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The Art Of Clairtone: The Making Of A Design Icon, 1958-1971



Synopsis

A fully illustrated, stylish look back at the story behind a Canadian design icon. For a decade, in the 1960s, Clairtone Sound Corporation captured the spirit of the times: sophisticated, cosmopolitan, liberated. From its modern oiled-walnut and teak stereos to its minimalist logos and promotional materials, Clairtone produced a powerful and enduring body of design work. Founded in 1958 by two young Canadians, Peter Munk and David Gilmour, Clairtone quickly became known for its iconic designs and masterful advertising campaigns. Its acclaimed Project G stereo, with its space-age styling, epitomized the Swinging Sixties. Famously, Hugh Hefner owned a Project G. So did Frank Sinatra. Oscar Peterson affirmed that his music sounded as good on a G as it did live. In 1967, suggesting how deeply Clairtone's G series had come to be identified with popular culture, the G2 appeared in *The Graduate* with Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft. With 250 illustrations, including previously unpublished drawings, rare film stills, confidential memorandums, and original photography, *The Art of Clairtone* is a candid and in-depth look at the company's skyrocketing success and sensational collapse. Through the recollections of those who knew Clairtone best, from its founders to its designers, engineers, and salesmen, and with comments from Karim Rashid, Douglas Coupland, Tyler Brûfâl, and Bruce Mau, among others, this elegant book, published on the 50th anniversary of Clairtone's launch, celebrates an iconoclastic company that once seemed to represent the promise of Canada.

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Customer Reviews

Based in New York City, Nina Munk is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and the author of *Fools Rush In: Steve Case, Jerry Levin, and the Unmaking of AOL Time Warner*. Her work has appeared in *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *New Yorker*, *Fortune*, and the *New York Times*. A leading expert on Canadian design, Rachel Gotlieb has curated exhibits for the Gardiner Museum, the Textile Museum of Canada, and the Design Exchange. The author of *Design in Canada: Fifty Years from Teakettles to Task Chairs*, she writes on design for the *Globe and Mail* and other publications.

I was born under a falling star, in 1967, the year Clairtone Sound Corporation collapsed. My father remembers it as the worst year of his life. Clairtone was his first company, his “first love,” he once called it nostalgically. Measured coldly in dollars and cents, it was his smallest and least-successful company; yet nothing my father has done since then has affected him the way Clairtone did. A few years ago, long after making a name for himself in the gold business, and decades after Clairtone had become little more than a quirky footnote in his career, he confessed to the *New York Times*: “Clairtone was the single most formative experience in my life because it was so traumatic.” But I’m getting ahead of myself. Once upon a time, for a short time, Clairtone Sound Corporation was one of Canada’s most dazzling, most admired companies. It started in 1958 with four employees, \$3,000, and a cramped, makeshift factory at 26 Sable Street in a Toronto suburb. The initial idea was simple: to merge contemporary Scandinavian furniture design with the latest in high-fidelity equipment. My father, then 30 and an electrical engineer, made custom hi-fi sets for wealthy clients. His friend and partner, David Harrison Gilmour, 26, had a small business importing Scandinavian flatware, ceramics, and glass. Together, and inspired by a basic 1950s Danish sideboard, they came up with their first hi-fi model—a long, low cabinet in oiled teak with sliding doors and tapered legs. It was good-looking and functional, and it was unlike anything being made in Canada back then. Fitted inside the wooden cabinet were a Dual 1004 turntable, a Granco tube chassis, and a pair of Coral speakers hidden behind plain, wheat-coloured broadcloth from Knoll International. In March 1959, less than four months after it was put into production, that first model, the 100-S, won a Design Award from the National Industrial Design Council. Other models followed, including the entry-level 400-S (“the Princess”) and the luxurious 1000-S (“the Signature”) with its wireless remote control. Then, almost overnight, it seemed, Clairtone’s stereo consoles were everywhere. “Everybody knew about Clairtone,” my father would later boast to the columnist Joan Sutton. “The Prime Minister had one, and if the local truck driver

didn't have one, he wanted one. Oscar Peterson, the legendary Canadian jazz pianist, officially endorsed Clairtone. Dizzy Gillespie and Frank Sinatra were avid fans.

"Listen to Sinatra on Clairtone stereo. Sinatra does," was one of the company's most memorable tag lines. During the company's first five years, between 1958 and 1963, production soared from 350 units a year to 25,000 units. The pace was incredible. That year, 1963, Clairtone was listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange. And nothing, nothing at all thrilled my father so much as seeing his upstart company listed alongside Canada's old guard, the Establishment: Massey-Ferguson, Algoma Steel, Canadian Pacific Railway, Abitibi Power & Paper, Falconbridge Nickel, Walker-Goodeham & Worts.

"In those days, the TSE was as WASP a club as you can get" was it, my father reminded me. "I was not only not WASP" "I was Jewish, I was an immigrant, and I had an accent." So great was demand for the company's products in the early 1960s that, for a time, at Simpson's department store in Toronto, one Clairtone hi-fi was sold every three hours. In those years, throughout the December rush, Clairtone's factory stayed open around the clock, with cabinetmakers and assembly line workers pushing out stereo consoles in time for Christmas. Keeping up with the orders was exhausting and exhilarating.

