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The Rise and Evolution of Accurate Reference Monitors

Part 1: The road from Dunlavy to Lipinski

by Dan Richards



Lipinski monitors at 101 Productions, home of 2015 Grammy-winning engineer Darrell Thorp on Beck's album "Morning Phase" for Album of the Year and Best Engineered Album

There are times when the right kinds of ideas, technologies, and man's talents seem to line up with the stars. And there are times when relatively esoteric concepts and products begin to make it into a more general population. Over the years as an engineer, producer, and product reviewer, I've had hundreds of products in for review, tests, and recording sessions. One of the things that makes it all worthwhile has been that every so often something comes in for review that stands out. And being able to get the word out and line up end-users with great products is one of the main principle drivers in my ongoing search for creative tools in the music-recording community.

In some instances that's resulted in a closer relationship to manufacturers, and even having input into some of the designs of pro audio products. I've also been able to spot companies either early in their development, or at critical growth periods, and shine the light on emerging products coming to market that sometimes change the game, and sometimes just make the game better.

When I received a pair of Lipinski L-70 self-powered monitors in for review, I got the sense that there was something different going on from the many offerings of monitors available on the market. I contacted [Benchmark Media](#) about joining in on the review process with their new [DAC2 converter](#). I'd used the DAC1 for years, and wrote a widely-read [deathmatch between the Benchmark DAC1 and the Lavry DA10](#). I was eager to audition the further developments with the DAC2, and it seemed the Lipinski L-70 monitors would give a clear window to explore the sonic details.

I've been fortunate enough to have had many of my writings and product

reviews create some impact and influence within the recording community. It occurred to me that writing about any of the Lipinski Sound monitors would be incomplete without some background into the history, companies, and people who have been at the forefront of accurate reference speaker and monitor technologies and products.

The idea of speakers and studio reference monitors having attributes of "transparent," "accurate," and "unflattering" is a philosophy. And it's not one you have to buy into. But it's one that mastering engineers, recording engineers, and audiophiles who are involved at the highest levels of music and sound production and music reproduction subscribe to in their professional environments.

In conversations I've had over the years with the legendary designer Rupert Neve, he relayed the idea that there are only two kinds of sound equipment. They're either "accurate" or they're an "effect." And while there is certainly a lot of room in the creation of music and sound production for "effects," there are also places where "accuracy" is the only way to go. I've long been a user of Bruel & Kjaer—and then later DPA—microphones as well as Millennia Media mic preamps. DPA microphones running through Millennia preamps has long been a world industry standard in cases where accurate recordings are desired. And one place where accuracy shows itself in efficiency, non-fatigued listening, and overall more precise decision making is in reference monitoring. If you want to drive a car safely and enjoyably through all kinds of conditions, you've got to have a clear windshield to see through.

When I heard about the Lipinski L-70 monitors coming on the market, and then after receiving them in for review, something became readily apparent: There was a connection in the design and philosophy founded by John Dunlavy of Duntech Audio, and later Dunlavy Audio Labs. If there is a father of the school of accurate speakers, it's Ph.D. physicist John Dunlavy. His speaker designs and products have often been lauded as the "Holy Grail" of accurate reference speakers. And this is not just coming from the audiophile community, but from mastering and recording engineers in the top studios in the world.

Mastering engineer, [Bob Ludwig](#) has been a longtime user of Duntech Sovereign monitors by John Dunlavy. From the Gateway Mastering website, *"In 1987 Bob was one of the first engineers to master using speakers designed for audiophile use, the Duntech Sovereign. Today, most mastering studios use audiophile speakers including John Dunlavy (Sovereign) designs."*

There's an excellent interview, [Loudspeaker designer John Dunlavy: By the Numbers...](#)

An extensive overview of the past and future of speakers is provided at [The Art of Speaker Design](#) by Lynn Olson. Refer to the Pulse Coherent Dynamics section under Major Schools of Speaker Design.

John Dunlavy passed away in 2007. And while Duntech still exists as a company in Australia, many have felt that with John's passing and the

folding of Dunlavy Audio Labs in 2002, that there has been a void left to further carry the torch of his work and design philosophy.

Enter Andrew Lipinski and Lipinski Sound



Andrew Lipinski

This is where things not only start to line up in the continued explorations of John Dunlavy, but also to further the development of the designs, and bring new products to market that reflect the needs and desires of the growing and ever-evolving landscape of the professional-recording market.

