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AUDIO REVIEWS

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MARCH 2006

# TEKTRON TUBE GEAR



**Reviewer:** Michael Lavorgna

**Analog:** Rega P3, Denon DL-103 cartridge, Auditorium 23 moving coil step up, Fi Yph phono stage

**Digital:** Audio Aero Capitole MKII

**Preamp:** Déjà Vu Audio, *Tektron TK6J5* [on review]

**Amp:** Fi 45 Prototype, Fi X, Fi 421A, Minute, *Tektron TK2A3/50S* [on review]

**Integrated Amp:** *Tektron TK2A3/50S-I* [on review], *Audio Tropic Musical Machine* [in for review]

**Speakers:** Cain & Cain Abby (Normal) and Cain & Cain Bailey, Tonian Acoustics TL-R2 Super Tweeter, DeVore Fidelity Super 8, *Lamhorn 1.8 with AER MKI drivers* [in for review]

**Cables:** PHY interconnects, Shindo interconnects, Auditorium 23 Speaker Cable, JPS Labs Digital AC Power Cable, Audience PowerChord, ESP Essence Power Cord, and Z-Cable Heavy Thunder V2 on the Blue Circle MR

**Stands:** pARTicular Basis Rack

**Powerline conditioning:** Blue Circle Music Ring MR800

**Accessories:** Symposium Rollerblocks Series II under AA Capitole, Yamamoto Sound Craft PB-10 Ebony Bases under Abbys and Bailey, PS Audio Ultimate Outlets, and AudioPrism Quiet Lines. Room damping provided by lots of books.

**Room size:** 13' w x 14' d x 9' h

**Review component retail:** Tektron TK2A3/50S \$1,800 | TK6J5 \$1,500 | TK2A3/50S-I \$2,050



### Popeil

"It slices, it dices, it makes julienne fries!"

Veg-O-Matic: "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to show you the greatest kitchen appliance ever made, all your onions chopped to perfection without shedding a single tear."

Dial-O-Matic: "Slice a tomato so thin, it only has one side."

Popeil Pocket Fisherman: "The biggest fishing invention since the hook - and still only \$19.95!"

Showtime Rotisserie and Barbecue: "Set it and forget it!"

While Ron Popeil does not have a hand in Tektron, perhaps he should. Perhaps that's what this industry needs. A good, clean and fun kick in the pants with an oversized shoe. Some carry. Some showbiz. Some pizzazz.

### Tektron

Tektron has been around for over 15 years getting its start restoring and repairing antique radios. In Italy. Alas, my factory tour request has been stalled by someone in the 6moons international corporate travel division. Apparently since I've already visited the US Importer Robyatt Audio in showcase destination New Jersey, "I've got it covered". "Request denied" with that big red stamp. If you visit the Tektron website -- the next best thing to being there -- you'll see that Tektron is *still* involved in antique radio restoration and sales. Then add today's line of tube gear which has already been around for 10 years; the sale of new and NOS tubes; vintage HiFi components; and various parts including their own hand-wound transformers. Tektron also has a hand in a line of tube-friendly loudspeakers produced by Max Research, also of Italy. The designer behind Tektron is Attilio Caccamo who, together with a partner, does all assembly and testing of Tektron's own line of hand-wired amplifiers and preamps.



I can recall coming across the Tektron website some years ago in one of those meandering late-night web tours. And I thought, "huh? An amp that will play 2A3s, 45s, 50s, 300Bs and VT-52s? *Must* be compromised. Must be some sort of Popeil-esque kitch pitch. I suppose it slices and dices too." Self-righteous smirk. Off to greener pastures. Well, here I sit in NJ now with the Tektron tube-O-matics - the stereo amp, preamp and integrated. The only ones not present in the full lineup are the monos. And I can tell you, there's no compromise in the sound coming out of these Italian wonders.

