

# General Interest & Interviews

## An Interview With A.J. van den Hul

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**Tom Mathew:** *Thank you for speaking with me, Mr. van den Hul. You're 78 years old and still making world-class stereo equipment. What is your fountain of youth?*

**A.J. van den Hul:** For me, it is very normal what I am doing. This has been my whole life's attitude, so there is for me nothing strange in my work. Working hard with eight hours of sleep is a part of my vitality. And I am medically observing my condition with my NES scanner. [*See below. -- TM*] In ten seconds' measuring time, I know my condition in 700-plus properties. Real good food is another part of my good condition. No junk or industrial food, and limited quantities. Also, I never use alcohol in any form.



**TM:** *How were you introduced to building audio equipment? How did you develop your design philosophy? What are your musical inspirations?*

**AJvdH:** My father had a big collection of electronic components when he died, in 1948. He survived the German prison camp Neuengamme [in Hamburg, Germany], but died afterward thanks to cancer. The stress and the hunger were here the trigger. He was, being in the resistance, mentally very strong, and that might be the source for my actual activities. I am also blessed with very neutral-sounding ears and very sharp brain filters. This helped me through the period I worked as an audio reviewer and later as a designer. My actual musical inspirations are mostly the classical music composers. In the past, I was strongly focused on original jazz until, say, the seventies. Experimental jazz is for me lack of inspiration and therefore not interesting. The structure (as I hear it) is missing here.

**TM:** *Is there a type of sound that you are striving for in the Crimson Stradivarius? As the cartridges in your line get more expensive than the Crimson, how do they improve on it -- if they do?*

**AJvdH:** The Crimson design is the result of understanding how a cartridge works, understanding what the components contribute, and the best possible handshake between the mechanical groove modulations and the electrical output. The sound of the Crimson is very close to what I hear when I attend a classical music performance in, e.g., Vienna: the Musikverein or State Opera. In addition, I regularly attend musical performances in the Concertgebouw, in Amsterdam. The Stradivarius version is a combination of physics and chemistry. My study was physics, and my hobby was and is chemistry.

The only [van den Hul] cartridge “beating” the Crimson is the Colibri, in several variations. But the Crimson is cheaper, has a very healthy output, and has a more sturdy construction, and fits therefore rather easily in many setups. The Colibri is more critical for both tonearms and mechanical misbehavior of the owner. And its impedance is higher, to generate enough output. The magnetic flux modulation is extremely linear but very low level. So more turns are needed, with the implication of a higher load impedance.

The number of cartridges I do produce and my company sells is for me not interesting. Each cartridge is made to customer specifications: model of tonearm, available input impedance and gain, type of music, and, when known, brand of records. The total number is therefore less interesting.

I am not planning any expansion because I am already very busy. What I see [is] that the number I have to build is constantly growing. Friends order after auditioning at friends. Especially the expansion in ordered numbers with the Crimson is amazing. The type of sound I heard first was just spot-on for many audiophiles.



**TM:** *How did you get the idea for the Crimson Stradivarius?*

**AJvdH:** Each year at second Christmas day, I design another cartridge. Some are better compared to the last one, and also some are less. The Crimson was a (predictably) lucky shot again. The ideas behind this design were: a nice output for the standard version (1mV at 5.6cm/sec), a low impedance (in conflict with the high output), and a noncritical (high) mass. In addition, the body should have good damping (by directional wood fibers).

The Stradivarius experiment came later, after I was already happy with what was achieved. I had the typical and original Stradivarius lacquer by happy coincidence on my desk. The drying took weeks, but the sound got better and better. One of the secrets of the sound quality of the famous Stradivarius violins is the lacquer. And the very long drying time . . .

**TM:** *How does your interest in brain health relate to your interest in audio equipment?*

**AJvdH:** After passing my final examinations from high school, I walked for three months around with a multiple-sclerosis patient in [a] wheelchair. I made at that moment the decision to find the real cause of this disastrous disease. Many years later, six years ago, I discovered the NES program, and with a lot of research, I have found the four reasons why a person develops MS. With my laptop and sensor, I have made measurements in the meantime, not only with MS patients but also with all kind of food, grass, hedges, and trees. There is, in the NES program, an extra device called miHealth. This device emits, by skin contact, electrical signals to adjust the human body-field. With better understanding about what happens in the

human body (different from standard medically educated persons), I am now able to modulate torsion fields with healing information to adjust the human body-field and all organs involved. Without my hi-fi knowledge, it was impossible to design this torsion-field generator. This torsion-field modulator uses extremely linear circuits, and this is the link between audio and the medical world.

**TM:** *You are unique among cartridge builders in offering a 200-hour refresh for your cartridges. I also understand that you can customize a cartridge to an individual stereo and a customer's listening tastes, creating a somewhat bespoke cartridge for each customer. Why do you offer this, and what does it do for the cartridge?*

**AJvdH:** A happy owner of a new cartridge needs the security that, thanks to unwanted minor accidents and after running in, his cartridge should sound as good as possible. This is his right and my obligation. That is why a happy owner of one of my cartridges has always the right to return his beloved one after 200 to 300 hours of playing. It means that I adjust again the channel balance, crossover levels, and cantilever alignment. The modifications in sound the owner wants me to do, I will do to satisfy this customer. Fine-tuning in sound reproduction is different from adjusting a cartridge to have, e.g., a flat frequency response. How or what I do is my personal intellectual property.

Each cartridge, after 200 to 300 hours of playing, sounds different from the original unit. This running in can work positively, but also negatively. Mostly, this happens in the mechanical domain.

**TM:** *Are you the only person in your shop who can do the work that you do, or do you have a protégé in the making?*

**AJvdH:** With export to over 70 countries and to 38 audio companies, I [do not] have even a company. Yes sir, I am doing this all myself. I spend around 1800 hours per year of my private time to “do” cartridges. You can imagine that there is not so much free time left. There is an interested person who likes to continue. But I am not 100% sure that this will work . . .

**TM:** *Why do you prefer analog playback to digital?*

**AJvdH:** I prefer always analog sound because I experience more natural space and attack. Especially in complex sounds like vocals and strings, the final result is much cleaner instead of a screaming blur. The more instruments play together and also the louder, the more unpleasant digital gets.

**TM:** *If you're stuck on the proverbial desert island with your stereo and just a few LPs, what five recordings would you be listening to?*

**AJvdH:** There are too many good compositions available. But, anyhow, the *St. Matthew Passion* of Bach, the Eighth Symphony of Bruckner, the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, *Cavalleria Rusticana* of Mascagni, and the *Magnificat* of Arvo Pärt.

**TM:** *What would your answer be to someone with the means, but who doesn't understand why music lovers would spend \$5000 or more on a phono cartridge?*

**AJvdH:** Just listen and you know for yourself.

*... Tom Mathew*

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