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MGD reviews three preamplifiers: PBN Audio Olympia L Linestage (\$12,000); Herron VTSP-3 Tube Linestage (\$6,550); and, **Wyetech Labs Jade Tube Linestage (\$4,900)** wyetechlabs.com

Tube Linestage Preamplifier



I don't think I've ever privately auditioned a preamplifier exclusively using 6SN7 tubes. They are a larger tube than the so called "mini-tubes" found in most preamplifiers; these are octals. I assume that the term octal comes from the eight pins on the bottom of the tube. The 6SN7 is also much larger and heavier than the standard 6DJ8, 12AX7, etc., etc. I think this tube has been in use for a very long time, oftentimes used in old tube type televisions. Some years ago I mowed the grass for an elderly lady in our neighborhood. After a few hot Saturday afternoons behind a push mower, she wanted to repay me for my lawn work and asked me to accept some money for my time. Since I did the work because I wanted to and not due to any desire to make a profit, I kindly declined the offer as graciously as I could. Without me knowing it, she later asked my wife about some of the things I liked. When Laura mentioned electronics as being one of my interests, the lady asked her if I would like a box of old tubes owned by her deceased husband; he had been a TV repairman many years before. Laura responded by saying that she thought I'd like that - boy was she right! There weren't many audio type tubes in his collection and many were heavily used, but there was a nice stash of 6SN7 tubes that I had no use for ... until now.

The Jade is a basic, no frills design that emphasizes super high quality parts and special attention to the power supply (grounded grid). By that, I don't mean a super huge power supply but a very sophisticated one. The Jade came to me in a plum colored painted aluminum chassis, a first in my experience color wise. AC line phase is standard. And this unit, unlike so many tube preamps such as SAS, c-j, etc., does not invert signal polarity. Break-in took about two weeks, maybe a little more, and the sonics changed pretty substantially during that time. On the back it had four RCA inputs, two sets of preamp to amp outs, a tape loop and a designated "preamp out" for sending the signal to recording devices like the Alesis 9600. On its front panel it had a single volume control, a balance knob, a source selector and a mute toggle - that's it. No remote, no mono, no phase inversion, no mono switch, NO REMOTE!!!! Do you ever wonder what life was like before remotes? With the Jade in the Big Rig I felt that I was getting a substantial portion of my daily exercise simply by getting *out* of my listening chair once or twice an hour during intense listening sessions. Don't let anyone tell you being a reviewer is easy". it's real work when the component comes without a remote. Being remoteless was, I believe, instrumental in the demise of the turntable and needle-discs. We needed CDs because we needed remotes. I'm in better physical condition for having auditioned the Wyetech Jade. I would be remiss were I not to tell you that the Jade has a homemade look and feel to it. It doesn't look crude, but it doesn't have the savvy appearance of the Herron VTSP-3 either. It

took time to become accustomed to the plum paint job and boxy visuals, especially after having worked with the Olympia L and Herron. But I got used to it, and as I'm getting ready to pack and ship it back to Canada, I can honestly say that I kinda' liked how it looked in the Big Rig; but not at first. There is more to the Jade than the utilitarian appearance. Internally, this is a machine that is as modular as anything I've seen. Many companies advertise modular construction as a deterrent to obsolescence. They tout "plug and play" circuit boards as your means to an easy and effective upgrade in the future. On more than one occasion I've looked inside one of those modular wonders to see no modularity at all ... all talk. With the Jade, on the other hand, I have found a manufacturer that does not hype his product as the next modular savior, while indeed making a product that is constructed in such a way as to make it imminently simple to repair and upgrade right down to the tube sockets themselves. This is a design approach that makes for easy accessibility to every internal part. Screw down terminal connectors between internal assemblies allow boards to be interchanged with a minimum of effort. In no way do the internal circuit boards on the Jade appear to be "stuffed" by an automated robot as is common with surface mount assemblies. The appearance, while looking a little like a one-off project also has a feel of quality and craftsmanship. I will take issue with one aspect of the design of the Jade. On the back of the IEC connector for AC, is a Delta EM! line filter. It probably cost Wyetech a couple of bucks. Its purpose is to filter the incoming AC. I have \$3,000 worth of AC line conditioners and truly do not need a \$4 part from Delta sticking its nose into my line filters business. In the past, I've had the opportunity to listen to equipment with and without cheap in line filters. Never have I heard one make a positive impact on a quality component. What would the Wyetech sound like without it?

