



AJ van den Hul: Dutch world brand

# Analog Magician



In the year 2005 hi-fi is almost completely digitalised: years ago going from CDs to DVDs and MP3s. But just as like with Asterix and Obelix, only one hi-fi entrepreneur successfully resists the all over present bits & bytes tooth and nail. DJs and audiophiles carry the Dutchman Aalt Jouk van den Hul on hands. The black magician in the field of phono cartridges and cables.

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C-sharp 09-05 (Translation from Dutch)

Call him the John Cruyff of the audio world. A virtuoso ballplayer, inimitable in his reflections.

We're already talking for more than one hour with Aalt Jouk van den Hul, but the subject of music hasn't come up even distantly. Even though here we're actually visiting maybe the biggest audio name known in our country.

It goes about the heat pumps which take care of heating and cooling in his office building in Vaassen. This by pumping up water from deep levels. It particularly also goes about carbon, a material which will take over the role of steel to a growing extent. But for instance also can provide good service to screen high frequency radiation for example coming from GSM transmitters. His study of carbon has taught him much about the construction of cables for audio and video, but also medical equipment. He even attributes the material with almost magical properties, so it seems.

Two small wristbands made of carbon fiber - he shows them as evidence - have freed him from the after effects of a whiplash suffered during a car accident.

"The memory is completely back and it almost seems if I get younger again", he adds on top of that.

"The idea came in a dream after two years of misery. The how and why may not be scientifically explainable, but it works."

Carbon influences the structure of the water in our body, we note down. To show that water isn't always water, the technical maverick shows tens of photos of frozen water crystals.

Different every time, depending on the water's site of origin. Carbon - if applied in the right way - can influence it all. He shows us a decanter which is wrapped with ten meters of carbon fiber and in that manner is having a wholesome effect on the quality of wine. He speaks of the link between the worlds of the liberal arts and the exact sciences, which we still know very little about.

### **Black magic**

Call it black magic. That would anyhow be quite appropriate considering Van den Hul's passion for LP records. But one thing is sure: we have rarely seen a 67 year old still being that active. He works at least 80 hours a week, travels around the whole world and is blessed with eyes and a steady hand that allow him to hold two for us invisible tiny wires together and fix them with solder.

"A sixth the thickness of a human hair," it sounds noticeably satisfied when we are in his workplace at home.

Here he builds his famous phono cartridges totally by hand. For a matter of fact this really literally is a custom job, because the maestro first wants to know what the client's musical preferences and listening habits are. Jazz requires a somewhat different approach than classical music. Or pop music. And also to the records themselves over the years quite some has changed.



***'The price list continues up to four grand for a cartridge'***



fine things which are able to wrest the last bit of refinement and emotion from a record. Preferably vinyl.

Amongst enthusiasts the whole world around AJ has at least built an almost mythical reputation. The unique design of the

***'Call him the John Cruyff of the audio world'***



Van den Hul talks about the choice of the applied wire - from copper to gold - the tension in the rubber suspension, more or less out of phase signal in the channels. It all helps to conjure the maximum amount of emotion from the groove. Analog stored music can retain this like no other. Ever more audiophiles return to vinyl. It's no wonder that again more LPs - new ones - are sold than small discs with new digital high resolution technologies like SACD and DVD-A added together. Later on the day we see him writing a small text with an engraving pen on little square millimeters of metal of a phono cartridge that we brought to have checked. Only when we actually expose it to a magnifying glass back at home we read his name, place of residence and the wish that we may experience lots of pleasure with the new life of our little cartridge.

### **World brand**

Not without reason Van den Hul also literally is a world brand. He conducts business in 65 countries and in that sense even so could rival the spread of Shell petrol stations - more than 90 countries - without problem, if he wouldn't consciously confine the list. As such his products don't go towards the African continent. In an interview with the German 'image hifi' magazine he tells why: "There they can better spend the money on schools and hospitals than on hi-fi. So you shouldn't let it flow away to Holland."

We were warned, one can claim afterwards. Also the prominent citation of 'greencare products' on all his products is telling. Although it remains striking. After all we're dealing here with a firm that grants the notion of 'welfare product' new profundity. It all revolves around the ultimate enjoyment of music. After all, Aalt Jouk van den Hul develops and produces phono cartridges, cables and other

'needle' in his cartridges for instance also carries his name. As such, in German magazines you can read about the 'Van den Hul Schliff'. Obviously it's all top shelf, because it does cost. The price list continues up to four grand for his Colibri XGP/XGM phono cartridge, specially wound with precious metal wire. We get acquainted with it at the immense attic above his living farm.

Wherever possible the floor and walls are covered with an immense amount of books, records and audio equipment. Here, Van den Hul gives the last adjustment to the about 750 cartridges he builds a year. Only very few visitors have ever been in his 'acoustic painting studio'. We listen there to the LPs we brought along.

Never before has our '79 dating 'No Nukes' album given such a transparent sound. Van den Hul listens along with closed eyes. Concentrated. Almost in trance. He prefers classical music himself.

Everything revolves around a spacious and deep sound image, precise localisation of the musicians. Unambiguously and very to the point he skilfully comments on the record's recording technique. It can carry his approval. One can indeed almost see Jackson Browne, Graham Nash, Carly Simon and James Taylor standing there. Without doubt for the first time in this room.

The sound comes from futuristic larger than man-sized towers with their horn speakers as the most eye-catching components. The high tones come from futuristic plasma ion tweeters, a kind of singing flame. Read: ion current. We have to get used to so much transparency. We ourselves therefore in first instance prefer the somewhat less unveiling cartridge which as second shows its abilities in the listening room, a small step below the Colibri: the Condor.

### **The sound of a tiny cable**

In the evening the wonderful journey through listening land continues at home with a foursome of stereo cables had on loan. That branch by the way accounts for 91 percent of Van den Hul's turnover. What difference can a tiny cable make at all, you think in your innocence?

Even to the untrained ear the effect however proves to be immediately audible. Instead of a standard product, basic model The Name - five tenner for a set - already means a huge step forward, a 'mid-class' one works still better and then his First Ultimate cable is next. In a manner of speech we suddenly have returned to Van den Hul's listening room.

Not that our system is entirely of the same level, but the 'character' is staggeringly recognizable. As if a last touch of fog clears from the soundstage and everybody takes some steps further apart. It concerns a cable totally made of carbon fiber, as we find out later. How could it be else.

Obviously a favourite of AJ van den Hul, because at the other side of the telephone line we can almost hear him frown when we state that 'this one again is so enormously transparent, but to our taste almost too clear'.

Maybe it has to do with our preference for tube amplifiers? The fourth cable - The Orchid - at first we can't place within the program, but also after regular swapping it every time ranks number one. Just a touch less 'translucent' than the carbon cable, but also here, in a manner of speech, you can see everybody stand on stage and the balance in 'treble and bass' is more pleasing.

We score points with that, because only now it appears that C-sharp carried the world scoop of a new, still to be launched, cable.

Three hundred Euro a set, yes, but for the time being AJ can forget about having it back. We'll make it a long test.

### C-sharp 09-05

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