

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



## Dan D'Agostino

### Master Builder

Jonathan Valin

**I** am tempted to say that in the world of high-end audio electronics Dan D'Agostino needs no introduction. Nonetheless, by way of introduction, let me recount a story HP told me years ago, when I asked him to name the best stereo system he'd ever heard.

I assumed, as most would, that Harry'd nominate one of his own systems—such as the famous IRS/Maggie combo. But I assumed wrong. Turns out HP paid a visit to Dan D'Agostino, who lived nearby on Long Island back then. At that time Dan was using top-of-the-line Apogeos driven, of course, by his own fabled Krell KSA-100 monoblocks. The sound wasn't just good; it was so good that HP spent the next month trying to make his system sound like Dan's. He never succeeded. HP being HP, he didn't tell D'Agostino that he had the best

system Harry had ever heard. It would've been too demeaning, I guess. But he told me, and now I'm telling you. Praise from Caesar.

Dan D'Agostino didn't just wow HP with his fabulous electronics. He wowed all of us when in 1980 his first company, Krell Industries (named after the super-intelligent race of aliens that once populated Altair IV in the classic sci-fi film *Forbidden Planet*), came out with the KSA-100—a Class A monoblock that was not only gorgeous sounding but also so utterly unflappable it could deliver 1000 watts into a 0.8-ohm load (e.g., the “impossible-to-drive” Apogee Scintillas).

Dan would've earned a place in *The Absolute Sound's* Hall of Fame for his numerous classic Krell designs all by themselves. But after a business dispute in which he lost effective control of Krell to a minority shareholder, he established an entirely new company, Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems, which not only boasts its own state-of-the-art amplifiers and preamplifiers but also offers some of the most beautiful industrial designs high-end audiophiles have ever been treated to. Eye candy as well as ear candy.

Dan D'Agostino has had high-end audio in his blood from a very young age, having been influenced early on by his father's interest in music and hi-fi. (In *The Absolute Sound's Illustrated History of High-End Audio, Volume 2*, you can read more about his dad's system, which consisted of assembled-from-plans Klipschorns and a small Lafayette Radio tube amplifi-

**“I looked at the marketplace and decided that that 25-watt amplifier was not what I really liked, so I tried to make one that produced 100Wpc.”**

er). Later, D'Agostino began spending time at a hi-fi store “a few blocks from where I lived and (the owner) got me excited about audio all over again; we listened to his big record collection there. When I was 16, he gave me a job, cleaning up, dusting, and helping out, which was cool.

“When I got out of school I wanted to work in audio and I started looking for opportunities. At the time, everybody was buzzing about the Mark Levinson ML-2 pure Class A amplifier that was 25 watts per channel. I looked at the marketplace and decided that that 25-watt amplifier was not what I really liked, so I tried to make one that produced 100Wpc. That amp became the Krell KSA-100. That's how I got started in the business.”

The KSA-100 debuted at a trade show early in 1980. At the time there were only three prototypes of the amp. Going into the show, D'Agostino's hope was that his fledgling firm might eventually grow to a point where it would ship orders for several KSA-100s per month.

“We figured if we sold ten monthly worldwide, we could design a preamp and a couple of other products and make a decent living and not have any worries. Actually

## The Absolute Sound's High-End Audio Hall of Fame Dan D'Agostino



none of that worked out because when we went to the show we sold something like fifty amplifiers!

“When we got back from that CES I didn’t even know where to start. I had to actually produce products that weren’t prototypes! We spent a whole year getting out the fifty units we had sold and we collected some more orders, and it became kind of like a treadmill after that, doing more and more products. I’d go out on sales trips and come back with orders. Then, most of the time, I would deliver the finished products and collect payment for them, because we needed the money. It was kind of hand-to-mouth.

“Krell never turned out to be the kind of small, hobby-oriented shop and fun place I thought it was going to be. Before I knew it, I had probably eight or 10 employees and just kept on putting products out, so there was never a time—once the

company got a foothold—that we got to relax with it. I mean, it just kept on growing until we were inundated.”

In 2009, everything changed. D’Agostino had taken on a minority investor without grasping that the associated investment contract gave that investor the power to force top-level staffing changes. Within a matter of months, D’Agostino’s position was terminated and Dan was compelled to leave a firm he had spent the better part of 30 years developing. Naturally, D’Agostino found this turn of events appalling, but rather than give himself over to bitterness, he decided to begin anew by founding Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems, a company intentionally guided by a different ethos than that of Krell.

“Krell always wanted to grow, always wanted to push that envelope, and so we went high, and then we went low, and we went into different things, like home theater. Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems does not want to do that. We primarily want to stay in the two-channel domain, focusing on products that offer truly exemplary performance. We are not into making compromises in what we have designed, so it’s not our goal to go down to the two- or three-thousand dollar price range and expand horizontally.”

Where Krell had been strongly growth-oriented, Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems is a business whose primary mission is to explore the upper limits of performance and aesthetics in high-end audio electronics—electronics that, for now, are best represented by

**“Krell always wanted to grow, always wanted to push that envelope, and so we went high, and then we went low.”**

the firm’s lovely Momentum Series amplifiers.

“At Krell, I would conceive a product and its performance envelope and then I would put a package around it—kind of like having the function dictate the form. But with the Momentum I really wanted to make something that no one had ever built before; I wanted to cross the lines between watches and cars and audio equipment—creating things that could be beautiful, yet functional. To that end, I worked with forms until I got a shape that I liked and then I started working on the size. When I realized how small the inside was and how much power I wanted it to have, *that’s* when the designing really got difficult.”

Difficult as they were to engineer, D’Agostino’s Momentum electronics were universally praised, setting new standards of sound quality and industrial design. The other equally beautiful Master Audio System products that have followed it have been just as successful.

It is tough to set the bar in any field. Dan D’Agostino has done it twice, with exceptional imagination, engineering skill, and industrial design. For this doubly remarkable feat, he earns his place of honor in *The Absolute Sound’s* High-End Hall of Fame.