Lipinski Sound was founded in 2003 by recording engineer/producer Andrew Lipinski. And to get straight to the chase about his talents:

Andrew Lipinski's perfect hearing abilities were recognized by the US National Bureau of Standards, where he was the only individual to achieve a perfect score on the listening evaluation of phonographic recordings (NBSIR 88-3725). His work contributed to the decision of the U.S. Congress to uphold quality standards for a unified listening code, in opposition to one proposed by then, CBS. Andrew Lipinski's only perfect score ("...one listener achieving a perfect score... A score of 10 correct of 10 selections would be expected 1 out of 1000 times"), superseded the valuation of audio contemporaries such as Quincy Jones.

Lipinski Sound has introduced a number of products since 2003, including the L-707 monitors, which were reviewed by a number of professionals, including mastering engineer and mix producer [Bob Katz in June 2004 for Pro Audio Review](#). Bob ended up purchasing the L-707 monitors and became an early evangelist for Lipinsky Sound.

"The 707's sound is in the same league as that of the best loudspeakers I've ever heard, including Egglestons, Wilson Watt/Puppys and Dunlavy SC-5s."

"Quite a challenge, to set a goal of "better than Dunlavy." Actually, I never thought there's much wrong with a Dunlavy, I'd never kick it out of bed. But I have to say after auditioning (and buying) the 707s that I'd invite them into my bed anytime and I expect a long-term, seductive relationship!"

Lipinski Sound monitors and class A amplifiers have been quietly making

their way into world-class mastering and recording studios, and professional laboratories over the last ten years, including Dolby Laboratories, Universal Music, Warner Brothers Mastering, and NYU's \$6.5M John Storyk-designed studio complex complete with a Lipinski Sound 10.2 surround system.



NYU's James L. Dolan Music Recording Studio

Adding to the mounting success of Lipinski Sound, recent [2015 Grammy winner Beck's album "Morning Phase"](#) not only won Album of the Year, but also won [Best Engineered Album, Non-Classical](#), which included engineer and Lipinski L-707 user Darrell Thorp, based out of [101 Productions](#).

1/12 Cycle



The latest products, and at the forefront of developments at Lipinski Sound, are a series of self-powered monitors, the L-70, L-500, L-700, and the L-120 subwoofer—all powered with a Lipinski Sound class A amplifier.

Every so often, we get true geniuses and innovators in audio and design. Names like Rupert Neve, George Massenburg, and John Dunlavy often are at the top of those lists. That level of talent and contribution is a rare occurrence. Andrew Lipinski is one such gem.

As I go through my review process of the Lipinski Sound L-70 powered monitors, I'll be including in Part 2 of this series on the rise of accurate speakers and monitors, information on the "Danish Connection," which highlights background and history of the development of transducers in Denmark, and their role in the evolution of loudspeaker and studio monitor technology.

After many of us have experienced the years of digital technology going through its awkward "teenage phase," while analog technology enjoyed its "golden age" in the 50s, 60s and 70s, we're entering another phase. Digital technology is finally maturing and growing up. And analog technology is seeing a new rebirth and renewed interest—and attracting the kind of genius and passion that seemed to have been lost—as greater minds moved into more cutting-edge fields, such as nanotechnology, biomedical, computational neuroscience, etc..

While we've enjoyed a great proliferation of products and content, we hit a big patch of suck, as the quality of experience incrementally eroded inch by inch almost imperceptibly. We reached a stage where we've all experienced the shitty foods, beers, wines, digital effects, online discourse, news media effluvium, and other offerings passed off by corporate greed and corruption. But concurrently we've seen the "silver lining" in a proliferation of smaller, innovative boutique manufacturers coming to market.

Admittedly, our own use of digital technology had to mature. What started out as a revolution in communication and audio recording in the 90s and 2000s—that allowed masses of musicians, budding engineers, and producers to jump in and get their feet wet with increasingly affordable recording and music production equipment—has itself grown and evolved. "Pro" audio is no longer the hallowed ground of big expensive recording studios. The tools are getting better, the talent is getting more seasoned, the technology is integrating more seamlessly. And for those desiring a deeper and richer level of experience—the information paths, products, and people are there, in place and available.

Lipinski Sound is among the companies developing and producing analog products that rise to the occasion of the dancing DNA helix of digital and analog technologies.

More info available at lipinkisound.com

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Reviews