But first things first. How do they *do* it? How do they allow for all these tubes with their different operating points to be used in the same amp? Through the same transformers? The short story is that the Tektron amp and integrated employ a 3-way switch that changes the filament voltage of the output transformers to match the operating points of the various tubes. Position A is 2.5V, B is 5V and C is 7.5V. You will see that this is not a cheap pot. It stands up to wear. On the basic operational side, this switch is located next to the power transformer to dial in the proper setting for the tubes in use. You should do this while the amp is powered off. A is for 2A3s and 45s. B is for 300Bs and the Sophia SET Princess. C is for cauliflower. No wait, C is for "others" like the 50s and VT-52s. There are two hum pots located behind the output tubes (and yes, I did feel the glow twiddling with them but with a little care, you can adjust without touching the tubes). Around back of the TK2A3/50S, there are some nice brass binding posts and the IEC and fuse. Up front sits the power switch, a blue LED status indicator and the Tektron logo on a brass plate. Rectifiers submitted were NOS National and Majestic 80s, driver tubes NOS 6SN7s.

The chassis of the review amp and preamp were done up in matching light oak with copper top plates, all bell caps and screw heads matte black. Overall, very nice understated designs. Corners are rounded over smoothly and the overall fit'n'finish speaks of quality. The amp measures 16 1/2" W x 11" D x 7" H to the top of the trannies and weighs 30 lbs. The preamp is on the smaller side, 12 1/2" W x 9" D x 6" H. The preamp uses a pair of 6J5s and a GZ32 rectifier. The review sample came with a pair of NOS CV-1932s.



The integrated matches the amp in size but as submitted, carried a different finish - Olive wood with burnished copper. And to my eyes, she's the looker of the bunch. Eh, bella. The preamp and integrated use a similar input selector marked A, B and C. So we have three inputs and two outputs, one variable, one fixed. These are single-ended so you'll only find RCAs around the back. The input selector and volume, of the dual-mono variety, are plain black knobs in keeping with the black/wood/copper scheme. Again we have a blue status LED and Tektron brass logo on the fascia of the integrated amp and the same binding posts as used on the amp around back.

### **Robyatt Audio**

Robin Wyatt is the US Importer for Tektron. I asked Robin how this came about. "They were selling an amp on eBay. I bought it, loved it and asked if I could be their US agent." End of story. Robin Wyatt is known -- infamous even -- for hot swapping tubes during shows. Jim Boshia from HE2004: "And apart from the downright fun, boardwalk-style showmanship..." And Paul Candy: "Robin W. terrified not a few visitors when he swapped out various output tubes on the Tektron 2A3/50SI integrated while the amp was under signal!" Showmanship aside, Robin Wyatt has an extensive collection of NOS tubes and audio gear plus an impressive knack for system building that I've experienced first-hand.

### **La Dolce Vita**

Ciao. Have you been to Italy? Hung out on a piazza of some hill town that hasn't changed much in a few hundred years? Had some cellar-chilled, label-less red wine turn your tongue black in an outdoor restaurant under the stars of Umbria after spending the day visiting the frescoes of Fra Angelico in the convent of San Marco? "Don't sweat the details" may be an appropriate T-shirt phrase to fit a certain personality style. For those of you who are already sweating over the various operating points, running a 2A3 at 2.5V or heaven forbid a 45, you've built up antibodies that I'm not even going to try to temper. Have it your way. Live and let live. For those of you with a triode stash or a nearly unquenchable thirst for variety, Tektron may have your salve. Or salvation.



