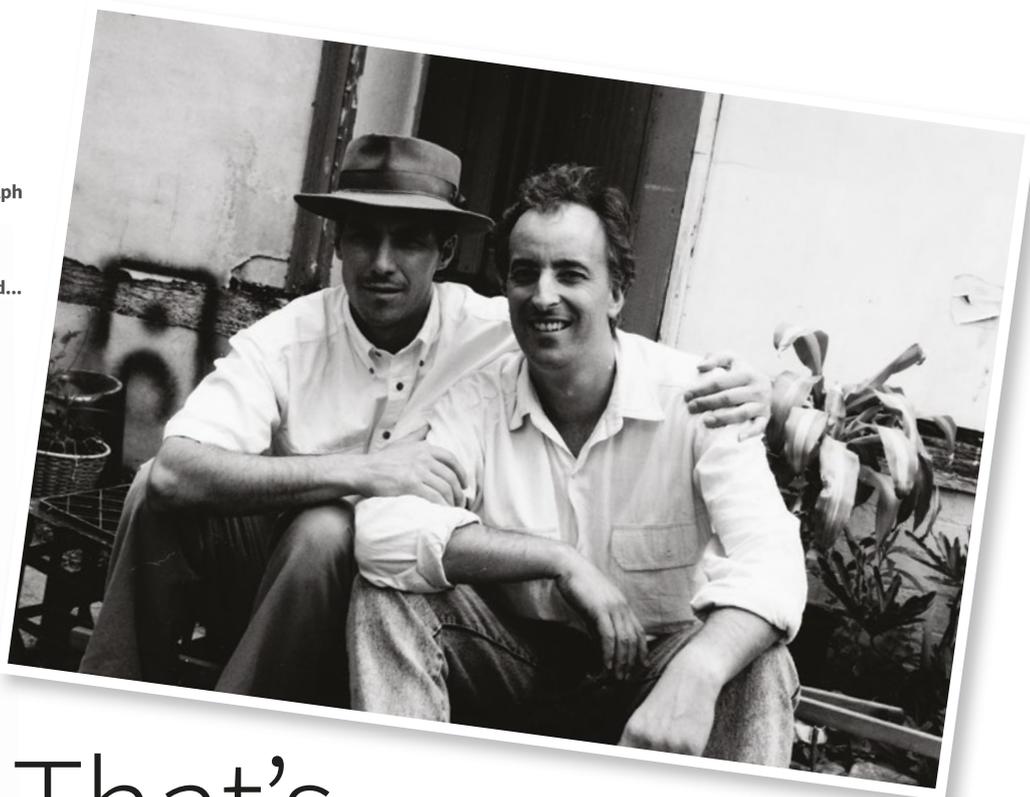


BELOW: The current Richter Wizard, one of our Ultimate 30 this issue (see p 12).

RIGHT: Designer double act, circa 1991 — Ralph Waters (right), Richter's founder, with Brad Serhan, who would later work on Richter's standmount Merlins and Mentors. Note the spray-painted baffle mark on the wall behind...



# That's Entertainment

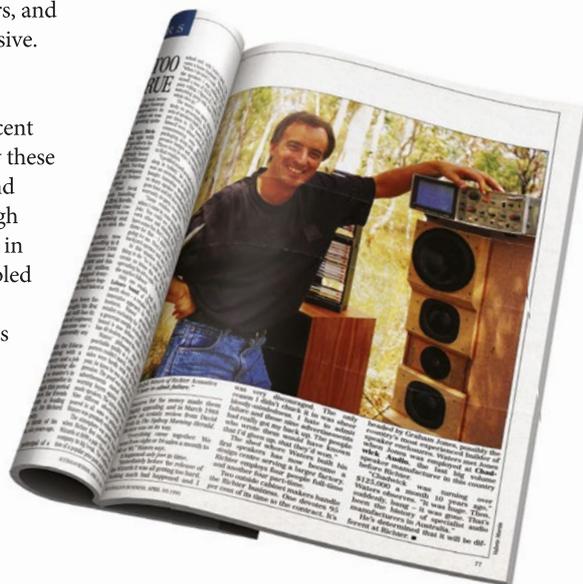
**'I'm not in the audiophile industry, I'm in the entertainment industry,' Richter Audio's founder Ralph Waters once said. It's still true of the company today, as it embarks on a new journey.**

