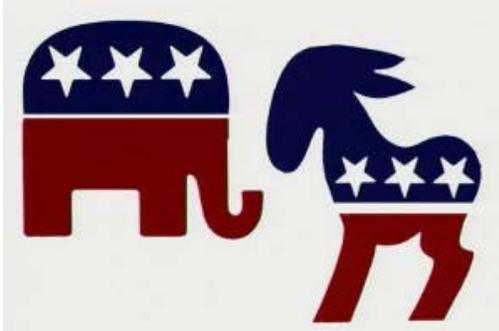




audio

## Soundstring Cables for President - Bad dreams, great sound

by Jim Merod



### The Problem At Large

I don't blame anyone who hates politics. It's the usual schlock every four years. The cast changes slightly. The script's the same. Jerk-offs on the "pretend left" promise good times as soon as they get their paws on the gearshift. Jerk-offs on the "no BS" far right castigate and vilify so called lefties, reminding us that we have much to be thankful for and more to fear. The overall political "center" resides with your Aunt Maude who still bakes blackberry pies and peach cobbles. As long as she's strong enough to grind in the kitchen endless hours, keeping you and your cousins plump, there's hope for a social and cultural middle ground where people stuff themselves silly on family recipes beyond the reach of covert CIA files and FBI secret memos that rationalize why government agencies won't cooperate with each other. Why should one bureaucracy make another one look good when the boss is always on their ass to ensure plausible denial when Congress or the press comes down on his?

Given the state of our non-union, its present crisis enlarging daily just outside your Aunt Maude's warm larder, no mixed metaphors are possible: only ennui and disappointment; truth and its deplorable repression. Which explains my recent nightmare.

### The Problem in Miniature

Awhile back I received a truckload of wire from those generous, talented cats at Soundstring Cable Technologies in the much beleaguered east ...beleaguered before New York's recent self-affirmation once the Brady bunch stumbled at the threshold of perfection when the Kid from Mississippi joined his older Manning sibling as kings of the collective football playground. We pay attention to this serious stuff out west.

Maybe you don't follow football or politics. You don't like obscure similes? Relax. Follow these entangled strings and oblongs right over the edge.

I've been listening to so much wire, cable, strings, interconnects—all that multi-colored wonderful stuff that gets your sound signals here to there (what should we truly call this stuff?)—that I'm not sure I remember the proper names for things. Isn't the cosmos a complex matrix of strings? Sub-elemental particle "strings" ...Isn't that where we now find ourselves in our 'Wizard of Oz' universe in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

You think I'm kidding. I'm not. If you open a whole load of boxes with beautifully-crafted audio cables and soon recognize that you have explicit, unavoidable responsibility to "make sonic sense" of so many lengthy gadgets (widgets?



"strings"?) ...well, if you do that, your world wobbles a bit.

Why? Well, for one, there's all this not inexpensive wire with claims on usefulness; sonic appeal; (iii) attractiveness; (iv) your hearing (when was the last time you had it checked?); and (v) your utmost professional fortitude, dignity, precision, care, and the crowd of Those Who Hang On Every Syllable an Arch Reviewer tosses out ...since (you realize) all those fan letters that pour in regularly celebrate the vast huzzah of your demoralizing prose. So, there it is. A guy's *gotta* live up to his own downward spiral.

### Getting to the point

Which is why I had that nightmare in the first place: boxes all stacked up begging for attention, the Little Lady asking why more shit (stuff, I mean) is about to hit her fan [Note : when the Little Lady uses such an expletive, it's a semi-technical term, not an implacably negative comment]. More to the soft underbelly of my point slipping away here: my nightmare could've easily freaked me out without her semi-technical call to return to humanity's obscene normalcy ...which is exactly what the Little Lady's expletives intended.

You read that correctly. I had this haunting nightmare's repetitive brooding visit me several night in a row—as if I had no status in the inner sancta of late-'40s comic jousting! As if I'd never visited Disneyland, The Village Vanguard, or Fenway Park. How much does a guy have to do to prove he's part of the human comedy, his inexorable finger thrust in the breach of culture's leaky dike? This having to reprove one's self-certification over and over is the ultimate insult. No wonder nightmares reappear, reminding us of things we wish to blot out. Boxes of cables. Little time to review them. Much interest in listening. Less interest in suffering its overburdened aftermath. Thus the dream that won't disappear. Thus nagging self-consciousness, vexed between day's obligations and night's stupid imagery.

Enough nonsense, I decided (leaning against the increasingly leaky wall above). I'm old enough to assert "rights of the semi-geriatric" or the "recently demented" (it comes to the same). Let me assert fully right now and here that such privileges are not something you can purchase. So, as I was saying to myself amid the scrofulous panic of the choking part of the bad dream when all that wire was wrapped around me and I was about to slide over he edge of a glass cliff with apparently no visible bottom ...what the hell was I about to say to myself anyway?

