

THE JOULE ELECTRA LA-200 LINE AMPLIFIER

Bob Sireno

Jud Barber recently took his very worthy LA-100 preamplifier and brought it to a new level of performance. The full dress version is called the LA-200. Its internal design is basically the same LA-100, but with enough changes to result in an evolution to the LA-200. Phase inversion is still the order of the day. Jud tried to obtain the level of performance without phase inversion. Regardless of design technique or level of tweak, without phase inversion the Joule Electra preamps aren't as good. Someday, Jud may hear the sound of music with standard signal phase in his designs. For now, the best is phase inverted.

The review unit had individual volume pots, remote control, and no phono stage — a \$600 option. There are four sets of inputs, all direct. Two sets of outputs allow for biamping. On the front of the unit are four handsome brass knobs behind which are ultra-premium quality switches and controls. From the portside they are left volume, right volume, input selector, and standby/on/mute. Internally the volume controls are shunted to ground. The board has no traces, only point to point wiring. Purist Audio silver wire replaces the LA-100's Cardas wiring. The tube compliment is the same in each model. The sound, however, is not.

ANCILLARY STUFF

The CD transport was Audio Alchemy's Digital Drive 1. Digital cables were Flatline Moonglo, and Mango Audio Labs Reference. D/A converter was Parasound's D/AC-1500. Analog Interconnects were Flatline Red Dawn and AudioQuest Quartz x3. The amps were Parasound's HCA-2200 mk.II and HCA-1206. Speaker cable was Apex Signature. Speakers were Legacy Focus and Michael Green Designs Chameleon. Power cords for the electronics were all Apex AmpCord. The ground was lifted on the AC cord to the Joule Electra LA-200. Seakay's Line Rover LR-1200 filtered the AC juice. AC to the LA-200 and HCA-2200 mk.II was not filtered.

THE SOUND

In a word: *unsurpassed*. The neutral tone, delicate yet lush layered images and the exquisitely painted soundstage have to be heard to be believed. CD's that produce spitty highs with other high end preamps sounded clean, rich, and tamed. I can only make the almost absurd statement that the \$3745 remote controlled LA-200 is one of the most forgiving yet one of the most neutral, revealing, and finest sounding preamplifiers on the market today at any price. A single listening session, mine was ten weeks long, will tell you that this preamp was designed by someone who loves music and understands audio. I don't generally rave about equipment. Most

gear is burdened with faults that detract from its ability to sound natural and real. The LA-200 earned a rave. Its faults are almost nonexistent. It's great.

Freeway Philharmonic's *Sonic Detour* (Sheffield Lab 10050-2-F) is a superb recording that illustrates the clarity, solidity, neutrality, and three-dimensional presentation of the LA-200. Bass was exquisitely deep, snappy, and rich with timbre that rivals a live performance. The Chapman stick (a ten-string instrument played by tapping the frets) sounded so good I thought the band was brought right into the room. Percussive sounds didn't intimidate the LA-200 either. Dynamics were fast and clean. Decay was beautifully natural and ambient. The LA-200 brought me closer to real life than any other preamp I'd heard. I'm in love.

What happens with most preamps when you turn the volume

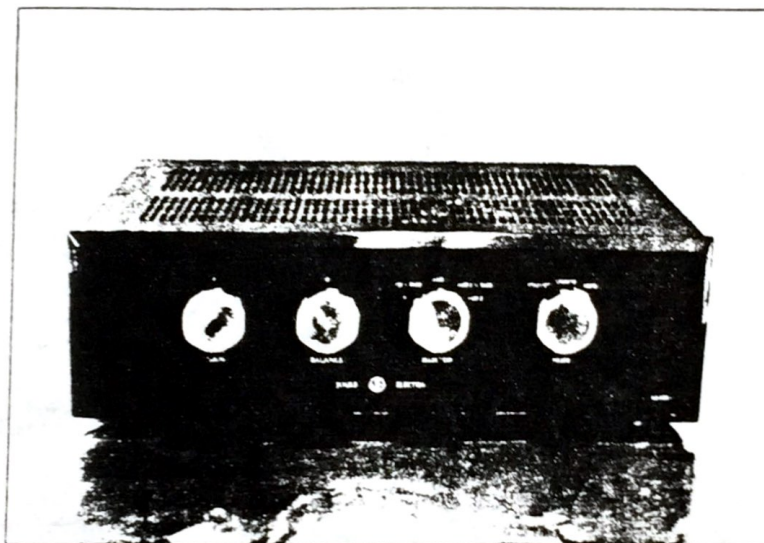
up all the way without a signal driving it? With the LA-200 I heard dead silence, at least with the ground lifted on the AC cord. No other preamp did this for me. It was as if the amp was turned off. No kidding. Even the \$7500 Metaxas Opulence II produced a hum regardless of what I did to eliminate it. Not only was the LA-200 quieter than the Metaxas, a superb preamp, it clearly outperformed it in all respects save ambient room decay. The Metaxas created more ambience, but sounded artificial spectrally and lacked precise solid imaging when compared to the Joule Electra.