**R**ichter began back in 1986, under talented Australian speaker designer Ralph Waters, who launched Richter Acoustics with three home-made pairs of speakers and capital funds of \$2250 — which he expended on good-looking packaging, warranty cards and business cards, some drivers, and badges to make the speakers look more impressive.

"The 1970s had seen an explosion in the number of hi-fi shops in Sydney," he later told [homeentertainment.com.au](http://homeentertainment.com.au). "In just three adjacent streets you could count 12 or 13 shops. Initially these were stocked with the best English, Japanese and American brands, usually fully imported, though later the loudspeaker cabinets were often made in Australia and the complete speaker was assembled and packaged. But the loudspeakers had zero design input. Some of the better cabinet-makers imported driver kits from reputable names

such as Audax, Foster and Peerless, but the rot quickly set in and these were replaced with a plethora of mainly Taiwanese components. The thinnest of chipboards... two-component crossovers, capacitors as tiny as those in a transistor radio."

RIGHT: Ralph Waters appears in the 'Rising Stars' profile of *Australian Business* magazine in 1991, interviewed by Rod Easdown. Image: Valerie Martin.



The upside was his belief in his ability to outdo these “banger boxes” by introducing locally designed and made speakers.

“Customers were fed aural sludge for a decade and then decided to buy ‘something better’. I was fortunate to enter the market with my Australian company Richter Acoustics at just this stage, and we seriously challenged the supremacy of British and American speakers as the only legitimate well-designed loudspeakers on the market.”

Not that dealers were leaping to stock these new Australian speakers.

“Some retailers were surprised when I came in, some treated me as a joke,” he told Rod Easdown in a 1991 article for *Australian Business* magazine. “You could see them looking at each other and thinking that they’d have some fun. But I couldn’t condemn them for that — they’d tell me I was a backyard operator and, hey, I was.”

The only taker was Leisure Sound in Cremorne, which was given in return 18 months exclusivity and a generous margin. Even then, the brand faced a cultural cringe from customers.

“I think it was an anti-Australian feeling at that time,” he told *Australian Hi-Fi* in 1990. “I became concerned that most Australians were unaware that local products which were handmade, individually crafted and high performance, often cost much less than their imported counterparts.”

It was Australia’s 1988 Bicentennial that made the difference.

“All of a sudden people really started thinking about what it meant to be Australian, and whether or not they were proud to be an Australian,” Waters recalled. “And that started them thinking about actually buying Australian. I now believe that people are actually proud to own Australian products. Richter is currently the best-selling sub-\$1000 loudspeaker in Australia.”

The first Richter model had been the Merlin, followed by suitably Arthurian-monikered models such as the Oracle, and then the Wizard, which went on to do so well for Richter. As Ralph put it, “the Wizard kicked ass, went loud and didn’t blow up.” It also hit a sweet spot of \$899, and in March 1988 drew an ecstatic review from David Frith in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and sales lifted from “eight or 10 a month to 80 or 90”.

And with that, Richter’s path was set. The company continued its proudly Australian way for the next decade, until Ralph Waters decided on a change of tack, and sold Richter to Ken Dwyer, who had recently founded Audio Products Group, going on to acquire AWA Distribution in 1998. Richter was a solid Australian brand to have — but it needed a new speaker designer. Dr. Martin Gosnell takes up the story.

“My involvement as Richter’s designer started back in about 1997 when I was contacted by Ken Dwyer”, Dr Martin tells us. “Ken had recently acquired Richter from Ralph Waters, who was moving into a different part of the industry. Ken was a real gentleman and I was impressed with his vision and enthusiasm for the company.