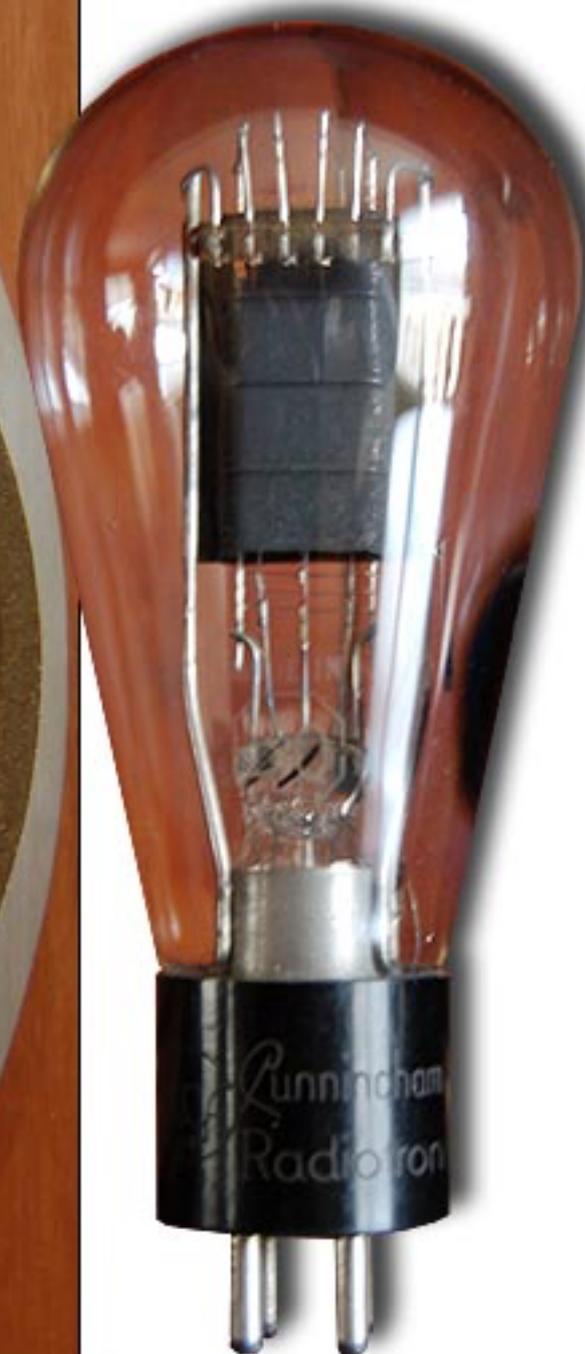
I had the opportunity to try the following Full Music tubes generously provided by Sean Ta at [AYDN](#): mesh-plate 2A3s, 45s, 300Bs and 50s. Robin Wyatt sent over NOS Cunningham balloon CX-345s, Cunningham ST-50s, Cunningham balloon 50s, Sophia 300B 2.5Vs (used on position A) and Sophia SET Princess tubes (position B). I also gave my EML

solid-plate 45s a spin along with some NOS RCA balloon 345s and Sovtek 2A3s.

Please cut and paste all this valve info into the integrated amp as well. I tried the same bevy (or is it gaggle?) of tubes in the integrated as I did in the amp. With one big *but*. The integrated uses a 6SN7 driver as opposed to the 6SL7s in the separate preamp. Stay tuned for listening impressions but anyone who keeps tabs on these things knows I have a soft spot for the 6SN7. The review integrated came with a pair of NOS CV-181s.

Power output will vary in both amps depending on your tube choice, from a low 1.8W with 45s to 5.5W with 300Bs. You may be wondering if our site's customary 3-month review turnaround policy was enough to really get to all these different tubes in two different amplifiers. After all, switching between a 45, 50 and 300B is really like hearing 3 different machines. How can I be sure which tube is best without clocking far more time? To get to the heart of the matter, you *don't* have to decide if you own a Tektron. You can wallow. You can revel in uncertainty. Swap and switch 'til the cows come home. But you already knew that. I just thought I'd bring it up again. It's tektronically worth repeating.

