

Stingray Integrated Amplifier Stereo Times Review



by Frank Alles
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Specifications

Price: \$2,250. (tape or preamp outputs add \$100 ea. pr.).

Warranty: 5 years parts/labor on amp, 6 mo./tubes with proper registration.

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"Starting with the lower octaves, this gutsy little amp delivered firm, extended bass, that sounded 'real.' While many amplifiers deliver copious quantities of bass, few of them render sound like the actual bass instruments they're trying to reproduce."

Under the leadership of CEO, Eve Anna Manley, working in concert with her astute team of engineers, Manley Labs has come up with a unique integrated tube amplifier, that physically mimics the shape of the aquatic sea creature—the stingray. The amplifier is unique both in its attractive styling and in certain aspects of its design and component parts.

First, I must tell you that although the Stingray was designed by a woman, there is a certain machismo to its appeal that is undeniable. No, it's not a super-charged Corvette, but under its stainless steel "hood," lies a little "engine," that COULD (and DID)! As it happens, the unusual dimensions of the chassis and the layout of the components were initially chosen to optimize its performance.

Let me assure you, there is nothing fishy about the Stingray. I hooked it up to my Eminent Technology LFT-8a speakers (83 dB/W/m), which I didn't even expect it to drive successfully, and I must say that at moderate volume levels the amp performed like a champion.

Manley says the secret's in a new output transformer design, which was enthusiastically conceived by "Hutch" Hutchison and Michael Hunter. Armed with an extensive technical library and on-premises transformer winding facilities, they returned to more traditional thinking, but with a few clever twists. Measuring, listening, testing and tuning led to a decision to replace the venerable 15-year-old input stage with an innovative and fresh contribution from Paul Fargo. Separate left and right silver-contact selector switches (for the four stereo line inputs) deliver the music signal to premium Noble® balance and volume controls before hitting the first 12AT7WA input tubes. In effect, this is a very high quality passive preamplifier

Following the 6414 driver/phase splitter, the trusty EL84 output stage (four tubes per channel) yields 50 Wpc of Ultra-Linear push-pull power. However it can be (factory) strapped for Triode operation which yields 25 Wpc. Individual bias for each tube is easily adjusted using the trim-pots and test points, conveniently located on the top of the amplifier. The Stingray's power supply is extra-rugged and stiff, a Manley hallmark.

The proprietary audio connectors are gold-plated over brass with a Teflon dielectric, and an IEC receptacle located at the rear of the amp, allows the use of after-market power cords. Stingray's sleek chassis is made from highly polished stainless steel, which will not rust or peel, like conventional chrome plate. Hand-turned, high-luster control knobs made at Manley's in-house machine shop appoint the CNC machined faceplate, which is then plated with 24-karat gold. This results in a finish that is not only elegant, but durable as well. Stingray is quite the dapper gent.

To The Staging Lanes, Rev 'er Up!

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My "fuel-delivery system" was the Parasound D/AC-2000 converter with Parasound's C/BD-2000 transport, "gassing" the Stingray via Full Spectrum Audio Signature interconnects. WireWorld Equinox III speaker cables delivered the "horsepower" to my Eminent Technology LFT-8a speakers. The ETs were used with add-on Walsh-type super-tweeters, by George Mueller.

Later on in my evaluation, I used the Stingray with the same source components, to drive the electrostatic midrange/tweeter panels of my InnerSound Eros speakers. There the Stingray took the place of my current favorite amps, Monarchy SM-70s (used as monoblocks).

Starting with the lower octaves, this gutsy little amp delivered firm, extended bass, that sounded "real". While many amplifiers deliver copious quantities of bass, few of them render sound like the actual bass instruments they're trying to reproduce. The Stingray is one of the few amps I've heard that lets the listener believe that an electric bass, drum kit, or the lower registers of the piano could have been produced by the actual instruments.

Another facet of the Stingray's bass presentation that impressed me, was its transition from the mid-bass to the upper bass--the area that affects male vocal reproduction. To check this out, I played a few tracks from The King Singer's *Good Vibrations* (RCA/BMG 09026-60938-2). This album really blew me away, because the different sections of the chorus, bass, tenor, and alto sounded exceedingly natural and had the best reproduction of the hall ambience, that I can recall hearing. On their cover of Billy Joel's "And So It Goes," the interplay between the singers was riveting and the mid-bass, to upper bass, to lower midrange transition

was virtually seamless. The bass and tenor vocalists had the perfect amount of "chestiness" to keep the presentation sounding natural and convincing. It wasn't too dry, and it wasn't too "DJ-esque".

For a dose of kick drum and electric bass, I chose Erykah Badu's "Rim Shot," from *Erykah Badu Live* (Kedar UD-53109). The drum was very dynamic and very clean and the electric bass breathed a butt-gripping growl that smacked of authenticity.