“Before too long I was having an interview with him and a friend of his at the Novotel bar in Sydney. His friend turned out to be none other than Howard Heiber, former owner and president of API Canada, who was there to grill the socks off me on loudspeaker technology, design, and engineering. Well, I immediately ordered a double scotch.”

Dwyer left the two to chat, and when he returned several hours later, “Howard and I were engrossed in a conversation like two old enthusiasts, and Howard gave Ken both thumbs up. I was hired as Richter’s new contract designer.”

Dr Gosnell has been designing for Richter ever since. Two ranges were released under Audio Products — a budget ‘Predator’ range, and the higher-level Sovereign range with sloped baffles and side firing woofers.

The next owner was John Fahey, industry luminary and recipient of one of Sound+Image’s first ever Lifetime Achievement Awards in 2007, awarded partly for the role he was to play in Richter’s next decade, as Dr Gosnell remembers.

“Ken decided to focus on distribution, and not manufacturing, and in 1999 he introduced me to John Fahey, who soon purchased the company from Ken. John’s unique blend of corporate experience from his Yamaha days and his get-down-to-it Aussie battler approach was great fun — we really hit some targets. Over the next few years we worked Richter to new heights, expanding to include the Precious Metals range that saw such a huge reception through Harvey Norman. We had the Richter Thor Mark IV, the only product to ever win the trifecta of Subwoofer of the Year, Product of the Year and Editor’s Choice, and the prize-winning Krakatoa subwoofer, and the Wizard Mk3.”

John Fahey kept Richter on a high for some 13 years, until another industry personality elected to take charge — John Cornell, who currently runs Audio Junction in Newcastle’s southern suburb of Hamilton.

His early years in a small country town — his family raised sheep on 120,000



Sound+Image has both reviewed and awarded Richter models through its 30+ years. Above is Greg Borrowman’s review of the Dragon MkII... “a misnomer”, he wrote, “because there have been so many changes that this ‘Mk2’ bears little resemblance to the original.”

Below is our review of the new Legend V series in 2015, combined in a home cinema package — we were clearly impressed, as it went on to win our Speaker Package of the Year under \$5000 in the 2016 Sound+Image awards.



ABOVE: John Fahey receives his Lifetime Achievement Award from *Australian Hi-Fi* Editor Greg Borrowman in 2007.



acres in south-west Queensland — instilled values that served him well with Richter.

“In the country, you quickly learn that the two most valuable assets in life are your name and your reputation,” he says. “To protect these, you always have to make sure that you do the right thing by people.”

And as a retailer he had known and supported Richter speakers from the start.

“My involvement with Richter as a retailer goes back to 1987, when Ralph Waters was the original Head Wizard at the fledgling Aussie manufacturer, taking it to the big boys from overseas,” he tells us. “We loved Ralph’s designs and supported him wholeheartedly — in fact we support and love selling the brand up to this day.”

It was over a lunch in 2011 at John Fahey’s house when the conversation alluded to the fact that John might be ready to move on and sell the company.

“It probably had something to do with the wine that flowed over lunch that led me to say I might be interested”, remembers John Cornell now. “I had always wanted

**LEFT: John Cornell, Brad Serhan and Dr Martin Gosnell work up a new Richter range; RIGHT: John Cornell displays his Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014. OPPOSITE: Brian Rodgers and Dr Gosnell receive the Ultimate 30 award.**

to be involved in speaker design and manufacturing, so after some negotiations I purchased the company from him on 1st April 2012 and set out to design a new range of speakers that embodied all of the existing Richter design principles — great sound at an affordable price, pleasing cabinetry built to a high standard. Given my retail background I knew we needed a range that really stood up musically, that I and my staff would be happy to stand by because it would sound better than the competition at the same price point.

“I re-engaged the services of Dr Gosnell, speaker designer *extraordinaire* and the man responsible for all of the Richter designs since the departure of Ralph Waters in 1996, and to accompany us on this journey I also contacted my old friend Brad Serhan, the king of bookshelf speaker design.”

