



audio

DISCOURSE

Soundstring Cables: "Are You Kidding Me? Or Tommy Flanagan's Audio and Musical Surprise"

by Jim Merod

Listening Is Not Always Hearing

A few years back, legendary jazz pianist Tommy Flanagan flew out from New York to get respite from the city's insistently negative vibe. Flanagan loved New York. That's where his professional work as a musician mostly took place: recording studios, jazz clubs, concert halls, rehearsal sessions, and the occasional spontaneous jam with ageless pals. But Flanagan loved warmth and sun, and relaxation no less. Tommy Flanagan loved to lie back a little and, as he frequently noted, "have a taste." Across the week of that particular visit, Flanagan's preferred taste was ice cold gin with periodic punctuations of expensive Chardonnay.



Like his dear pianistic "brother," the equally legendary Jimmy Rowles, Flanagan had a small cadre of favorite piano predecessors. Rowles adored Ellis Larkins. Flanagan revered Art Tatum. Thus it was on this memorable trip west that Tommy Flanagan and I found almost daily occasions to listen to pianists we both loved ...mostly vinyl recordings that I plopped on my Linn LP12 turntable (through an Audio Research phono preamp) in order to stump or provoke the maestro's attention.

That week we spent time talking about Bird—Charlie Parker—who meant so very much to Flanagan. One of the pianists who Parker played and recorded with often was Al Haig. Many years earlier, when Tommy Flanagan had come to my house near Concord, outside Boston, I'd proposed to play some fantastic Al Haig trio albums for him. Tommy Flanagan was not in the mood and vetoed my inclination. We spent most of our listening time on that earlier trip engaged with Bill Evans' recordings. But this west coast jaunt was ten years later and, instead of suggesting we dig Al Haig, I merely put one of Haig's albums on the playback rig and handed the maestro a tumbler of Bombay Sapphire right from the freezer.

After ten minutes or so, the frequently laconic Flanagan asked who in the world we were listening to. "Al Haig," I told him.

"That's one of the greatest players I ever shunned—oh, my goodness..." he replied and slugged his gin in semi-reverie.

It turned out that Flanagan used to haunt the famous midtown Manhattan bar Jim and Andy's, where Al Haig sometimes invited the eight years younger pianist to visit him or hang out somewhere. "I always turned him down," Flanagan noted, "because I thought he was just another one of those guys who sort of dog the scene with nothing much to say."

The notion of "nothing much to say," of course, was Flanagan's way of indicating that there are two kinds of jazz musicians and he was only engaged by the cats who "said something"—like Art Tatum, Earl Hines, Bud Powell, Hank Jones, and Bill Evans.

In sum, that afternoon, sipping nearly frozen gin, Flanagan "heard" Al Haig. He fully got Haig's touch and elegance. He was moved by the fluid, hip lines Al Haig always seemed to have ready for any occasion, and Flanagan also "heard" the great be-bop pianist's deep influence from one of his own idols, Bud Powell.

"What do you hear in Haig's playing," I asked him. His response was calm and measured: "Authentic ideas, original ideas ...beautiful chops."

Jazz Listening: Hearing What's Truly There

While Tommy Flanagan avoided Al Haig's talent for a long time because he mistakenly assumed that the great musician was under-whelming, what emerged that happy fall day in La Costa, California derived directly—as Flanagan insisted later on—from his experience there hearing how tactile a well-recorded piano is when vinyl sound reproduction is exquisitely *torqued* with superior equipment and high-end cables. In fact, that afternoon's surprise for Flanagan led him to request that we listen to more Al Haig on vinyl. My surprise was that Flanagan asked that we listen through various cables to hear what differences he could hear among them.

Few musicians I've known over the years (hundreds) have ever shown much interest in audiophile explorations. Strangely, sadly, most musicians I've known are willing to accept, as adequate, boom box reproduction. Flanagan confessed that he had never before pawed through the ins and outs of audiophile obsession. The upshot of this adventure was Flanagan's increased appreciation for Al Haig, in specific ...and for, in general, the nuances of sonic presentation. After our foray with music and cable swapping, we drove to La Jolla where he had trio gig. Tommy Flanagan quietly admitted his sense of humility in the face of avoiding a great piano colleague only to discover him later, in part, because the sense of immediacy that Haig's records offered sonically, allowed him to take full note of the musician's delicate inventiveness.

Over long years, I've often wondered what impact extraordinary music playback might have upon truly great musicians. If players who have little or no awareness of the power that great sound carries were to come across its transformational seductive force, the outcome might be deeper attention to both musical and sonic details. Their creativity may well expand. One thing became clear on this west coast visit. The essentially inadvertent conjunction of Tommy Flanagan "discovering" a special pianist's unique artistic intelligence, "hearing" its artistic touch full bore via great sound reproduction, put one legendary pianist hauntingly close to another one, though long deceased.

