

Breathe deeply

Based on a lake shore an hour's drive from Toronto, Adamson Systems Engineering is a company that is passionate about what it makes. *Dan Goldstein reports*

In a business full of lookalike product designs and soundalike demos, Canadian loudspeaker manufacturer Adamson stands out as unique in more ways than one. Visiting the firm, which has its headquarters on the shores of Lake Scugog, about an hour's drive from Toronto, is a breath of fresh air – and not just because of the local climate. This is a company that is passionate not just about what it makes, but how it makes it, and why.

The story begins with a young Brock Adamson growing up in various towns along the west coast of the US and Canada with his father, Alan Ewart Adamson, the son of a Scottish immigrant. Wherever they roamed, Brock recalls, "there was always a machine shop in the basement". This gave him his first insight into engineering and manufacturing, but the first business to benefit from it was not music but motorcycles.

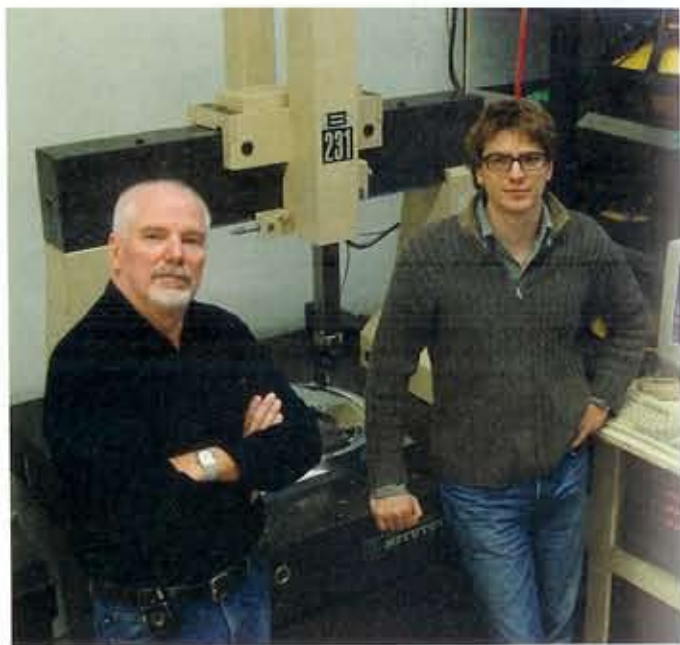
It wasn't until the mid-1970s that, as an ambitious twentysomething keen to make a mark on the

pro-audio industry, Brock Adamson designed his first serious loudspeakers – which, as with so many of his contemporaries, were not touring boxes at all, but studio monitors. In the early 1980s he worked alongside a Vancouver company, Rocky Mountain Sound, and was used as a consultant by the organisers of the 1986 Expo that was held in the city, when it became clear that none of the FOH systems set up for concerts and other events was fit for purpose.

Expo '86 proved invaluable in terms of experience, but financially it was disastrous, as the Vancouver market subsequently became flooded with cheap, barely used equipment – such as London's installation sector would be swamped following the closure of the Millennium Dome 14 years later. So Brock Adamson upped sticks and headed for the Toronto area, where there was not only a better market for his speakers, but also a more deeply entrenched engineering tradition, which enabled him to build a manufacturing plant worthy of his ambition.

The rest of the 1980s were good for Adamson's company, but the early 1990s recession, together with an ill-advised move into DSP, caught him on the hop, and Brock was forced to shut his firm down and start afresh in 1992. Fifteen years later, it's hard to imagine him making a similar mistake again. Walking around the 37,000sqft headquarters facility in Port Perry, Ontario which Adamson built for itself two years ago, "The Chief" as he is sometimes known internally, is master of all he surveys.

Few pro-audio manufacturing



Brock Adamson AKA 'The Chief' with his son Jesse, Adamson's MD

plants, if any, are as clear and as potent a reflection of their founding father as this one. Unlike so many of its competitors, who are content to buy in the majority of their components from third-party suppliers, Adamson does as much as it possibly can itself, on its own premises, and in its own time. Many loudspeaker plants contain sheets of baltic birch ready to be cut and glued into enclosures; far fewer allow a glimpse of raw sheet metal ready to be fashioned into everything from rigging parts to the Adamson logo itself.

