

EQUIPMENT REPORT



Tasty Tubes from Manley Labs

Manley Labs Shrimp Preamplifier

Sue Kraft

Stop by the Manley Labs Web site and you'll see why meeting EveAnna Manley in the flesh at CES proved to be one of the highlights of the Vegas show for me that year. While EveAnna's effervescent personality was a welcome change from the endless onslaught of three-piece leisure suits, it was her sense of humor that I enjoyed the most. Never mind the absolutely gorgeous Manley 300B Neo-Classic tube amps cranking the tastiest of tunes tethered to a pair of Israel Blume's Coincident Total Eclipse speakers. I'm willing to concede there may have been a few better, albeit more expensive systems to be heard that year, but none that intrigued me quite as much at a price someone with not-so-deep pockets could actually afford.

I was impressed enough to pony up the dough for the Coincident Totals which I eventually replaced with my current Coincident Supers. As for the Manley gear, procrastination reigned and it wasn't until recently that I mustered the nerve to phone EveAnna on the chance she might be open to a review. She graciously agreed, and it wasn't long before Manley's entry-level all-tube linestage preamplifier "The Shrimp" came swimming my way.

Although I'm guessing (for obvious reasons) not many guys would want to be called a shrimp, at Manley Labs being shrimp-like is a good thing, as it means a smaller, less painful price. The Manley Shrimp is anything but small, however, when it comes to aesthetics, parts- and build-quality, and what matters most, great sound. This offering from the land of the sea urchins is a serious contender in the sub-\$2k price range, and I'm betting could compete (and, in fact, did) without embarrassment against preamps costing two-to-three times as much.

Of course, you'll have to make a few minor sacrifices. No

optional remote means unless you have a trained dog, you'll be forced to put down the brewski and turn down the volume yourself when the police come knocking at two in the morning because you're disturbing the neighbors. And no matter how hard you look, you won't find a phonostage, either. But before you start whining that you're getting too old to peel yourself out of that favorite listening chair, pop the top on this retro-inspired gem and take a look inside where you'll find generous energy storage in the high voltage power supply and monstrous 30uF polypropylene output coupling capacitors as well as classy NOBLE balance and level-control pots, all of which may have you thinking that you needed a bit of exercise anyway. And while you're at it, try doing without the CD remote for a few days. You'll be amazed at how much music you've been missing.

The Shrimp's single-ended topology is a design choice rather than a cost-savings measure, as Manley feels that converting the signal to balanced via something like ICs or transformers would complicate the Shrimp's minimalist non-inverting signal path. Tubes include a pair of 12AT7WAs on the input side and 7044s on the output end. Also of special note, a White Follower output stage is used. This circuit has been a Manley favorite for years, mainly due to its inherently low (50 ohm) output impedance. The manufacturer says that under normal conditions the typical user will never come close to reaching the limits of this output stage. During my auditioning, at least with the various tube and solid-state gear I had on hand, running out of volume control range (or gain) was never a problem.

I have to give Manley props for including a very detailed, informative, and entertaining owner's manual, even though all the functions of this preamp would be child's play without any

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SPECS & PRICING

Tube complement: Two 12AT7WA, two 7044
Inputs/outputs: Five line-level RCA inputs, two sets RCA main outs, one record out
Dimensions: 19" x 11" x 3.5"
Shipping weight: 15 lbs.
Price: \$1880

MANLEY LABORATORIES, INC.
13880 Magnolia Avenue
Chino, CA 91710
(909) 627-4256
manleylabs.com
emanley@manleylabs.com

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Meridian 808 & G08 CD players; Meridian G02 controller, Atma-Sphere MP-3

preamp, BAT 3ix preamp, Sonic Euphoria passive preamp; Levinson 436 amps, Meridian G57 amp, BAT VK-55 amp, Atma-Sphere Novacron amps, Atma-Sphere M60 amps; B&W 800D & 704 speakers, VS VR4jr speakers, Coincident Super Eclipse speakers; various Harmonic Technology, Synergistic Research, Audio Magic, Paul Speltz, Elrod, Cardas, JPS, Tributaries, Bright Star Audio, and Symposium cables & accessories; Chang Lightspeed Encounter & CLS 705 powerline filter; Echo Busters & ACS room treatment

instructions at all. The chassis is nicely finished with a screen cover for ventilation. (You may have to look twice to notice the tubes, as they are mounted sideways rather than upright.) There are five single-ended line-level inputs and two sets of main outs on the rear panel, while the front panel includes the usual fare, such as input selector, volume and balance controls, a mute button, and an on/off switch. The unusually large size of the volume control knob may take you by surprise when you first open the box, but it sure is easy to find in the dark.