Before digging into the various sounds from Mr. tube-O-matic, I'll touch on what *doesn't* change in the TK2A3/50S and S-I. With the exception of the Full Music 50s, I was able to eliminate hum to barley audible by simply adjusting those pots. This includes the NOS 50s so I have to assume there was an issue with this particular pair of Full Musics. Operating the amps and dealing with the ABCs was no problem and the A-is-for-apple approach worked fine for me. I admit I wrote down "Sophia SET Princess = B" because it didn't occur to me until writing that I simply could have said "B is for Beauty". We all know princesses are beautiful. On the preamp and integrated front, I found the dual-mono volume control useful since my listening room does not have equal corners behind the speakers. On the left side, there's a 1-ft wall, then an opening. The other side is all wall so having the ability to slightly vary the volume balance was welcome.



It's also worth noting that I played the Tektrons through my Cain & Cain Abbys and a review pair of Lamhorns. Without getting to giving things away, I find the >100dB Lamhorns to be extremely revealing and nearly surgical in their precision and ability to flag any flack coming downstream at 'em. The Tektrons also went head-to-head with a slew of amps (I suppose I've become an amp collector) including the Fi 45; a newly acquired Fi 421A (an early AM Audiogon find - still stunned at that bit of luck); the Fi X; the EL 84-based SAC Thailand Minute; a loaner pair of parallel 2A3 monoblocks; and a loaner EL34 P/P integrated. I just thought I should mention how much fun this really is, not to gloat but to counter all the pain and suffering you can read about on the pages of posts on the Audio Asylum related to listening to music on a HiFi. I don't know about you but I've had my fill of all the angst and anger associated with this hobby, all the infighting of opinions masquerading as fact. My toy train is better than yours. If you measure that thing too much, you'll go blind.

Captain Obvious sez, the sound of the Tektron changes depending on the tube you use. When approaching this review, I had a bit of dilemma. After all, I couldn't very well compare the tube-O-matics directly to each competitor. I don't own a dedicated 300B amp or a 50, VT-52 amp or anything that can even play the Sophia SET Princess tube. So let me dispense with the direct comparisons early on and say the Tektron -- both the amp/pre combo and the integrated -- are not as resolving nor ultimately as musical as the Fi 45 when using 45s (and the Fi of course is optimized for only the 45 so that makes sense). I still feel that the 45 is one of the best all-around tubes - rich (and I mean rich like dark chocolate), detailed with strong yet controlled bass and extended airy highs. And to keep things straight, I'll talk about the Tektron amp/pre separates first as we enter the listening portion of our program.



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Trafomatic Audio



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AUDIO REVIEWS



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A new CD that's spending way too much time in my player is *Tokyo by Guitar* [monitor 51]. Consisting of sampled Japanese string instruments like the koto and pipa and with vocals by Ayako Akashiba, this minimalist melodic beat-trippy music has me using the repeat button more than ever. And this disk paints its beautiful landscape with few elements. Think delicate. While the NOS 45s in the Tektron separates made for a wonderfully soft presentation, with the Cain & Cain Abbys the Sophia SET Princess tubes ultimately won me over as the best mix of rich midrange, a nice tight grip on the beat and sparkling notes from the pipa and koto while throwing an airy and relaxed presentation. The Princess tubes were actually the surprise favorite of the valve bunch on the separates as they seem to gather the most favorable characteristics from all the other triodes to deliver a near best-of-all-worlds presentation. For example, my least favorite of the bunch, a 300B, has a midrange that brings home the lush life. The Princess manages to deliver nearly identical richness while bringing along a tight-fisted control of the bass like a 2A3 and the sparkle and delicacy of a 45. Nice tube, that Princess. Even through the ultra-revealing Lamhorns, not a pea prick was to be found.

