



AUDIO ISLAND

Jack of all trades, masters of all trades!

Audio Island was established in 1996 by proprietor Nick Graham. Having had no idea of what he wanted to do when he left school, he finally decided to follow his passion for cars and car audio specifically. This proved to be a very good idea!

Nick is an enthusiastic, witty and charming man. I am not certain if this has always been the case or if he has matured like a good wine, but certainly, the day I spent in his company was extremely pleasant as well as very informative.

Nick left school with no clear idea of what he wanted to do with his life. As a stopgap, he took a job maintaining trucks and serving time as a HGV technician for a Volvo main dealer. Nick had always had a passion for cars and on hearing one at a show fitted with a band-pass bass box, he became extremely excited at the possibilities offered for making music in them. Nick told me; "You could say I was moved by hearing the bass in that car and wanted to replicate it in my own and then in cars belonging to friends and eventually, make a business out of it. This is how Audio Island began. At the time, car audio was quite

a big part of the car modifying culture and information and equipment was quite readily available, as were customers with money to spend. Although I was learning on the job as it were, I was very confident in my abilities. I am quite driven and when I decide I want something, I will do all I can to get it! I really wanted to be the "go to" man for car audio and had ambitious plans."

Things went well for Nick and he built a very positive reputation that continues to draw in new customers from the locality today. His business has changed emphasis over the years to reflect the change in the car electronics market and now alongside audio, Audio Island carries out many other types of work including security, tracking and reversing sensors, hands-free car kits and even building response vehicles for the emergency services and a local charity, 'Lives', as well as servicing the local agricultural machinery market. Audio Island has even become a dealer for Thule who manufacturer top boxes, bike racks etc. for cars. Nick explains; "It is important to have as many skills as possible. Trends change in business and I would not be here today if I had blindly continued to be solely involved in

car audio. Trade work has kept Audio Island going through a time when interest in audio waned. However, we have always applied the same enthusiasm and drive to exceed customers' expectations in whatever we do. I remain open-minded about new business opportunities. Right now, we are seeing a huge resurgence of interest in good quality sound in cars. I believe there are many reasons for this; people are experiencing better quality sound in the home, meanwhile car manufacturers have taken their eyes off the ball. Many have done well with factory "upgrades" but the discerning listener is not fooled by these any longer. There are still very basic principles that car manufacturers won't or can't apply when designing on-board sound systems. We can upgrade a car for less than a thousand pounds and deliver something better than the upgrades customers are expected to pay £3000-plus for at a car dealership. Fortunately, people are shopping around and coming to see us before they tick the box on the car specification sheet!"

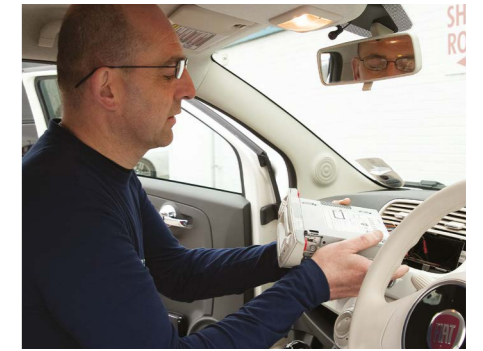
Audio Island currently employs five full-time staff and a part time accountant/bookkeeper; Mark, Mike, Andy, Phil, Nick and on-site specialist, Paul. They are all multi-skilled and they have to be. While I was there, I could see a variety of jobs being tackled including the fitting of a set of reversing sensors, an audio installation and a couple of fleet jobs.

Nick operates as front of house, which makes perfect sense.

His knowledge and experience means that he can handle most requests for information and particularly of an audio nature. I was amazed at his recall of model numbers from days gone by and his ability to explain what was good and bad about certain pieces of equipment. I am certain that his heritage in the industry as well as an analytical approach ensures that every customer gets exactly what they want. I had the opportunity to speak at length with a customer of Nick's, Graham Hopkins, as I reviewed his car on the same day (see, M3 article elsewhere in this issue) He confirmed my suspicion explaining; "I let Nick make all of the decisions now. I have had many systems fitted by him and he can obviously out-knowledge me when it comes to making product selections. I merely give him some pointers on the final sound I would like and of course budget. I trust Nick to do everything else and he always delivers beyond my expectations."

Nick is swift to point out that Audio Island is not all about him however. "The guys do a great job in making my system ideas into a reality. It is probably fair to say that I have the most experience of audio, but in terms of practical skills, I couldn't ask for a better or more able team."

I asked Nick about his approach to finding new



I think in terms of hardware, the Audison bit Play HD is a very significant product



This image Nick's friendly smile and expert knowledge come as standard at Audio Island

Left On-site specialist, Paul, spends a lot of time in his van!



customers; "Word of mouth and reputation are the biggest things for me. I do carry out a little local press advertising now and again but we are flat out busy anyway and our reputation grows and grows. We dabbled with online presence but to be completely honest, it generates a lot of work searching for information and answering emails but generates very little business. People really need to come and see us, I can't demonstrate great sound in an email." At this point, Nick treated me to a demonstration of Audison Prima equipment built in to a specially prepared stand he has in his store. It sounded fabulous even when cranked up. Loud, but without a hint of distortion, which can quickly make things sound quite nasty. But as well as being able to demonstrate great sound he is good at communicating the sonic requirements for a good system. I asked him about his musical background; "I don't have one really. I never invested in an expensive home stereo system and it wasn't until I got into car audio that I listened critically at all. I now find music a constant voyage of discovery and will listen to all genres although I don't really get Jazz or Opera, however, even these I would explore for the sake of pleasing a customer. I prefer music with a strong beat including a lot of dance music but I also like Classic Rock such as Pearl Jam and Nickelback."

- Pink Floyd**
One Slip
- Dire Straits**
Telegraph Road
- Tears For Fears**
Woman In Chains
- Frankie Goes To Hollywood**
Welcome To The Pleasure Dome (Extended remix)
- Nickelback**
Photograph

During our conversation, I asked Nick what he thought the future of car audio may bring. He told me; "I think in terms of hardware, the Audison bit Play HD is a very significant product. People are already moving away

from CD in favour of stored music and we have products in stock that have no CD drive in them at all. The audiophile customers we attract will never be happy with MP3 or AAC files from an iPhone and I think the ability to stream high definition audio FLAC files is a huge step forward. Although in its infancy in terms of mass-market appeal is concerned, I don't think it will take too long for high definition music to become the norm. Of course, as with any new technology, there is a tricky balance between the number of customers and the amount of recorded music available. I remember this from the introduction of CD when you could probably only buy Dire Straits initially. The music industry is getting much better at reacting to market trends however and there is high definition stuff being made available all of the time now. There is a tipping point after which the floodgates will open and the costs will inevitably be driven down. In the meantime, for those who want the best and don't want to wait an unpredictable amount of time, we have the products and technology right here, right now!"

As my character reference at the top of this article suggests, first impressions are that Nick is a most agreeable human being. On closer investigation you find that his business is built in his own image. Friendly, driven, intelligent, and hard working, I would strongly recommend Audio Island if you want great sound in your car, no matter what you listen to. □

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