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Issue No. 396

April 2015

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# Salisbury thrill

Still going strong today, **David Price** tells the story of the evergreen NAP 250 power amplifier that first appeared in 1975

**I**t's a long time since Naim Audio Ltd. first started up in a Wiltshire backstreet in 1973, and from that moment on began to win friends and favour. Its founder was the sadly now deceased Julian Vereker, who established the company to make hi-fi equipment that he and his friends would enjoy listening to. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the audio industry he wasn't a Cambridge University engineering PhD with 20 years of electronics design experience. He was entirely self taught, and claimed it took him a year to learn enough to produce his own amplifier.

While many regarded this as a chronic weakness, in some respects it was his strength. There was a strong orthodoxy in solid-state design, with amplifiers being regarded as (the saying went), "a piece of wire with

gain". The conceit was that all sounded the same providing they had been properly designed. Julian blew a hole through this idea, being able to demonstrate dramatic differences and account for them too. The first Naim product was the NAP 200 power amplifier, and it soon got the NAC 12 preamplifier to partner it. They were both designed for his personal use only, then productionised, and this set the pattern for Naim amps for the following two decades or so. Those early Naims were highly distinctive in their sound, and so very controversial and the company was something of a Marmite brand for many years.

The NAC 12/NAP 200 sold in small numbers; it wasn't until 1975 when Vereker really found his feet. The NAP 250 was the product in question, and it became an iconic amplifier in the space of just a couple of years as well

as Naim's top stereo power amp for a quarter of a century. Julian explained its sound in terms of making: "a musical signal that I could compare with the sound of live music", which pretty much hit the nail on the head. However, it was important to caveat this with the point that he was a big rock fan, and didn't spend too much time listening to anything else.

His thesis was that a power amplifier should be able to drive loudspeakers into 'real-world' loads – which is to say impedances that vary under dynamic conditions, rather than the static ones you see on the test bench. The way the hi-fi press waxed lyrical about the NAP 250, you would have thought its power output was a kilowatt or so, but in truth it was 125W into 4ohms, and around 70W into an 8ohm load. Indeed Naim named its power amps by the total

## A brief history of Naim

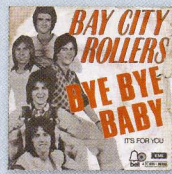
1973

Julian Vereker starts Naim, the same year that Bowie ruled the album charts



1975

The NAP 250 is released, while *Bye Bye Baby* becomes the best selling single of the year



1984

Naim debuts the NAP 135 as Band Aid outsells every other single and feeds Africa in the process



1989

A switch to olive-green fascias causes havoc for Naim fans, while *Neighbours'* soap star Jason Donovan rules the album chart





power made into a 4ohm load; with its stereo amplifiers, to get the 'per channel' rating you have to divide by two. The company was right not to obsess over measured power figures; despite being of fairly small stature in the power stakes compared with the emergent American and Japanese competition, it still went loud. Indeed, it had more life and soul than many far bigger (on paper) amps, and this tallied with his stated objectives.

It was an essay in doing amplifier design differently. It ran custom output transistors biased well into Class B mode, because Vereker believed this was more efficient and able to provide power better. He wasn't overly concerned with conventional harmonic distortion measurements either, or the power output into a static load. He was very interested in power supplies, however, and did his best to over-engineer them with each NAP 250 running a very sizeable 450VA toroidal power transformer custom made to Naim's specification by Holden & Fisher. This had two

## The NAP 250 has a sense of life and vibrancy that you don't hear very often

windings and twin 22,000uf capacitors feeding two regulator boards, which provided excellent dynamic headroom so the amplifier could go loud fast – when the music signal so demanded. He also insisted on DIN plugs; this wasn't such a big deal in the early seventies when the connector was ubiquitous, but by the nineties the rest of the world had moved to RCA phono connections. Naim also used recessed 'banana' speaker sockets, which ruled out spade connectors or bare wire.