I found the midrange reproduction to be as liquid and generally smooth, with a very good sense of nuance. Not only were vocals well served, but complex instruments like the piano were handled with particular aplomb. For example, on Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue* (Delos DE 3216), the notes of the piano seemed to have just the correct proportions of attack, sustain and decay. With lesser electronics the piano can sound hard or glassy and the notes may not be reproduced with the proper amounts of attack and decay. With the Stingray, I found the character of the piano to be melodious and seductive, which is how the instrument sounds in a live venue. Yet the notes were clean and distinct and didn't smear together.

Additionally, the lower registers were just as convincing exhibiting the weight and body commensurate with the instrument. In fact, at one point, my wife remarked about how true-to-life the piano sounded--and she was listening from the bedroom at the other end of our ranch--the next floor up...!

Strings, brass, and woodwinds proved themselves equally competent. Listening to "The Royal March," from *L' Histoire du Soldat* (Everest EVC 9049), the woodwinds acquitted themselves especially well, while the solo violin and the brass were rendered with their inherent sweetness and natural ease. This amp offers a good degree of immediacy and intimacy, never sounding sterile or mechanical.

The Stingray's treble reproduction was also noteworthy. On tracks like US 3's "Tukka Yoot's Riddim," (Blue Note CDP 0777 7 80883 2 5), the brushwork on the cymbals was detailed and extended, yet non-fatiguing. In my view, this is exactly how it should be on this recording. There was no hardness, edginess, or overbite. Also it seemed that high frequency percussion instruments such as maracas, shakers and even zydeco washboards, exuded a wealth of detail without stridency. Triangles and cymbal crashes on symphonic works were rendered very life-like and natural.

The soundstage was expansive and images were placed with a good degree of precision. I have heard some amps produce a touch more soundstage depth, but who can say whether this is accurate or an "effect" of some type? Also, I've heard some amplifiers provide a slightly more precise focus, with the trade-off being that they tend to sound slightly more etched.

Regarding the area of system dynamics, the macro-dynamic envelope of the feisty Stingray was very impressive (especially in view if the severe speaker load it was driving!). I didn't discern any noticeable compression on sforzandos, and from the deft level of nuance it provided on the piano, on *Rhapsody In Blue*, I have to give it high marks for its expression of micro-dynamics too.

However, the above paragraphs were written in the context of the amp's sound with the ET speakers. When powering the electrostatic panels of my InnerSound Eros speakers, the Stingray didn't fare quite as well. In truth, the sound through the Eros was a bit brighter, in the lower treble. Cymbals and other high frequency percussion instruments were a little splashier than with my reference amps.

As I recall, I got similar results (in the treble) using a Music Reference RM-10 amplifier a while back; but the RM-10 was not as powerful, nor could it match the extension and punch of the Stingray in the bass. The

bottom line is that the performance of all amplifiers is load dependent; and the character of a given amplifier will change a bit in accordance with the load that your speakers present (not to mention the unique sonic signature that one's listening room will impart). For that reason I always suggest, whenever possible, that you audition *any* prospective amplifier in your own system before committing to the purchase.

Caveats?

I've already discussed the Stingray's sonic presentation in detail, so I won't repeat myself here. But there are a couple of ergonomic "barnacles" that I should mention. First, the on/off toggle is on the butt o' the 'ray and you have to feel for it from the front. Secondly, the dual-mono input selectors are located on the rear flanks (to shorten the signal path) and they are a bit inconvenient to reach as well. Third, although the binding posts appear to be of high quality I'm not in love with their design. I don't like the way they hold banana plugs, and they are close enough together that spade lugs can short if not tightened securely. Lastly, the individual left and right inputs are far apart and at odd angles. This could make the use of some types of interconnects (stiff, inflexible audiophile-types) a bit problematic, especially if you will be installing the amp in an enclosed, or hard to reach location.

Conclusion

This is a great little amp. It's a manly beast, spirited and lively, yet gentle as the recording dictates. A lot of thought went into its development and this shows through in its gorgeous eye-catching styling, and in its sonic presentation.

If you own inefficient speakers and like to blast them without caution in a high-volume acoustic venue, then you will need to buy a more powerful amplifier. Otherwise, this is a fine amplifier that provides a generous blend musicality and resolution. With it, you may find yourself forgetting about the hardware and simply focusing your attention on rediscovering your collection of recordings.

Plus, the Stingray really looks MARVELOUS! And if it ever stops working somewhere way down the line, you can always mount it on your wall like a big-game trophy. Then you can tell your grand kids impassioned stories about the "Big-One" that got away--minus the usual regrets ... Highly Recommended!

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