Listening to the Jade was similar to looking at it. Not having had experience with 6SN7GT tubes before, their sound struck me as a bit old fashion - at least at first. Not only did the appearance of the Wyetech represent a physical departure from the modem aura of the Herron preamp, it sounded a lot different too. Whereas the VTSP-3 leans toward the revealing side of the music (without going too far in that regard), the Jade puts an emphasis upon the emotions sought to be explored. Harmonically, it tends toward romantic richness without sacrificing detailing or dynamics. Stating that, it would be understandable if you expected the preamp to be of the ultra up-front variety, but it wasn't. Actually, of the three preamps here, and the SAS IIA that I own, the Wyetech had the most "middle of the hall" (call it relaxed if you want) presentation of them all. I won't call it distant, but the visage it presented was one of standing back and more seriously considering the *context* of the music. Actually, I believe this preamp's greatest and most formidable asset may be its ability to portray the aural contexts of a performance, especially live performances, at arm's length; all without sacrificing the emotive mix required to mesh music with realism.

What is the "context" of a performance? Playing *Four Way Street* by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young is a perfect example of how a preamp can preserve and present the full musical context of a performance. And it was that recording which allowed me to observe the wonder of the Jade in that respect and to begin thinking more about context as opposed to imaging, dynamics, range, etc., etc .. More realistically than either of the other two preamps covered here, the Jade presents context in a way that is utterly reminiscent of the live listening event. To me, context is the whole of the event in every dimension put before the listener to scale. With context, no aspect of the performance dominates unnecessarily, nor is anything lessened; everything is there in its proper proportion. All good preamplifiers present the context of a performance to a certain degree. The Herron and the SAS are very good in that regard. But it wasn't until I listened to the Jade that I understood how the other preamps were getting the concept of context at least a little less perfectly than the Jade. I'm also prepared to acknowledge that the superb ability of the Jade to capture the context of a performance, or its completeness to scale, may mean by definition that the sound stage must be, or at least appear to be, more distant than that of other preamplifiers. In some ways it's the antithesis of presence and immediacy as presently so sought after in many preamp designs. Until you figure out what it's doing, the preamp comes off as a little uninvolved. Not entirely so, just a little bit that way; by no means is it extreme. The Jade is therefore a notable divergence from the current approach and mindset regarding how a preamp should sound. In all honesty, I'm not sure which is the more correct. After months of using this preamp, however, I consider the contextual aspect of its operation to be formidable. So formidable that other parts of its performance, good and bad, tend to be overlooked once you figure it out

Earlier in this coverage of the Jade I mentioned that the preamp at first came off as a little old fashioned sounding. Some will take that comment as a positive, others as a negative. But, from my audition I concluded that the Jade errs in favor of a little warmth and a little rounding.

Its lines are cleanly cut, and there is certainly a precision of placement to its soundstage, but seldom does it slice with a transient or threaten to send a passive listener into shock. To a degree, its mid-hall presentation would seem to preclude that. Though I would not in anyway suggest that the Jade dampens dynamic edges or even the natural distinctions between amplitude gradations. In its ability to capture the true whole, it gives up some excitement - simple as that.

To some, "old fashioned" means the ability to express tone qualities in all their glory without going all technicolor and overblown. I loved the way the Jade captured the richness of a Wurlitzer pipe organ in a cavernous venue, the body and string of a cello, the bite of a trumpet and many other things. I loved the way it did those things, and how it was willing to take a chance of maybe going a little overboard tonally in an effort to recreate the recording accurately, or at least accurately in terms of the instrument's tonal essence. As you know, it's possible to go too far on occasion in an effort to get something just right. Likewise, I loved the Herron's willingness to take a transient (dynamic accent) to its breathtaking conclusion without drawing back, and to reveal the inner workings of a complex sound without making excuses. * Until a perfect preamp is built these are the kinds of trade-offs and compromises that are being made. The good things about these trade-offs is that they are becoming much less exclusive of one another. Universes are beginning to collide ...

* Please excuse my personification of these products in terms of performance, but when dealing with a subject as complex as music reproduction and its impact upon a listener, sometimes personification is the only thing that works for me; it creates a common ground of sorts, i.e., the human experience.