Most people under 40 have never heard a tube-based sound system, and get an image of Victrola and thin sound if you mention tubes, if they even know what vacuum tubes are at all.It is really enjoyable to see the old technology resurrected and used, and amps made with vacuum tubes sound better than you might expect. But it has also resurrected old debates that had all but died before many of us were born. The one I'm thinking about right now is the SET verses push-pull debate. There are others too, like the right amount of negative feedback and other things. But just take the SET appeal, for example.I'm new to tubes. My education pretty much glazed over them, with a single semester dedicated to tubes. So I understand how they work, but have very little experience with many of the issues of implementation. Certainly, many of the issues are the same between active devices, like Class A implementations running hotter and having generally lower drive but no crossover between positive and negative cycles. But there are obviously other issues that are specific to vacuum tubes, even some that are specific to device types. In these matters, I've learned a lot from folks like Eric Barbour and Steve Bench.What I've begun to find is that there is the same sort of irrational zeal for specific design approaches in tube circuits as there is in other aspects of audio. Why am I suprised? There is some tendency to idealize the SET configuration, for example, of which there are several nice examples. But naturally there are also poor SET products and a whole slew of mediocre designs. So it's nice to find voices in the crowd

with what appears to be objective view. I'm not necessarily looking to the contrarian simply for an alternate view, but I do enjoy finding what really works and why, as opposed to follwing in the herd fashion, even if the herd seems fashionable.Wayne