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THIS ISSUE: Industry veteran Michael Klein opens a new hi-fi store in Pittsburgh, against uncertain odds and amid online competition. What's he doing differently?

Third time's the charm

It's not every day that someone opens a new brick-and-mortar hi-fi store. A variety of factors make the prospects of such a venture uncertain at best. Hi-fi industry veteran Michael Klein, though, has the guts and seasoned-salesman charm to make a go of it. I was curious to check out Stereo Stereo,¹ Klein's new dealership in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I wanted to find out how a brick-and-mortar shop like his can compete and coexist with other retailers, especially online retailers.²

Stereo Stereo isn't Klein's first stereo rodeo; in fact, it's his third. He opened his first, Pittsburgh's The Audio Gallery, in 1983, selling Linn and other brands. He sold his second, Let's Make Music, also in Pittsburgh, a few years back. Klein then moved to Dallas, hired by high-end dealer Audio Concepts. After 16 months, as the pandemic took hold, he decided to return to Pittsburgh and open a new store. This time, he decided, he'd do it his way.

It wasn't an easy sell. Banks these days are bearish on traditional retail. But it isn't just banks. "People thought I was out of my mind," he said.

For Klein, a hi-fi store is all about relationships, music, and providing a great experience. He asked lenders—the humans he was talking to at banks—if they'd ever experienced that. Sometimes—often enough—the answer was "yes."

What makes Stereo Stereo different from other retailers? "Me," Klein told me. "I'm serious. ... Having a smile on my face when people walk in."

Stereo Stereo's store occupies a 3500ft² space in a suburban shopping center amid other indie businesses. The store is designed to Klein's specifications, with a large main room and three adjacent rooms. It feels open, inviting, casual. A few two-channel systems and fun, midcentury-modernish furniture populate the main room. Off to one side, a headphone area lets customers try 'phones from Grado and Focal, among other head-fi brands. Large paintings in splashy colors by Pittsburgh-area artists adorn white walls. Two of the listening rooms are lined with Ikea Kallax shelves filled with Klein's own albums.

Shelves of LPs, it turns out, are good marketing. Visible through the front windows, another LP-lined wall—this one lined with new LPs—attracts interest, enticing people into the store. Once they're in, Klein asks about the systems they listen on. He invites people to listen—he loves giving



demos—but it's a low-pressure experience. When a customer buys something, he throws in their choice of LP as a bonus. "I let them know I appreciate their business," he said. If a customer brings a product in for repair, he loans them a replacement. He allows his regular customers to borrow components so that they can try them in their systems at home.

None of this is unique among b&m retailers, but it helps differentiate the experience he offers from the experience of buying products online.

Low-cost online dealers can make life harder for b&m dealers. Klein's attitude? Bring 'em on. "Online sales don't really threaten me," he said. "I take it head-on." That might mean matching an online price, especially for a regular customer, or demoing a superior product. "I'm not going to lose a sale because I don't have the right product," he said. "I will lose a sale because of my personality, or they don't like my store or [demo] presentation, ... or if it's more money than they wanted to spend."

Before opening Stereo Stereo, Klein did his research, visiting several US dealerships. The goal was to decide what *not* to do. A few of his findings: Setup is often poor. Fake plants are off-putting. Many dealers stock too many lines, which gets confusing for customers and dilutes a dealer's expertise.

"I take setup seriously," he told me. He

keeps his real plants healthy and his offerings manageable. "When people ask, 'What else do you carry?' it's powerful to be able to say, 'That's it.'"

Stereo Stereo's current brands include Audio Research, Bluesound, Bowers & Wilkins, dCS, HiFi Rose, KEF, Mark Levinson, NAD, Shunyata, Wharfedale, and Wilson. Despite the space's LP orientation, Rega is his sole turntable line.

Stereo Stereo is a new, independent store, but, as that list makes clear, he mostly sticks to established brands he's worked with in the past. "I would absolutely take a chance on some newcomers," he said, but first he'd need to get to know the people behind the product. HiFi Rose is the only brand he carries that isn't long-established.

Not quite four months in, Stereo Stereo is ahead of plan. Even so, Klein knows he needs to earn customers' long-term support. On the store website, he describes Stereo Stereo as "a community-based business." He welcomes everyone—newbies included—in contrast with the snobby stores of yore.

Stereo Stereo serves home theater aficionados, but when Klein demos those systems, he always starts with music—live concert videos with good sound. Why? Because people know what live music sounds like. "I don't know what dinosaurs chasing me or a bullet flying past my ear sound like," Klein said. "But we all know what a live guitar or vocalist or piano sounds like."

A home theater demo can also be a perfect opportunity to introduce people to a great-sounding stereo system. Once they hear their favorite music sounding better than they've ever heard it sound before, they might find themselves buying a two-channel system instead of a system for movies.

Klein likes to see the expression on people's faces when the setup and demo are done right. Even if they don't walk out with something new, that's one more person exposed to hi-fi. They—or their friends, or their neighbors—will be back. ■

¹ Stereo Stereo's name was Linn founder Ivor Tiefenbrunn's idea, from way back in Klein's early days as a dealer. He also borrowed Linn's old tagline: "I use mine every night."

² See stereophile.com/content/re-ales-19-old-school-vs-internet.