

envy as he/she/it looks enviously to the violin section, but there's no soul there.

I consider this arm of reference quality, and though it is conceivable that some cartridges might be happier in a more massive arm, the Graham won't obscure their basic character.

**Joule Electra: Rite of Passage Output Transformerless (OTL) Monoblock Amplifiers**  
**Price: \$21,000/pair**

**N**ow that William Z. Johnson seems to have at least partially retired from high-end audio design work, it's Jud Barber of Joule who is breaking new ground in the sound of tubed electronics.

His amplifiers are some of the few reliable (and therefore commercially successful) designs that dispense with the output transformer—thought to be the most significant source of coloration and distortion in tubed circuitry design. Others have tried to dispense with the transformer, which exists, through its windings, to step down the high output impedance of tubes to match the (relatively) low input impedance of the normal speaker system. The problem has been this: Such amplifiers usually deliver their maximum power output into the higher (say, 16 ohms) speaker impedances with less and less power available at 8, and then, 4 ohms. Barber has found, clever man he, a way around the problem, and *voilà*, here we have more or less 200 Class A watts available at 8 ohms (and he has a bigger unit coming along, one that will make it summer all year round here in New York. And after this past winter in New York, who cares? We'll worry about living in Matto Grosso-Sea Cliff next summer.).

They are good-looking units and you can do just enough tweaking to feel really macho, if you are of that ilk. You must set the bias voltages for the output tubes—easily done—and adjust the feedback circuitry control to best match the speaker you are using. Minimum amounts of feedback can and do make a considerable difference. Higher

amounts, for instance, work best with box-type speakers, while planars and other exotica (ribbons and electrostats) prefer a lower feedback setting.

And what a gorgeous sounding amplifier this, his latest work, is. It's the most powerful design yet and it ought to drive anything you can think of other than a Hummer. With plenty of headroom to spare, and with a dynamic swing that will catch you by surprise. Why "by surprise"? Because of the equal ease it shows at every dynamic level and by the continuous way it slides between both the mini and maxi changes. Wonderful bottom-octave response, the kind that sounds like bottom octaves sound in a hall, not that overly controlled, "high-definition" bass so common to the best solid-state designs. The bass is "relaxed" without being sloppy, ill-defined, or deficient in testicular capacities. Neutral as can be sonically. I really wouldn't know where to put it on a yin-yang scale, because tube sounds, rightly done, are tonally neutral and seem to fall into a different universe. So we have an amplifier, like the new Koetsu cartridge, that has character, but not colorations.

Deep thought: Could it be that the best transistor designs, like PCM digital, remove just enough harmonic richness for us to use terms like yin and yang to ascribe a basic character to them, thus making for a narrower window of tonal "neutrality," while with tubed units, that window of neutrality is much wider?

*End of Part I: HP's Super Component List: Conclusion, next issue*

#### MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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**Gamut USA**  
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**Joule Electra**  
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**Nordost**  
[www.nordost.com](http://www.nordost.com)

## II. Golden Ears – Audio

This historical Joule-Electra Product info is provided courtesy of Signature Sound High-End Audio (Rich Brkich). We provide service, support, and (some) upgrades for Joule-Electra gear. Joule-Electra may no longer be in business, but we still love it!

Signature Sound, Liverpool, NY USA Website: [www.sigsound.com](http://www.sigsound.com) Tel: 315-622-4137 E-mail: [hifi@sigsound.com](mailto:hifi@sigsound.com)

### Alón's Exotica Grand Reference Hybrid Speaker System

**V**isually, something else to behold. The sonics? A radical departure for a conservative designer, Carl Marchisotto, who got his start with Jon Dahlquist back when. See review, this issue.

### Edge Signature Model One Solid-State Monoblock Amplifiers

#### Edge NS-10 stereo amplifier

**W**e've discussed, though not yet fully reviewed, these startling new transistor designs from Edge electronics (Issues 131, 132). Even veteran tube-o-philiacs can't find any solid-state artifacts to complain about, so neutral and free from gross colorations are these electronics. That alone would be high praise. But the Edge, on the right material and through the right associated components, does something else and that is bring back, almost alive, the authentic sound of music from time to time, so fresh and uncolored is their impact.

### Joule Electra Rite of Passage Output Transformerless (OTL) Tubed Monoblock Amplifiers

**J**ust when we thought that solid-state had caught up with the acme of tubed electronics, along comes a surprise from Jud Barber, a courtly Southern gentleman who has come out of retirement to design a line of remarkably sweet-sounding electronics, and who, it would seem, has, along with Ralph Karsten of Atma-Sphere, figured out a way to make OTL amplifiers work, and work well with virtually any speaker system. This is a Class A design with a single-ended output

stage that packs a wallop, and well it should, since it will deliver 220 tubed watts into an 8-ohm load. Clipping it does not do.

It is a well-named amplifier, since the Rite of Passage (\$21,000/pair) indeed demarks just that, Barber's transition as a designer from the remarkably good to the great. The Rite is competitively priced with the Edge, and sounds, in many, many respects just like that design – tonally neutral, quick as a tick in getting to a percussive note, and without the gentle slurring we oft associate with the better tubed designs. Its 12 Russian 6C33CB triode tubes run hot (and quickly toast up your listening room), and their bias usually needs adjusting once they stabilize after break-in (but this is no difficult task for any but the most technically leprous). And there is a feedback control knob that you'll have to adjust to get the maximum transient accuracy from your speaker system – too little and things can sound "soft," too much and the opposite takes place. Let your ear be your guide in this, as in all things to do with the reproduction of music (assuming, to be sure, that you have a working familiarity with what the gestalt of music is). The most obvious difference between it and the Edge that we could determine in early listening sessions was in the matter of texture, with the Rite sounding slightly wetter, or more liquid, or slightly richer in terms of its harmonic renditions.

I'll say this: Outside of a few classic Audio Research designs that would now sound much more colored by comparison with the Rite, I've heard nothing this pure or anywhere like this from a tubed design. I would think, at least in the here and now, that except for a more powerful version, to give that last ounce of "authority" – this is the unquestionable state of the art both in OTL amplification and in the sound of a powerful tubed amplifier. Review to come.

*Manufacturer information can be found on page 64.*

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