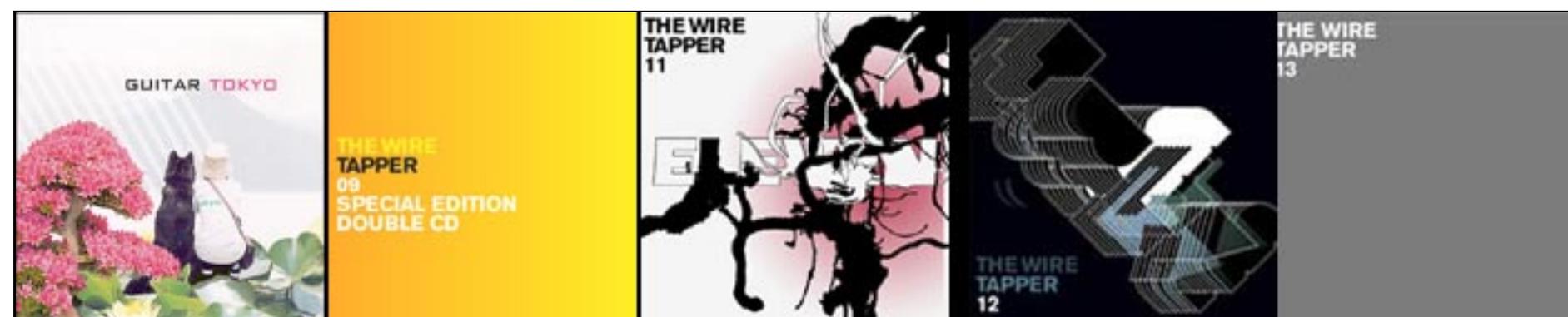


On the subject of the Lamhorns and for large-scale classical music, the NOS ST-50s were glorious. Think big physical sound with more drive and grab-you-by-the-collar physicality than I'm accustomed to. Peer in too close and you may get slapped back a few paces. On vinyl and classic jazz however, the 45 still had me in the grip of the

beat the mostest. I was surprised to find a preference for the NOS Cunninghams on the Lamhorns, silky and dreamy. But as with the Abbys, the Princess ultimately won me over as the everyday tube of choice which excelled on raucous fair as well.

One holiday gift I gave myself last year was a subscription to *The Wire* magazine (Adventures in Modern Music). Each issue arrives with a sampler CD and these CDs are as tremendous as is the magazine. For an exploration of alternative music, I highly recommend picking up an issue. And while not inexpensive, I'd also recommend going for the subscription if you have any interest in exploring music off the beaten path. These compilations are varied and include electronica,

world beat, avant rock, dub, hiphop, contemporary jazz and modern composition (classical). And if I wanted to pick one tube to serve them all up, the Princess is the pick of this litter. Another tube surprise was the 2.5V Sophia 300B. It exhibited the richness of a traditional 300B with a bit more refinement. This tube also makes for a nice option in the Fi X since it operates on the same voltage as a 2A3.



### **But wait, there's more!**

The first big surprise of a few to follow was that I preferred the TK2A3/50S-I integrated over the separates. There's a slightly softer, fuller and rounder presentation with the integrated that sounds more natural to my ears. Notes take longer to decay and there's a wonderful float to musical images that makes for captivating events. By contrast, the Tektron separates are comparatively on the analytical side, cutting cleaner lines but also feeling a bit flat by comparison. My EML solid-plate 45s were a bit too hot in the Tektrons and overly analytical for my tastes especially on the Abbys. But as one moves to the integrated, the sound rounds.

I thought about dragging this out for effect but what the hell - the NOS balloon Cunningham 50s in the Tektron integrated made for some of the sweetest music I've yet heard on the Abbys - comfortable and warm like your bed after a cold late-night walk in the snow. If we can forget about the julienne fries for a minute and take the Tektron integrated delivered with a pair of Cunningham balloon 50s as the end and climax of the story, you'd have yourself one musically satisfying combination with the Abbys. This sound is less detailed than any other tube in this stable yet I'd describe it as ultimately more musical - a velvet curtain of sound, a cohesive whole. Mississippi John Hurt and his guitar are open for business right there with you and as close as you care to get.

