

## Audio Space Reference 3.1 (300B) Amplifier - EQUIPMENT REPORT

Another big surprise had to do with bass definition. Well, maybe I should not have been as surprised considering the bass damping factor advantage of triodes over tetrodes and pentodes. But bass lines were reproduced tightly and with exceptional pitch definition. For example, resolving a Fender bass and upright acoustic bass playing in unison was a piece of cake. In these respects, the Ref 3.1 blew away the recently reviewed Esoteric A-100 and the Air Tight ATM-1S. Its low internal source impedance was also a key in minimizing load interactions. It made no attempt to dominate the load's tonal balance, allowing each speaker's tonal character to shine through.

It should be noted that my listening impressions to this point were based on using digital front ends or feeding an external phono stage into the "Direct" input. I also spent some time auditioning the built-in moving-magnet stage using a Grado Reference moving-iron cartridge. Its performance was commendable in a number of respects including a low-noise floor, very good detail retrieval, timbral accuracy, and excellent image focus. However, it exhibited dynamic reticence in scaling the range from loud to very loud. Transient speed was also a tad blunted relative to the rest of the circuit.

The only significant sonic quibble noted with the stock tube complement was a slightly grainy character through the presence and treble regions. Not being a fan of any sort of textural abrasiveness I started rolling in vintage 6SN7 types. I knew I was on the right track when my first pick, a Sylvania chrome-top, brought about a smoothing of the upper midrange and treble. As

a bonus, the lower midrange gained harmonic richness, fleshing out that big tone a vintage 6SN7 is known for. I also tried GE and Raytheon types, but my favorite in this application turned out to be a CBS-Hytron brown-base 5692, the most spacious and transparent of the bunch. However, that was not the end of the story. Having recently purchased several NOS Sylvania 7N7 Loktal types (with triangular black plates), I decided to give them a tryout as well. The 7N7 is internally electrically identical to a 6SN7 but with a different pin-out. Thus, with a 7N7 to 6SN7 adapter, it may be substituted for any 6SN7. The Loktal (for Lock-In), was a trademark of Philco-Sylvania. Other manufacturers (e.g., Tung Sol and Raytheon) referred to them as loctals. This type is distinguished by having the lead-out wires thickened to form the connecting pins and the use of a metal base shell instead of the typical Bakelite base. The 7N7 has specifically developed a reputation as an inexpensive yet excellent alternative to vintage 6SN7 types. And I totally concur. I found it to possess excellent detail and spatiality and could live with its sonics happily ever after.

It should be obvious by now that I'm wildly enthusiastic about this integrated amp. The Audio Space Reference 3.1 (300B) offers a path toward enlightenment—of being one with the music. Outfitted with a vintage pair of 6SN7 or even inexpensive 7N7 triodes, its musical pleasures would be captivating at any price point. Considering its asking price, it earns my nomination for a Product of the Year award. **TAS**

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...I should think so!"

Srajan Ebaen, 6moons.com  
Full Review April, 2009

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