

SoundStage!

www.soundstage.com

**Home Audio
Equipment Review**

February 1999

**Manley Laboratories
Stingray Integrated Amplifier****by Steve Rochlin**

A long time ago in a bar far, far away there was a napkin -- the kind on which all great ideas start. J. Gordon Holt and EveAnna Manley were drinkin' at the bar when lo and behold along comes this drawing. This would be a drawing of a new Manley product. Holt said it looked like a stingray. The saga continues...

Manley Labs has won awards in the professional recording market. The Manley Labs Voxbox was given the 1998 Tec award by *Mix* magazine, and this was Manley's fourth TEC nomination in a row. Fact is, many recording studios use Manley gear -- from their microphones to their amplifiers, and much in between. So what are they doing making home audio equipment? I mean, if you're doing great in the studio, why bother with audiophiles? Well the head woman at Manley Labs -- yes, a chick -- EveAnna, loves music and tube gear. How much does she love music and tubes? She is the only person I know of besides me who uses tube amps in her computer audio system. (Hey, try it sometime yourself. As they say in South Park, "Kicks ass!") So after the incident with the bar napkin, Manley decided to do something about it. Anyone who knows EveAnna Manley realizes that she's no ordinary chick. She loves music, motorcycles, and cool retro cars. My kinda woman! So with all her many years of designing tube gear, she set out to make good on this napkin deal.

**Review at a Glance**

Sound Clean highs, precise soundstaging, and its own way "of keeping the music exciting and invigorating."

Features Fifty watts per channel and four line-level inputs; short signal paths; high-quality Manley-made RCA jacks; no phono stage.

Use At its best with neutral or forgiving speakers; looks great -- a female's touch?

Value It's \$2250, made by Manley, looks cool, and does rock right -- not bad with jazz or classical either.

Nothing fishy here

We all know the best signal path is also the shortest one. The Stingray integrated amplifier has virtually every part optimally placed to insure the shortest signal path -- hence its look. In fact, the signal paths are so short that the RCA inputs and input switching for the right and left channels is on the rear of the amplifier, to the right and left. Tube-wise and per channel, a single 12AT7 is used in the input stage, a 6414 in the driver stage, and four EL84 tubes for the output stage. The only things on the front panel are knobs for volume and balance. This setup yields 50Wpc with four inputs (no phono-stage option). All tubes are on high-quality ceramic bases, while the RCA and speaker posts are gold-plated. Nothing here screams chintzy, el cheapo, or bottom-of-the-line. Instead of using those really cheesy female RCA jacks like most "cost-effective" gear does, the Stingray has Manley's own impressively solid gold-plated female RCA jacks. As much as I hate the RCA jack due to its crummy design, Manley Labs has custom-made what I have long felt is the best RCA jack. Why? Because of its "grabbing" center piece. So what we have here is a sexy, different-looking design with high-quality jacks and posts, gold-plated faceplate, and backlit center name plate. Can you say huge value-for-the-buck? How does she do it? Volume, volume, volume! Word has it these babies are selling like fresh Cohibas at a US cigar show. Of course, all this means nothing if it can't deliver the musical goods.

Enough of the foreplay. How does the Stingray sound?

In two words, it rocks! In a few more words, it also has impressive clarity and fast transients from deep, gnarly bass to hygienic highs -- not hygienic as in sterile, but hygienic as in curvaceously clean. The main eye-opener here is the precise soundstaging ability of the Stingray. While the images are very solidly placed between the speakers, the "air" doesn't seem to quite float outside of them or into the room in front of the speakers as it can with other amplifiers. All the images between the speakers are not just defined, but also well placed depth-wise as well. The Stingray seems to be one of the few units that can portray a nicely deep soundstage that almost makes you want to apologize to your neighbors for the drummer in their living room. What the Stingray also excels at is utter transient speed, impressive clarity, inner resolution, and the ability to play deep bass from intense pipe-organ pedal notes to fast techno beats. The Stingray never seems to undershoot or overblow either. This is not just speaking for a unit within this price range either. The Stingray could easily challenge many units costing two or three times its price.

Associated Equipment

Loudspeakers – KEF 104/2, Galante Audio Buckingham, Royal Reference 3A, M&K MX-2000 subwoofer.

Amplifiers – Conrad-Johnson CAV-50 integrated amplifier.

Digital – Assemblage DAC-2, Audio Alchemy DDS-III (both heavily modified), Z-Systems RDP-1.

One of the things I listen for especially is not only how well an amplifier portrays dynamics, but also if it can clearly reproduce the subtle beginning of a note. When a musician plays a stringed or wind instrument, for example, there is a part in the sound just before the full note develops. This is also where the ear seems to "tune in" to what instrument it is and the specific note that is being played. Alas, as some manufacturers seem to put more parts into the signal chain,

Analog – Voyd turntable, Audio Note AN-2/s-V tonearm, Audio Note IO-2 cartridge, Audio Note IQ-series cartridge, Audio Note AN-S6c step-up transformer, Lehmann Audio Black Cube phono stage.

Digital cables – 75-ohm digital cable of author's design.