The team was completed by the addition of Adam Hobbs, who as a capable industrial designer contributed to the design of the loudspeakers’ cabinetry. But not wishing to rush out new designs, the team took two years “and a lot of listening and discussion to reach a point where we were happy to manufacture”.

Dr Gosnell remembers that the focus was “very much on two channel and musicality, in what was a challenging time with everyone recalibrating post home theatre boom. We created some particularly outstanding and prize-winning products like the Legend 5 Harlequin, the next Wizard and new Merlin bookshelves — the bookshelves were a joint project headed by Brad Serhan, a much-loved gentleman and a scholar of audio. John Cornell did a wonderful job of taking the company through this transitional period, and he got us into manufacturing valve amplifiers too.

The first valve amp was a new departure for the loudspeaker company, the Mystique launching in January 2013 to exceptional reviews. It was followed by the Sorcerer and Medusa amplifiers, more good reviews and “good market penetration”, says John Cornell.





ABOVE: New logo and new direction — ‘The Core’, one of the new Richter radio designs.

“All of our hard work and attention to detail paid off, and one of my proudest moments was being awarded Sound+Image’s Loudspeaker of the Year for our Wizard model, and later the Bookshelf Speaker of the Year for our Merlin model,” he tells us, dabbing his eye with a hankie. “But I decided to slow things down after some prompting from my long-suffering wife, and after discussions with another industry veteran and longterm friend, Brian Rodgers, I decided he would be a great person to carry the Richer mantle forward and lift the brand to the next level.”

## The next level

Brian Rodgers cut his teeth at Southern Cross Electronics before joining first Grundig Australia and then Bush Australia, where he oversaw the Australian company’s move into smart radio products in particular, including two which have picked up Sound+Image awards. It doesn’t take a crystal ball to foresee that Richter will inherit his enthusiasms in that direction, and the first two products to emerge under the new management have been digital radios which build on the strengths of existing Bush models. John Cornell thinks it’s just what Richter needs.

“I think we will see the Richter brand taken to the next generation of audio listeners with products that would make Ralph Waters very proud of the legacy

he created, and that he still keeps his eye on,” says Cornell. And Dr Gosnell agrees.

“Most of all for me, Richter has been great fun, and I love the characters I have met, worked with and who have been vital to Richter’s amazing success — with special thanks also to Paul Clark, Derek Pugh and Terry Deacon for wonderful representation and determination. Now with the company owned by lifestyle guru Brian Rodgers, we’re gearing up for a range of revolutionary and exciting new products never before entertained by Richter,” he says. “Brian is a true gentlemen and enthusiast bringing a whole additional range of ideas and vision, but determined to ensure every Richter product has that involving musical Richter signature. We are going to make Richter soar.”

And Brian Rodgers sends his regards back.

“There’s no question it was the early Wizard speakers that put Richter on the map and are still claimed as being the biggest selling Australian speaker of all time,” he tells us. “And Richter established a formidable reputation with subwoofers — the Thor has been a legendary product over the years. Under John Cornell the Mk V Legend range was born and Richter was brought back to life, a great effort when many Australian brands have now

disappeared and the market is over-supplied with international brands. Also very importantly it’s been Dr Martin Gosnell who came into Richter two decades ago and is still with Richter today, and who has been responsible for the numerous successful designs and award-winning products — the Wizard MkIV and Thor MkIV to mention just a couple.”

And to anyone concerned that it may be digital radios all the way from Richter now, we gather the next big release will be a newly developed version of that Thor subwoofer. It plays to what Brian Rodgers sees as Richter’s underlying *raison d’etre*.

“Ralph Waters was once quoted by *Australian Hi-Fi* as saying ‘I’m not in the audiophile industry, I’m in the entertainment industry.’ And Richter’s philosophy from the beginning was this: We never stop improving what we make. Good design is the key to success. And a successful product must be long lasting and offer value for money.”

He clearly intends these maxims to hold true as Richter Audio embarks on the next stage of its journey — to the next level. +



ABOVE: from Merlin to Dragon — Richter’s current Legend V Series, the latest Wizards being the middle set of floorstanders.