Brock Adamson refers to the plant as 'Our Shop', but while the skill and attention to detail of the workforce is admirable, this factory is anything but a folksy anachronism. The Port Perry location gives Adamson the best of both worlds – a greenfield site which the company owns outright and which offers plenty of room to expand, but close proximity to the Great Lakes and the industrial heartland of

North America. Brock Adamson knows that, in the face of Far Eastern competition, productivity is key to the continued success of any western manufacturing company. So when nearby industries dispose of equipment that clearly has plenty of life left in it, Adamson pounces.

"The auto industry is a voracious consumer of manufacturing technology," says Brock. "Its processes are highly innovative, and the turnover of hardware is faster than any other industry I know."

It is this turnover that has allowed Adamson to enter the world of robotisation with a new, semi-automated production line which the company is currently customising to meet the particular requirements of speaker enclosure assembly and testing. It has also given the firm's newly designed anechoic chamber a motorised lift system (spotted by Brock on eBay and personally driven over the US border from its previous owner in Ohio) which, as he points out "will allow us to do what

Finished wave guides



Welder at work in 'Our Shop'



Adamson prefer to make as many of its own components as possible

very few anechoic chambers allow you to do – measurement all around the enclosure, not just at the front and the top."

Many of the products that result from this passion for innovation in engineering have become global standards. The optimised sound chambers, waveguides, driver sizes and box angles of Adamson's Y-Axis series have made it the line array of choice for many engineers when very high SPLs are required as well as consistent coverage. The company's SpekTrix series has been designed to offer all the benefits of line-source technology in a compact, three-way design. And both systems have matching subs that combine power with control in a way few competitors dare try to match – thanks at least in part to the Kevlar drivers with which Adamson has been working for more than two decades.

"We have done tests between our Kevlar drivers and their paper equivalents and the robustness of the Kevlar simply can't be equalled," says Brock. "That is true even when the drivers are new – when they have been on the road for a while, the difference in consistency becomes even more dramatic."

If Brock Adamson's reputation as

someone who lives and breathes rock-and-roll is a huge asset to the firm, so too is the contemporary sensibility brought to the business by his son Jesse, who joined the company six years ago and is now managing director. At seemingly

"We have done tests and the robustness of the Kevlar driver simply can't be equalled" Brock Adamson

every opportunity, Jesse will jump into his car to flee the rural lakeside idyll of Port Perry and head for the metropolis of Toronto, complete with its thriving youth culture and live music scene.

Driving into the city alongside Adamson Jr (to see a gig, naturally), the conversation can pivot around any number of key music-industry issues. Such as: "Why don't virtual instruments ever interact with one another, sonically, in the same way that analogue synthesisers do?" And: "What, exactly, is the point of Coldplay?"

While his father rules the roost at home, Jesse travels thousands of miles around the world every year, attending trade shows, arranging demos, talking to engineers, and ensuring that Adamson is able to offer the right kind of service and

support wherever its products are used. Most recently, he and Brock have mastered the opening of a series of European service centres in the UK (Luton), the Netherlands (Maarsen), Italy (Osetimo), France (Metz) and Denmark (Løsning). The centres are designed to reduce delivery lead times by carrying a limited inventory of products along with replacement parts for the full Adamson range, and are planned to be fully operational for the 2007 summer festival season. The move coincides with Adamson's decision to imple-

ment factory-direct sales to dealers and distributors throughout Europe, as announced on 1st April (see news story, page 4).

As for the future, Jesse Adamson is committed to the tradition of doing as much manufacturing in-house as is practicable – not least because, as he explains, it allows the implement technological innovations more quickly. "Third-party suppliers can be good for making you things in bulk, but you can wait weeks, or even months for them to build you a prototype of something new, because it doesn't fit in with their production schedules. We don't have to work with those restrictions. If we want to build something, we just build it."

In many ways, Adamson is a company of contradictions, stubbornly sticking to what it does best (there'll be no more adventures into DSP anytime soon), but ceaselessly looking for ways of doing it better. Neither Brock nor Jesse sees any point in a pre-determined product life cycle. If they can build a better loudspeaker, they'll just do it. And you can't get much more refreshing than that. **EJ**

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Adamson headquarters: the best of both worlds – a greenfield site with close proximity to the Great Lakes and the industrial heartland of North America
Bottom: final assembly