Although I usually run my main system balanced, at least when there's a choice, switching to single-ended cabling to accommodate the Manley preamp didn't present any particular issues with line noise or other pesky gremlins. My first impression of the Shrimp was of an exceptionally quiet component. This "little" entry-level performer stepped right up to the plate with remarkable three-dimensionality, along with a seemingly boundary-less soundstage rivaling the best I've heard from my current reference gear, which includes such stand-outs as the Meridian 808, Levinson 436 monoblocks, and B&W 800D speakers. As hi-fi components go, those are some mighty big fish to swim with.

Taking full advantage of the unusual clarity and wide-open spaces of this affordable preamp, images were nicely focused with walk-through separation of instruments. There was no lack of detail here, but I did find the Atma-Sphere MP-3 preamplifier (the component I replaced with the Manley) offered a bit more

refinement, with greater finesse and delicacy on the top end. At the other end of the scale, however, the Manley had more weight on the bottom with a fuller upper-bass region, as well. This gave the perception of a better overall top-to-bottom balance than the MP-3.

The Manley is also a very lively and “fast” preamp with plenty of spirit and drive. Its overall sonic character does lean to the warmer, richer side of neutral giving it a touch of what I would call “old-fashioned” tube sound. But just a touch, as I never found the added richness or splash of color to be overdone. As I mentioned above, images are well defined—no sloppiness, overlapping or bloat here—and easily discernable until the last vapor trail of decay dissolves into space. The superb front-to-back depth of the soundstage allows a drummer’s delicate brush stroke to appear out of nowhere and radiate equally in all directions. I must give at least partial credit for the wholeness of images to the B&W 800D. Those speakers are truly a reviewer’s dream when it comes to revealing the sonic truth, and I’d say the Manley Shrimp had little to hide.

Least anyone think you need to spend the price of a house on associated gear to make the Shrimp happy, this is not the case at all. I also spent a fair amount of time with a number of more affordable tube amps along with my Coincident Super Eclipse speakers. The results were similar in nature, but perhaps on a smaller scale. The

Manley still impressed as an extremely clean and quiet preamp, with a very lively and engaging persona as well as delightfully warm, rich tonal colors. The soundstage was still remarkably three-dimensional, the most notable difference being in the somewhat diminished separation of instruments and wholeness of images. Not that I was hearing anything particularly negative; virtues were just not as pronounced as they were in the main system. But then that can hardly be blamed on the Shrimp, can it?

Thus, the reviewer’s conundrum, I suppose. You can only listen to systems, not isolated components, leaving gear under review at the mercy of the associated equipment. (The variables can make your head spin at times.) If a reviewer has done his/her job, you can usually get a pretty good handle on the sonic attributes (both good and bad) a particular piece has contributed to the overall character of the system. In the case of the Manley Shrimp, I was most impressed by the potential of this entry-level all-tube linestage. Although it wasn’t perfect—it could have used a dash more finesse on top—I couldn’t stop grinning when I plugged this spunky little sea creature into the main system and heard how well it performed alongside equipment retailing for at least ten times as much. There’s nothing I enjoy more than dispelling the notion that you have to spend the gross national product of a Third World country to get good sound. Thanks EveAnna for putting a smile back on my face. You’re a gas! **TAS**

MANUFACTURER COMMENTS

Manley Shrimp Preamp

Thanks to Sue for the many kind words! It seems quite evident that she has found the foremost feature packed into this little preamp’s housing: the unit’s attractive and vivacious sonic personality.

At Manley Labs, we’re lucky to be immersed in tube gear on a daily basis and are familiar with the pleasurable sonic attributes that better tube circuits can provide.

While it can be a real challenge to stringently minimize the signal path and keep the parts count low, the tubes themselves help out a lot by virtue of their inherent linearity, high bandwidth, low noise floor, and prodigious dynamic range. The advantages of using tubes are pressed to full

advantage in the Shrimp: The circuit is elegant and simple, thus eschewing the need for unnecessary circuitry to mitigate or conceal unwanted sonic artifacts. Born right and proudly manufactured in the USA.

Extraordinary sound is always our goal, at any cost—even such a low price—along with making our preamp controls easy to find in the dark.

Thank you for sharing our passion.

EveAnna Manley, President
Mitch Margolis, Designer
Manley Laboratories, Inc.
Chino, California