But -- and there's always a few butts around -- keep in mind the cost of these wonderful tubes as approaching \$700/pair. If you can find them. And then they're delicate. Finicky. They have to be pampered and don't like to be played hard. I've also been told they're gassy but seeing as the pair I had on loan was over 70 years old, who can blame 'em? Think of the 50s as you would of your granny (if you had the kind of granny that smelled sweet and treated you sweeter). Those CV-181s drivers can run \$200 apiece. Add in the \$60 rectifier, an NOS RCA globe 80 and we've got roughly \$1,200 in tubes gracing our tube-O-matic. Now you may cry foul but I think it's worth noting that the Tektron integrated will give you back what you plug into its sockets, right up to some cream-of-the-crop classy old glass.



So let's stick a new pair of tubes in the integrated tube-O-matic and see what we get - a tube you can easily buy whenever you want. First up on that front was the Sophia 300B at 2.5V. Compared to the NOS 50s, a bit of that magical sweet mist was removed. In its stead, I got more bloom in the mids and boom in the bass. And I don't mean flabby or overly emphasized bass at the expense of all else. There was more separation and detail like a 45 but unlike a 45, the sparkle was toned down a notch in favor of that rich midrange. So it was 300B-ish although the actual 300Bs on hand tipped the mids even more for that moist garden sound. The Full Music 300Bs give you steamy. I'm just not a huge fan - through a glass darkly in order to make things bigger and fatter and lush. It's simply too much of a good thing.



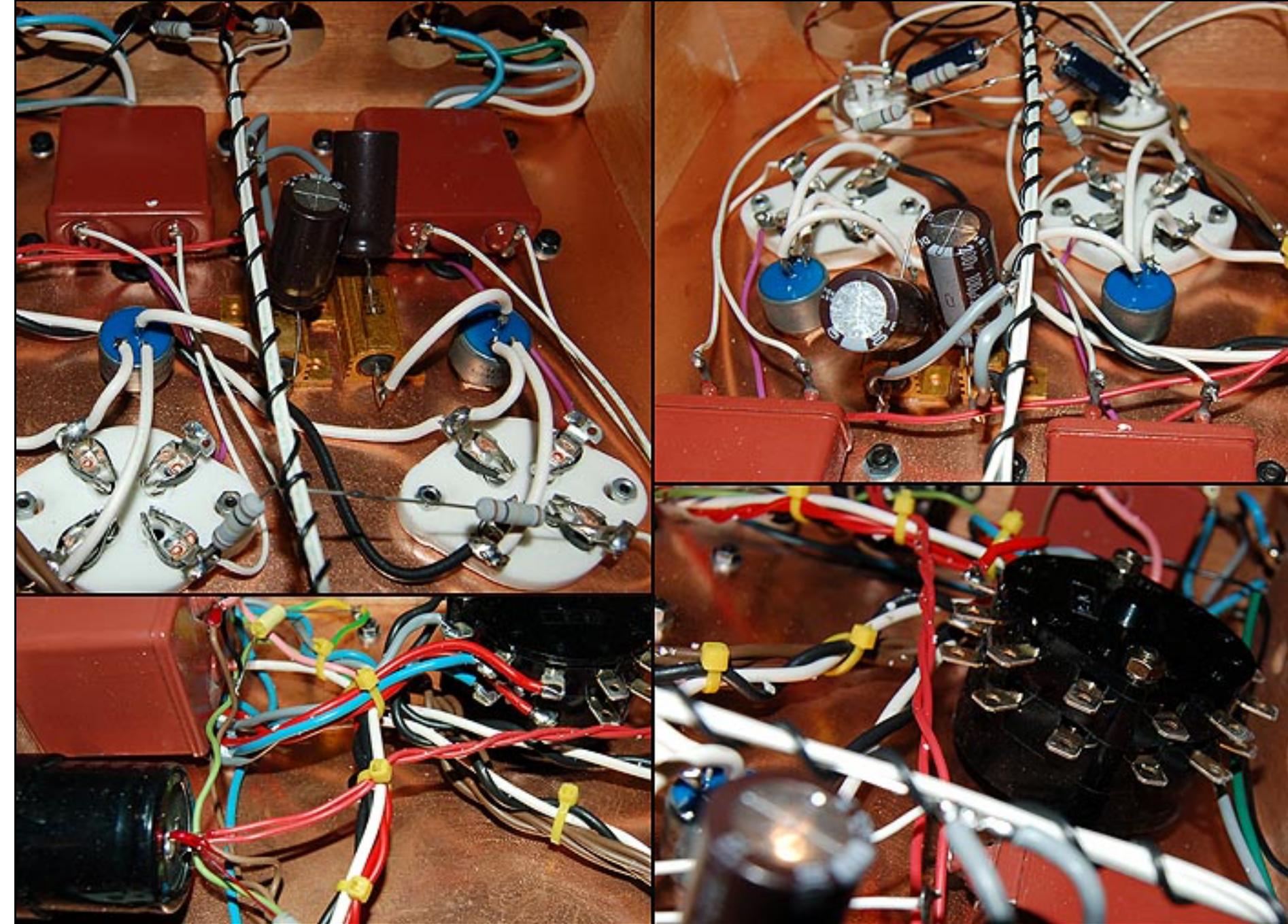
The Sophia SET Princess was up next and as the winning all-'rounder in the separates, I was curious to hear if the 6SN7/CV-181s-endowed integrated (the latter isn't a direct replacement for the 6SN7 btw) would add a tad more air to the drive and become the clear favorite for sensible everyday use. Price on a SET Princess pair runs from \$400-\$600 (depending mainly on length of warranty). Sophia describes the SET Princess as a 205D/300B hybrid, with three times the plate size of a normal 205D, operating at 5V and putting out 5-6 watts. This is not a drop-in replacement for a 300B or any other tube and I'm not aware of another production amp that can play it without modification. This Princess got power. And drive. And detail. Once again, she was able to bully the Abbys into sounding more muscular than I'm used to. So I'll stick with the previous observations with the separates: if you like your music raucous and rowdy, try a Princess. For something like the Doors' *Soft Parade* on vinyl, she's a match made in Rock'n'Roll heaven. And you know they have one helluva band.