"I worked seventy- and eighty-hour weeks," the company's former comptroller, David Pols, told me with pride, echoing other Clairtone employees I interviewed.

"Sometimes, I recall, I worked all night." Remarkably, back in the day when about the only things Canada exported were natural resources and tractors, half of Clairtone's stereos were being sold in the U.S., at "prestige accounts" like Abraham & Straus and Bloomingdale's in New York, Marshall Field's in Chicago, Halle Brothers in Cleveland, and J.L. Hudson's in Detroit. For a Canadian consumer product to be featured in the windows of Bloomingdale's was almost unimaginable and yet, there it was. In 1959, when fashionable men, including my father and David Gilmour, still wore three-piece suits, an article in the *Globe and Mail* trumpeted Clairtone's success in the U.S. market: "Canadians would have popped a few buttons on their vests last week if they had attended the American Music Show in New York. A stereophonic set designed and manufactured by a Canadian company founded less than a year ago by two young Canadians was the centre of attraction." This is perhaps the first time a piece of Canadian consumer-electronic equipment has aroused such enthusiasm in the U.S. As for my father and David, they were hailed as visionaries. They were "everybody's darlings," in the words of the journalist Alexander "Sandy" Ross. "They were treated as movie magazines treated

Rock Hudson, with awestruck approval, " another journalist recalled. "Peter Munk was probably one of the most admired young men in Canada, the closest thing to a hero the Canadian business community has produced in this generation," continued Ross. "Just contemplating the Clairtone phenomenon made us all feel smart and groovy and efficient, like the Scandinavians almost." Even my father seemed awe-struck by his own success. "There was a year when I had thirty-four speaking engagements," he recalled wide-eyed on CBC's the fifth estate in 1978. "I stood there, at the age of 30, lecturing the stalwart, establishment members of the Canadian business community. I used to go home and pinch myself."

This book is approximately 10" x 9" in size with an attractive dust jacket and 177 pages, co-written by the daughter of one of the two founders of the Company. It is filled with photographs (some full page) and lucid commentary. Also included are copies of hand-written initial design and specification sheets along with internal memos and advertising layouts. Most of the book is dedicated to the "Project G" which is one of, if not the most, innovative console stereos of the period and certainly the most famous of the Company's products. I lusted after this magnificent collection of components and cabinetry when I was young, but the \$1,600 price tag was well beyond my means. The overall system engineering was first-rate and the sound was amazing for it's time. Another reason to purchase the product was use of well-known components such as DUAL, ELAC-MIRACORD and GARRARD record changers. The only small complaint I have is not including pictures of the entire product line. Even if you have never heard of this Company or it's products, you will be entertained by reading about a business that had a great impact within it's product niche but was ultimately driven into the ground by it's founders too-grandiose dreams: what a loss!

Rare look into one of the true icons of early upscale sound systems with heavy design effect. The last time I saw one for sale was in Palm Springs, Ca. at nearly \$13,000! Solid and wonderfully researched.

Fascinating behind the scenes look at the rise and fall of a Canadian company way ahead of its time. LOVE the treasure of photographs.

I highly recommend purchasing "The Art of Clairtone: The Making of a Design Icon, 1958-1971". The authors, Nina Munk and Rachel Gotlieb, have revealed a fascinating behind-the-scenes tale of

the rise and fall of Clairtone. I was initially drawn to the book due to my own fascination with electronic equipment, modern industrial design, and Canadiana (since I am Canadian). I have found this book to be very well written so that the reader is captivated from page to page and also beautifully illustrated which makes the book an excellent visual reference for those who either collect vintage Clairtone electronics or have an interest in industrial design in general. This book is chock full of lavish colour illustrations and photographs depicting initial designs, close-up details of Clairtone products, and the marketing campaigns of the era. I simply could not put down "The Art of Clairtone" once I started reading it and I congratulate the authors for producing this delightful gem of a book.

During the 1960s, the Clairtone Sound Corporation had a meteoric success in design and was known for its ability to reflect the spirit of those turbulent, sophisticated, cosmopolitan, experimental times. Founded in 1958 by two young Canadians, Peter Munk and David Gilmour, Clairtone was especially acclaimed for its iconic designs and masterful designs for everything from stereo cabinetry to television panels. Their advertising successes made Clairtone designs an integral part of the popular culture. Their rise to prominence was as dramatic as their sudden collapse and is provided with an insightful commentary by co-authors Nina Munk and Rachel Gotlieb. Enhanced with 250 illustrations (including previously unpublished drawings, rare film stills, confidential memorandums and original photography), this informed and informative corporate history is enhanced further with interviews with its founders, designers, engineers and salesmen and is a fitting memorial to one of the most iconoclastic companies that Canada has ever produced. A fascinating read, "The Art Of Clairtone: The Making Of A Design Icon, 1958-1971" is highly recommended reading as a model corporate history.

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