Can't a guy get a decent glass of beer in some nearby dive? You need a lawyer sometimes just to sort out the good guys from the bad guys inside yourself. Weary stuff. Who doesn't hate nightmares? This one's a winner. I mean loser ...oh, shit. Forget it.

### Arriving on target

The Soundstring Crew has something going or they wouldn't trust their cables to just any old guy (like me). Would you? Don't answer. What I've come to question about this nightmare haunting far too many nights, when the winter solstice was most bankrupt, is this: why did it choose me? Dreams choose different folks at various moments. Someone's got to sweep the sewage, put his middle digit in place of leaky politics. I've heaved more than my share, enough to earn a decent beer. Which reinforces my point about Len Miller and his crew at Soundstring in the icy east. Condolences. A nice, engaging man like Len Miller ought never deal with weather's bad karma. Len's a good bloke. His cables are good, too. Better than that. It's not right for a stand up man with perfectly buffed credentials (like Len) to put up with inclemency each winter.... while a *doofie* guy, on another coast, endures personal inclemency. Forget about inviting your pal, Kosher, to the party. He split long ago. Perhaps I'm too tolerant of ambiguity, too willing to suspend disbelief.

But—and this is the utter truth—the tangle of these semi-confusions and nano-nuances about cables did not resolve into focus until I read my colleague Will Wright's remarkable piece in Positive Feedback [Issue 35](#) (an underground audio journal scattered across the galaxy). You think I'm kidding? Consider what follows here to be a collaborative undertaking without Will's permission. Or think of it as a contemporary lesson in "How To Escape Nightmares and the Repulsive *Desublimation* of Politics." Literally so. Will's genuinely brilliant review of Soundstring cables was up against the same opportunity I'm in the middle of: a truckload of superior audio wire generously deposited on one's electronic threshold awaiting audition. Bang! There it is. Will and I are cousins. We share Aunt Maude's peach cobbles infrequently, but we have the same warmth to protect us.

Will Wright has written a deeply scrutinizing review of the way in which the Soundstring cable line offers signal transparency at a bargain price. He has showed patient readers how auditioning these cables results in hard won understanding that paradoxically results from a combination of one's knowledge about impedance matching plus the art of listening carefully. There's no way I'll write a single sentence that retraces Will's caring review or attempts to verify the contours of his procedures. Will has investigated thoroughly; he has articulated the logistics of the audio reviewer's junket. But he

has opened an area where I'll try, with intrepid good cheer, to supplement his work and its outcomes.



### Who cares who gets to be President?

Will notes that he is genuinely "satisfied with the performance of [Soundstring] cables, despite occasionally being frustrated with [his own] inability to ...describe exactly what they are doing."

What any cable "is doing," of course, has two fundamental valences: what it's doing technically, as a signal transmission device, a carrier of electrical pulses that improbably translate into the magical world of audio reproduction, the glory of music; and what it does as a differentiated ensemble of sonic textures and musical images (harmonies, the placement of instrumental staging, as well as nuanced ambient melodic holograms).

Heard with the greatest degree of sensory sobriety, sound is sound, a musical note is just that: a sound struck right or not so well. But, and here's the rub, heard with a full degree of engaged emotional attention—attention framed by aesthetic discernment and personal yielding—no note or sound is ever merely "right" ...it is informed and informative. Music is essentially a realm of nonverbal, non-tactile Eros. Music is fundamentally sensuous and sensual, but the textures and resonances of such erotic appeal are nearly without haptic impact. Nearly, but not wholly. The *virtuality* of the emotional, intellectual and spiritual impact of, say, Beethoven's late quartets constructs an alternate world to the one we carry with us in (as) our own specific human *sensorium*—even while that alternate realm suffuses our consciousness, enhancing its complex alertness while articulating its unique differentiation (our individuality, separateness, and openness to otherness).

Such abstractions, notwithstanding, I want to suggest that the greatest amount of our love for music, and our self-enhancement by music, has less to do with maximum audio reproduction (and fidelity to the musical source) than with the inherent musical bond we re-experience each time music that we care about deeply captures our attention. I realize that's innately against the grain of "high-end orthodoxy," but I think it's true. Music works its will and magic on us regardless of boom-box sonic deterioration or ultra-high resolution playback nirvana.

I am not denigrating the audio reproduction magnificence. I'm a sucker for its seductive appeal. I am, however (despite audio addiction), emphasizing that one of the ways we approach the precise area Will Wright's humble yet accurate statements point to—the difficulty of describing what we hear; what a piece of equipment or a cable accomplishes—is by recognizing (and developing) the inherent "bonding" that music reanimates each and every time we listen.