### Stir it up

By 1978, the NAP 250 was really causing a stir, and was hugely popular with reviewers. Meanwhile, Vereker's friendship with Ivor Tiefenbrun led to a strategic partnership with Linn, the idea being that the latter supplied the source and speakers, and the former took care of the electronics. It was a very successful partnership and the active version of the Linn Isobarik speaker (the PMS) caused Naim to develop an active crossover, the NAXO, which would partner with no less than three NAP 250s to power a

pair of active Isobariks. It was a formidable combination, and acted as a 'force multiplier' for both companies for a decade from the late seventies. When Naim began making speakers and Linn produced electronics around 1988, the partnership cooled off.

In 1984, the NAP 250 was given a close cousin in the shape of the NAP 135 mono power amplifier. This was, ostensibly, a NAP 250 with its two stereo channels split into individual boxes and given their own power supplies. This was a formidable device, regardless of what configuration it was used in. The power output remained at just over 70W RMS, but the circuit layout was slightly different, with Naim able to pay better attention to grounding, with a star ground bus bar between the big smoothing capacitors. A cooling fan was also fitted, useful when the 135 was called upon to drive very awkward loads – which it did better than practically every other transistor amp of its era. Linn's Isobarik loudspeaker was famously one of the few loads tricky enough to trip this fan on in normal use.

Both NAP 135 and 250 were initially made of heavy aluminium extruded cases that acted as heatsinks. Painted black with a silver front edge, this style began to be called the 'chrome bumper' era soon after it ended in 1989. In this year, the entire Naim range got an olive green coloured front panel with a backlit Naim logo. Many Naim owners sold their entire systems to get a perfect visual match with their new green kit. In 2002 the NAP 250 got tweaked circuitry and at the same time, the NAP 135 was discontinued. Then in 2013, the NAP 250 was updated again with aluminium chassis and sleeves and a diecast zinc



**Naim Audio's electronics seen here with its SBL speakers shortly before the olive-green face lift**

## BUYING AND RUNNING

The great thing about buying any used piece of Naim hi-fi equipment is that the Salisbury company takes its legacy products very seriously. Many others do not, and simply stop supporting them, giving you an apologetic "no, sorry" on the phone when you enquire about servicing or spares availability. So, you can buy a used NAP 250 safe in the knowledge that you can send it back to Naim for repair, or even if you feel it might need a service. As electronics age, they do periodically need recalibration, solder joints or internal connectors need cleaning, and capacitors need replacing – so it's great to have the manufacturer still around to do it!

Because of its excellent – and surprisingly affordable – aftercare service, the prices of second-hand Naim hi-fi holds up extraordinarily well. Indeed, you might say it has some of the highest residuals in the whole industry. The used price of a Naim product may be between 30 and 50 percent higher than its price rival back in the day. This means that picking up a NAP 250 isn't cheap; you'll expect to pay £1,000 for a good one. The other side of this is that when you do, it will likely have been serviced and be working just as well as it did when it first came out of the factory. And for £1,000, it still represents one hell of a lot of performance for the money.

fascia; it's a different beast to the original, but still shares much DNA with its 1975 antecedent.

### Getting it right

There are many who think this amplifier's sense of pace, rhythm and timing is unsurpassed. Some say that the NAP 250 still has that special something about it. It certainly has a sense of life and vibrancy that you just don't hear very often; rival power amps from other manufacturers all too often sound flat, lacking in energy. They may be more powerful, but there's something about the way the 250 does its business that is unique. Many find it abrasive, overbearing even; it's perhaps not the sort of thing you'd want to relax in front of at the end of a long day, listening to jazz standards at low levels just before bed! This harks back to Vereker's insistence that an amp needs to provide a strong sense of live music.

Naim's NAP 250 and 135 are 'Marmite' products; some love them and some just can't stomach them. But still, the world changed a little when Naim's first statement power amplifier was launched. Later products have bettered them in many ways, but these two remain very special to this day. For this reason alone it warrants a special place in the great scheme of hi-fi things. And with its many incarnations over the years, you might say the NAP 250 is a veritable serial thriller ●