I know I've neglected the Tektron preamp. It's by far flashier mates stole the limelight. That's not to suggest it's an underachiever. As a matter of fact, the Tektron preamp was a very capable performer. But for my Tektron take, I've found my favorite - and that happens to already come with a built-in preamp. Also absent was a VT-52 since I couldn't get my hands on a review pair.

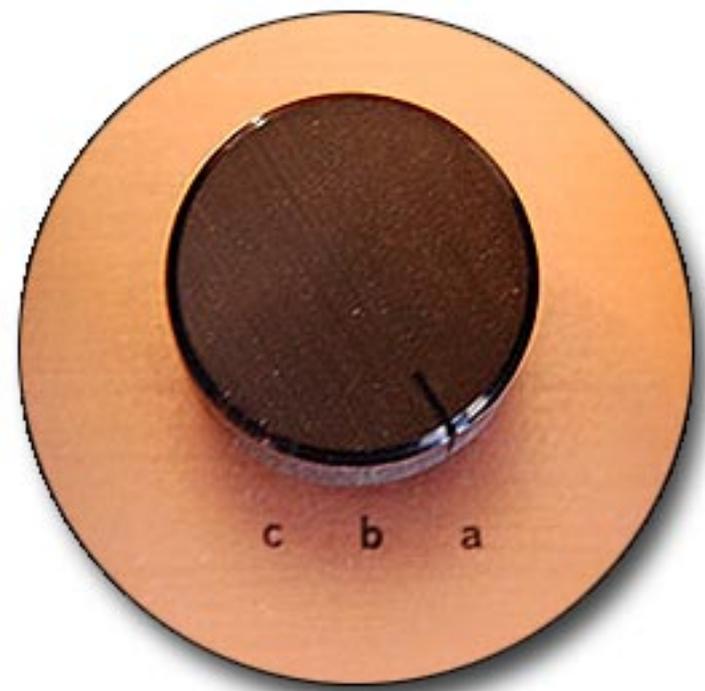


**Get it and forget it**

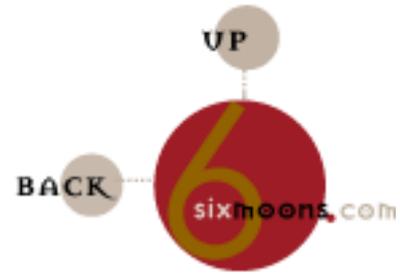
If you haven't noticed, I spent a lot of time listening to tubes and music, not amplifiers. Maybe that's the most important thing I can say about the Tektron gear. Its sonic signature is the aural equivalent of the chameleon. It adapts to the tube. Is the Tektron the best 45 amp I've ever heard? Well no, the Fi 45 bests it in overall musicality and I have to think that the Fi's direct-coupled simplicity is part of the reason. But anyone seriously considering a Tektron isn't buying it to play a 45. The Tektron customer is a spice-o'-life kinda guy, with variety something to be explored whenever the mood strikes. If you're a Tektron owner with an itch, you just power off, out with the old, set the switch, in with the new and you're rolling. Tube swappers and sound swingers may have found their perfect mate. Seven-year itchers can stay home and be faithful. Detail and delicacy? Try a 45. Feeling bombastic? Go Princess. Tough day at the office? Relax to a warm 300B. More power, less power, anything in-between? You Tektron types know who you are. The Tektron is a lifestyle amp. Why fret, have it all.



But what if we forget about that ABC switch for a minute? The integrated Tektron TK2A3/50S-I with the Cunningham balloon 50s was magical. How much magical? Only my Fi 45 and 421A have matched it on the Abbys. And for certain types of music -- small and intimate -- I'd actually give the nod to the 50s. The Lamhorns proved to be more demanding and less forgiving. But once again in the Tektron camp, I'd opt for the integrated as the partner of choice. For the Abbys and new production tubes, I like the Sophias, either the SET Princess or the 2.5V 300B. Then again, the Full Music 50s were very intriguing. Their mesh 45s and 300Bs all contained qualities I could see sampling over time. And that's really the Popeil point to drive home. You don't have to settle. You don't have to choose. The Tektrons are magnanimous. These are amplifiers for the amplifier collector who only wants one amplifier.



If you've been on the fence about Tektron because you thought "that's too good to be true, sounds like an infomercial for TA - tuboholics anonymous"... well, in a manner of speaking, it is. For anyone with a stash of NOS triodes of the 45, 50, 2A3, 300B and VT-52 variety and nowhere to plug 'em all in, Tektron has two sockets with all those names on it. It's ready to roll. While it may not be the very best for any one particular tube type, you'll just have to be able to live with the fact that you can spend your time trying to find that perfect tube for you. These are well-built pieces with quality parts wrapped in handsome packages. And they sound about as good and varied as your tube stash will bear. The hand-wired design also lends itself to some tweaking if you're so inclined. But which to pick, the separates or integrated? To my mind, the integrated TK2A3/50S-I is the no-brainer choice of the bunch. My rationale here is that if you're willing to accept that you're not optimized for a specific tube but rather relish the ability to swing, you'll want the no-fuss convenience of the integrated. Besides, it sounds better. And with the money you save, you can start or continue to build your triode tribe collection to match any and every sonic mood you find yourself in. And boy does it catch fish.



Michael Lavorgna

Manufacturer's [website](#)  
US importer's [website](#)

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