To satisfy myself

that I wasn't delusional about the performance of the LA-200 I hauled it to Legacy Audio where Bill Dudleston graciously inserted it into his system. Along with the LA-200, a Pioneer PD-65 CD player, Music Metre Signature interconnects, and a pair of Legacy amplifiers drove the best sounding commercially obtainable speakers on this planet, the Legacy Whisper. After Bill replaced his Coda preamp with the Joule Electra LA-200, and fired it up, we sat back and enjoyed the best playback sound one can hear. Wow! A landscape of clean, clear realistic sound flowed from the Whispers. Music that normally sounded a tad shrill with the Coda was convincingly smooth after the LA-200 was in place. Bill commented that he thought the LA-200 was the best preamp he had ever heard. The sound was extraordinary. Words don't genuinely convey the solidity, the natural ambience, the clean delicate inner detail we heard. The LA-200 made the Whisper sound a notch better.

COMPARISONS

The original LA-100 was compared to an Encore Electronics DL2010.2 preamplifier in *Positive Feedback* Vol. 5, Number 2. This time I compared the LA-200 to the LA-100. Where the LA-100 had



The Joule Electra LA-200 (with older faceplate)

somewhat slow bass, the LA-200 was fast, crisp, and rich. While the LA-100 had superior midrange to the Encore DL2010 2, the LA-200 was several notches closer to reality. It breathed spirit into music. High frequencies were sweet and smooth on the LA-200, dramatically improved. The LA-200's staging was extraordinary. The 100 was forward sounding with large center images, while the 200 painted a lifelike sonic landscape that was incredibly holographic. A major improvement. Inner detail was finer with greater air and finesse. Nuances weren't buried or smeared. Subtle details were heard easily, even in a busy soundstage as on Dire Straits tune "On Every Street." Individual voices are easily discernible. Timbre was natural, not colored.

I already mentioned how the LA-200 compared to the Metaxas Opulance II. To sum it up the LA-200 produced more realistic sound at half the price of the Metaxas.

SHORTCOMINGS

Nothing is perfect. State of the art products can fool us into thinking things can't get any better. Technology advances inevitably lead to improvements. For now, however, the Joule Electra is as good as a preamp gets. Matching it to an amplifier with impedance input more than 100,000 ohms is critical to obtain significant gain in

the system. The circuit is set for 8 dB gain, but can be adjusted up to 12 dB. I left mine at the stock setting. Bear in mind that low impedance amps won't be driven to their full output. This may or may not be important to you. But, it is a consequential characteristic of the LA-200 that limits its universality.

CONCLUSION

This is a superb preamplifier. I bought the review unit. If your amp is high impedance, or you don't drive your system to high levels, accept nothing less than an LA-200. Only the best should do.

To own an LA-200 you need to purchase a basic LA-100 (\$2495) and order the Purist Audio silver wire upgrade (\$150) and black acrylic faceplate with brass knobs (\$500). The basic LA-200 that sounds like the one I have is \$3150. This is a bargain for the quality sound that flows forth. Remote control is indispensable if you want to answer the phone without running to the stereo to turn down the volume. Add \$600 for remote control and Vishay resistors.

Total: \$3745.

Result: Joule Electra's top of the line preamplifier.

Check it out.