Here's what I mean ...practically. In some completely literal way, the seeming absurdity of the fact that music "speaks" to and from (and "as") your personal nature: from and to ("as") your fundamental emotional consciousness and your less than fully conscious awareness ...that potential absurdity begins to dissolve the further you pursue how you experience music at the most attentive levels of your being. If you are devoted to rationalist outlooks or prefer somewhat mechanized models of hearing, knowing, perception and cognition, you may feel uncomfortable with this assertion. I'll not argue this in full here. But I offer that view as a way to supplement Will Wright's astute observations about Soundstring cables' sonic "transparency."

As Will was not wholly certain how to describe what the cables under survey were doing precisely, I suspect he was essentially asserting a puzzle about the physics of sound transmission, in general, and of the Soundstring cables he had spent considerable time with, in specific. That puzzle, of course, opens another one, more global: how to understand and describe signal outcomes: for

example, small sonic differences between specific, differing cables' audio reproduction. My assertion here suggests the nearly absurd proposition that such a conundrum cannot be overcome by wholly rational analysis or analytic vocabularies. In some profoundly innate way, minute nuances that differentiate subtle elements of sonic outcome can only fully be "gotten" (heard, recognized, and talked about somewhat clumsily—as here, for example) by yielding one's attention to the interconnection" between awareness and the essentially erotic seduction of musical sound. There one experiences how the sensuous fact of a cable's "transparent" signal delivery is, simultaneously, an envelope of relaxed (immediate, highly detailed) musical seduction and a matrix of complex sonic nuances.

### Audio transparency ain't no nightmare

My time with Soundstring's Alpha Octaphase cables (just to zero in on part of the load that the Little Lady bemoans) verifies Will Wright's assessments. I'd like to add to those that the still enigmatic issue of signal transparency offers a view of larger enigmas that haunt the perception of audio and musical differentiation among audio cables. It opens a conceptual door to the micro-subtleties of hearing and to the macro-dynamics of musical enjoyment as well as analytic and emotional interpretation. If anyone wishes to assert that these are not areas of experience and cognition are not *imbricated* with one another in varying sorts of overlap, uncertainty and reinforcement, then I'll assure you absolutely that the check is always in the mail.

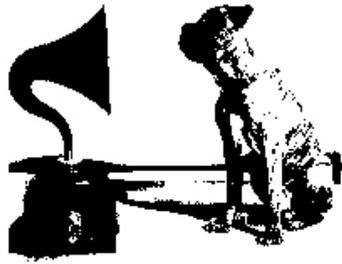
I have found that Soundstring's unique "transparency" is constructed, in my repeated witness, from the "outside in." What the hell could such a preposterous formulation mean? Am I again having the nightmare about boxes stacked everywhere *ad infinitum*?

I think not, but identify precisely with Will Wright's frustration regarding the reviewer's enterprise. To my hearing (in my *delusional*ity, engaged sobriety, etc. and so on), Soundstring cables seem eccentrically but gloriously to concoct the illusion of a transparent opening into sonic space and time ...as if the event rendered (as if something at the heart of their construction of musical details; their innate reproductive delivery) inexplicably gathered musical elements together from the external reaches of the musical event's ambient limits toward the emotional and sonic center of its staging.

Let me designate this differently. This is extremely subtle and no doubt subjectively gauged not merely by my *perceptual sensorium* but by specific equipment used to render musical outcomes with Soundstring (or any other) signal transmission. Listening to my recordings, made in ambient spaces that I know very well, what emerges for me with more than a small degree of surprise is the way Alpha Octaphase wire seems to "privilege" the entire ambient space of my recordings. The salient fact or illusion (it comes to the same thing as one listens) of this signal delivery is that, in some vital way, the cable "hears" or "replicates" (carries) the most delicate details of sonic signal delivery—music and its ambient space—with the same veracity and replicate "touch" that it lends to musical fundamentals: to pianistic overtones, to staging details, and to voices and instruments dead center. This, in itself, is a haunting experience. How can that occur? How does a cable do this? Is that how I want to hear my recordings? Is it accurate? Is it satisfying? Most of all (technically), how come this occurs?



That last question joins me closely to my colleague, Will Wright, who enjoys Aunt Maude's blackberry pie as much as I do, surely. He cannot parse the inner sancta of this issue. Nor can I. More later. Maybe. I'm tired. Nightmare wakening deprives the brain's relaxation. Excuse these raving mumblings, footnotes to the truth of too much work, deep issues of audio recreation enigmatically propounded against unsleeping bliss.



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