Subject: Re: A Rise In Numbers?
Posted by Wayne Parham on Sat, 11 May 2019 17:50:24 GMT
View Forum Message <> Reply to Message

This subject often gets brought up at audio club meetings and at audio trade shows. Some say "the sky is falling" and the industry is in decline. Others say new lesser-expensive technologies and the ease-of-discussion from the internet has brought in many more audiophiles than ever before.

I personally think this industry has always been a niche market that has stayed basically constant.

Prior to about WWII, only technically proficient DIYers could get what would have been then the state of the art in sound. Most people had table radios or console radios with one big full-range speaker as their only sound equipment. Some had record players but, just like the console radios, they were relatively poor quality even if they were in an expensive console. Only "audiophiles" would have tried to build equipment capable of better quality sound. That's a small group of people indeed.

Then later, as America enjoyed post-war prosperity, some high-fidelity equipment started showing up as consumer electronics. The early DIYers had some competition from commercial offerings. Some of the early companies were started by passionate individuals, so many of the commercial offerings were polished versions of their DIY efforts. But in any case, the point is that was a time that the numbers of audiophiles grew, because availability grew.

But even then, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s - when several hifi products were available - most people still usually chose inexpensive sound systems over high-fidelity equipment. So even with high availability and no need for technical competence, the numbers of people that owned high-fidelity equipment was much smaller than those that had mid-fi or low-fi equipment.

Availability has continued to increase and costs have tended to decrease. A lot of this is due to digital electronics, which have been developed in rapid pace. No other industry that I've ever seen has grown as rapidly as digital electronics has since the 1970s.

Some audiophiles believe that only analog provides "true" high-fidelity sound. Those are the ones that love vinyl and tape media. Some believe tube amps and/or single ended amps with low feedback are required for best high-fidelity. Both of these technologies tend to be a little (to a lot) more expensive. So in the beginning of the 21st century, the latest talk about "audiophiles being a dwindling breed" tended to come from the vinyl and tube amp lovers. Naturally, these audiophiles were a small group but they weren't any smaller than their counterparts in the early 20th century.

And now look at the market: Vinyl is decidedly returning to popularity. It is still not as popular as digital formats, both physical formats like CDs and BluRay disks and soft formats like data streams. The millennials and Gen-Z kids definitely love their MP3s on phones. So as always, most people own mid-fi and low-fi equipment but the audiophiles, while in a minority, seem to have more choices than they ever had.