Interconnects – Audio Note AN-Vx, Kimber KS-1030.

Speaker cables – Kimber KS-3035, Nirvana Audio S-L.

Accessories – Standesign 5 equipment rack, Target amplifier stand, Ikea rack for turntable, Caig ProGold, Ensemble Tubesox-TI, Dynamat, Vibrapods, Furman Sound IT-1220 balanced power unit.

this part of the music's structure seems to get lost. At times this confuses the ear/brain and makes us work harder. This is just one of the advantages of keeping your signal paths as short as possible (and why integrated amps also make sense). Now, I am not saying all products that use a kabillion parts obscure the beginning of the notes. Of course, there are always impressive products that pack in more parts than in the Space Shuttle and still deliver the "payload." It just seems that the products that get it more right than wrong are those with fewer parts. A big parts count does not necessarily mean obscurity.

It just seems to me that the Stingray has a way of keeping the music exciting and invigorating. This is not at the expense of overly bright highs or augmented midbass either. Like driving a Ferrari on a warm clear day, the Stingray is a joy to "drive" the music with. Its clarity, speed and capability of

"driving" the supporting lower frequencies with the clean fast highs gives me the desire to play recording after recording. Even great classical pieces like Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* [Teldec 4509-90201-2] seem to come to life with ease. The midrange has great see-through clarity and not 300B SET romance. Meanwhile the small microdynamics might not be up to the standards of cost-no-object units, yet for its price, the Stingray gets more than you paid for. Oh, and when the cannons roll in, you better duck for cover! While 50Wpc might not seem like an 800-horsepower F1 engine, I would describe it more like my Honda's VTEC (you car enthusiasts know what I mean here). In a sane system with a common-sense speaker load, the Stingray should be more than enough for room quakin' sound power -- unless you're shooting for permanent hearing damage.

Bass-o-matic or bombastic fantastic?

Because many of you have read my review of the Conrad-Johnson CAV-50 integrated amp, I'm sure some will ask, "Yo, Steve, can you compare the two considering there is only a few hundred shekels difference between them in price and both are integrated amps?" To that I say, "No problemmo." Please remember, though, that the CAV-50 uses a totally different tube compliment and is tube rectified, while the Stingray is solid-state rectified. Therefore, one rightly expects a different musical perspective. After all, not all tube amps sound the same, just as solid-state amplifiers that use different devices/designs don't sound the same.

Seems to me that the Stingray kicks the music's rear while the CAV-50 romances it. You see, the Stingray has this way of making me want to rock and jam while the CAV-50 has me more relaxing to jazz and classical music. Of course, if your system is on the brighter side of reality, the CAV-50 might help to tame this to some degree. If you have chosen

wisely with neutral or more forgiving speakers, then the Stingray is ready to jump-start your system. As much as the Stingray kicks, this is not to say that it can't play jazz, classical, or opera. Many hours of Muddy Waters, Chick Corea, Billie Holiday, Bach, and Beethoven have played through the Stingray. But when it comes to romancing my bones, the CJ CAV-50 wins out over the Stingray. I am a bit hesitant to say that the CJ is for jazz and classical lovers while rockers should dive for the Stingray because the Stingray definitely shouldn't be pigeonholed into such limited usage, especially when it does so many good things to the music in general.

When it comes to build quality, the Stingray has it over the CAV-50 in a few visible areas. The Stingray uses seemingly better tube sockets, definitely better RCA jacks and speaker binding posts. Of course, when it comes to cosmetics we start getting further into personal preferences. Me? I like them both, yet my girlfriend likes the Stingray better. In fact, when it arrived and I told her it was designed by a woman, she said it looked that way. The layout on the Stingray is so lovely that it appeared in *Penthouse* (November 1998). No kidding -- Manley in *Penthouse*! Oh yeah, the Stingray also appeared on TV -- KTLA's coverage of HI-FI '98. What's next? Manley in *Big Tube Uns* magazine?

Beggars banquet

In the end, if you see a dude on the side of the road with a sign that says "Will work for tube integrated amplifier," that would be me. Please give generously. There are times when the added clarity is a must-have for a reviewer. As much as I love the tender romance that the CJ CAV-50 brings forth, a dude's gotta rock too. The Stingray is one of the best bargains out there right now, and I predict that it will become a classic. Bold statement? You betcha! The more I listen to the Stingray, the more I love it. Don't even think of buying a tube or solid-state amplifier in the \$2000 range unless you have heard the Stingray first. It's that good. Just think of the preamplifier as a free add-on. Ain't life great?

...*Steve Rochlin*

Manley Laboratories Stingray Integrated Amplifier

Price: \$2250

Warranty: Five years parts and labor

Manley Laboratories, Inc.

13880 Magnolia Avenue

Chino, CA 91710

Phone: (909) 627-4256

Fax: (909) 628-2482

[email](#)

Website: www.manleylabs.com

SoundStage!

www.soundstage.com

All Contents

Copyright © 1999 SoundStage!

All Rights Reserved

[Top of Page](#) | [Manley Home page](#) | [Review Main Page](#)