These literal facts of "musical proximity," with all the emotional and cognitive results that derive from such intimacy, establish a point that motivates this first of my review essays on Soundstring Cables.

The predominant point I have in mind here is that art and reception—performance and witnessing; creativity and critical discernment—cohere most precisely in the musical universe when the sound of one note resonating *feels* "real," the experience of sound resonating in ambient acoustic space.

Welcome To Soundstring's Realm

Tommy Flanagan's amused, self-conscious discoveries that cheerful day prefaced my own surprise over these past few months.

Flanagan knew virtually everything there is to know about jazz piano, harmony, improvisation, melodic variation, and musical dynamics from beginning to end ...yet he'd overlooked a major pianist, part predecessor, part contemporary: a man, Al Haig, whose jazz credentials were (and remain) strong and true. Despite the fact that Tommy Flanagan recorded with Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Coleman Hawkins, Johnny Hodges, and Roy Eldridge (plus more), toured and recorded with Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald (and others), he was aware he always had something more he could add to his repertoire of



knowledge and experience. That's a common artistic self-discovery, but surprising nonetheless given this particular man's extraordinary brilliance and constant rumination. Tommy Flanagan was a musical prodigy as he grew up in Detroit. Among great musicians, he was unusually self-reflective and, at moments, profoundly articulate.

My extraction of a "lesson in listening" derives from the maestro's double jolt, in the company of iced gin and superior sonic playback. Flanagan's joyful amazement serves as a predictive example of my recent education in the company of Soundstring's in-no-way ordinary or average audio cables.

My colleague at *Positive Feedback Online*, Bob Levi, gave me a heads up awhile back when he asked me to listen to one of Soundstring's power cords. Because I have very high regard for Bob's refined taste and critical judgement, I knew immediately that he was "telling" me something worth pursuing. That lone cable was more than impressive ...all the more impressive because the entire line of Soundstring cables (including their remarkable power cords) are priced to help nearly every aspiring audiophile to increased musical satisfaction.

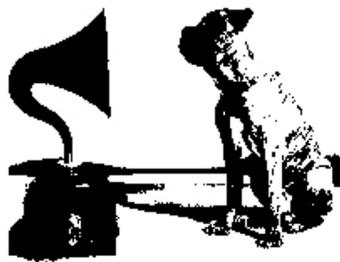
I have now been in the presence of Soundstring wire for a number of months ...months in which my concern not to overlook the inherent signal reproduction nuances of cables priced so low has been reinforced over and over by the sheer facts of the matter at stake as one listens. By any rational accounting of current price standards in the audiophile market, Soundstring cables are genuinely "bargain basement" gifts to those on a budget and to those who refuse to throw money like water on audio dreams. The major conclusion that I have taken from my time with the spectrum of Soundstring cables is this:

I am not aware of any brand or make of audio cables that equals or surpasses Soundstring cables in quality for dollars spent. In that critical if also frequently neglected price-quality ratio, Soundstring (to the best of my knowledge) is literally unequaled. If, like me, you begin to swap out power cables, for example, depending upon your cache of comparison cords, you'll find (I'm confident) that, while a few quite expensive cables may edge these out in subtle ways, the differential between them and Soundstring's wire is purchased at an extremely large and punitive cost multiple.

This first of several reviews of the Soundstring line of cables is meant to alert readers—or warn them—that outrageous prices do not have to obstruct audiophile dreams of enhanced music enjoyment. Over the years, this listener has found that inexpensive integrated amplifiers (such as NAD and Creek) can offer a very large percentage of "ultimate" sonic resolution—and that slightly more expensive amplifiers, such as the line of modified McCormack DNA series amps, can rival and exceed amps at ten and twelve times their price. Another relevant example can be found in the recent appearance of the OPPO universal disc player [review to follow]. But my point here at the outset of reviewing Soundstring's remarkable accomplishment is that GREAT MUSICAL REPRODUCTION CAN BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT BANK BUSTING EXPENDITURES.

I'll conclude for now by offering a small personal lament. I wish I had requested a thirty foot pair of Soundstring's balanced interconnects so that I might evaluate them as microphone cables against others (quite costly) which I regularly depend upon. Perhaps, if I write Saint Nick a legible note of solicitation—cookies warm by a holiday fire—I may be a lucky boy whose one last wish is fulfilled ...because these cables from Soundstring (balanced and unbalanced interconnects, power cords, and speaker cables; as well as short jumper wires) ring gorgeous bells here at BluePort Sound.

Soundstring Cables www.soundstringcable.com



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