“Well you know it’s gonna be alright.”
—John Lennon

“It’s alright.”
—Chris Stamey

“It’s alright it’s alright it’s alright it’s alright...”
—Robert Plant

You know how it goes in storybook towns: Now and then some wicked pixie comes along and casts a spell on everybody. Then for the next umpteen years they all have to do her bidding. Not until the spell is broken and the pixie sent packing can the people get on with their lives, though when that happens, things start to look up. Flowers bloom, birdies sing, and the clouds part from the sky. The market square fills up and everyone gets back to business. Men and women flirt, marry, and raise families. Sounds of laughter, music (which is where we come in), and dancing fill the streets.

The miserable hamlet of hi-fi has had its share of bad fairies—in our case, mostly insecure guys who want everyone to think they’re the sole arbiters of the truth, whether said truth comes from a battery of test equipment or from the number of times they have wedged themselves into the most expensive seats at Carnegie. But lately, they have all decided to haunt the movie house instead. A lucky break.

I felt a change in the air a little over a year ago—and to celebrate, I bought another amplifier. Not a “new” amplifier: For one thing, I bought it used, and for another, it wasn’t meant to replace something else. I had simply always liked the way the Audio Note P2SE plays music, so when the opportunity presented itself, I got one of my own. It sounds different from my other amp, and to this day I play it whenever the mood strikes.

Then I bought another amp: Last year I decided to splurge, and I ordered one of Don Garber’s Fi amplifiers (a stereo 2A3). It just arrived a few days ago, and it’s beautiful in every way—and the Fi sounds nothing at all like my other two amps. So there.

Does this mean I think all amplifiers are good? No. Amps that get the notes and beats right, and which consequently make the listener feel emotionally engaged by the music, are good, and those which do not are not. Heck, I can put a finer point on it than that: Even within the context of amplifiers that play music, not all of them are to my taste (and so it stands to reason that they won’t all be to your taste, either).

That’s right: taste, not truth. Beyond a certain point, no one can tell you what the truth is, because in our hobby of different sounding auditoriums, different sounding seats, different sounding instruments, different sounding microphones, and even different sounding times of day, the truth is unknowable. And life is too short to sweat it. As a pre-freebasing Ricky Nelson once suggested: You’ve just got to please yourself.

Why not start by buying a new cable, Mister Moneybags? Read some reviews, read some manufacturers’ poop sheets, then just take a chance and buy one you can afford. They all sound a little bit different, and maybe you’ll like the new one better on certain discs or days of the week or whatever. Definitely buy another phono cartridge, too. You need a bunch of those.

Then go buy a new amp. It’s alright, really. It’s alright to own and enjoy more than one amp.

As a public service, in the interest of nudging you along toward this brave new world of hi-fi, I have taken it upon myself to listen to three fairly new amps and to tell you what I think of them. They’re all on the expensive side, but not obscenely so, and in any event please don’t crab at me about that.

I used all three amps in my basic system:

Choose one of three.
Small survey by Art Dudley

Reprinted from Listener Magazine July/August 2000
Linn LP12/Naim Aro/Lyra Lydian record player with Naim Armageddon power supply; Audio Note AN-S2 moving-coil transformer; Naim CD3 CD player; Fi preamplifier; and both Lowther PM2/Medallion and Spendor SP1/2 loudspeakers, the latter on Sound Anchor stands. All the amps were installed on a Mana Reference Table, which I think makes them sound better. None of the amps was used with aftermarket AC power cords, because—meaning no offense to anyone—I have tried about five of these things now and I have yet to hear one that makes the slightest bit of difference in the way an amplifier or anything else performs. Maybe it’s just me.


Gordon Rankin of Wavelength knows how to get good reviews: This time he started by naming an amp after an Alfa Romeo. That always works around here.

This is the least expensive of what Gordon refers to as his “signature series” amplifiers, a range which goes all the way up to his $20,000-a-pair monoblocks, the Wavelength Napoleons. But the Duetto is a single-chassis stereo amp—and it’s single-ended, too, having but one 300B output tube per side.

The Duetto also has just one AC transformer and one rectifier tube (a 5AR4), but from there this is virtually a pair of mono amps sharing a single platform—starting with separate power supply chokes for the left and right channels. Said power supply also contains a whopping ten Black Gate capacitors ($$$!), and its output tube filament supply in particular is huskier than average, being rectified, regulated, and rugged enough to satisfy the most current-hungry heaters.

The ever-popular 6SL7 does the voltage gain honors, and each 300B operates in self-bias mode. The Duetto is supplied with a matched pair of Western Electric output tubes as standard, and the standard 5AR4 and 6SL7s are high-quality, hand-selected NOS tubes. For my own edification—as much as for the fun of it—Gordon also loaned me a few substitute tubes, of varying (mostly much older) vintage and pedigree. Did you know how much the choice of a rectifier tube can influence your music? Have you experienced the differences—in pacing, in tonal complexity, in background silences—between different makes and vintages of driver tubes? If not, get out there and start having fun! If you’ve got the bucks, go on the internet and buy a few different vintage tubes and see which ones you like best. If not, get in the car with your loved one and do the lawn sale thing: Here in upstate New York, you can find at least one cheap Bucket O’ Tubes in every town.

While the Duetto’s musical performance was and is consistently superb right out of the box, the newly built amp’s sound continues to change over time: It was at least three or four weeks before this amp decided to settle in and pitch camp somewhere. The changes were mostly in the form of the sound “opening up”—getting bigger and more extended in the direction of what our English friends so charmingly call “the trebles” (this from a nation of people given to naming their houses—in which case I think I’ll call our next place “The Mids”). Gains in bass detail and quickness were also evident throughout this time. All of these things, incidentally, are things that I have heard with other amps whose builders were generous with the Black Gates—my own Audio Note Kit One in particular.

Musically, the Duetto is as versatile as it is effective. If it were this good at playing just one kind of record—jazz, classical, rock, mono, stereo, or whatever—I would still be impressed. Thing is, the Duetto is a great
all- arounder. Nothing trips it up, and during its time in my house it took a liking to every record I played. It was like a member of the family.

On Big Star’s “Mod Lang” (from Radio City) the Duetto sounds even smoother, more natural, and less mechanical than the Kit One—which I had never thought needed help in those regards. The drum beats are explosive, and every single picked electric guitar note brings me closer to embracing the whole idea of “bloom” in sound reproduction. And there’s no lack of pacing or sheer rocking involvement here: It makes jumping-in-your-seat music, assuming you can stay seated at all.

In addition to playing music so nicely, the Wavelength Duetto is a sonic treat. It has all the positive attributes I associate with single-ended 300Bs: a silky and slightly warmish midrange, gobs of natural texture, a top end that’s ever so slightly rolled off and puffy, and a way with stereo imaging that makes voices and instruments sound whole and “present” without seeming carved into space. It has 300B bass, too (noticeably if slightly thick-tongued and slow compared to other kinds of amps), but then it’s also the best I’ve heard a 300B do in this regard. If you’ll forgive an audiophile-ism: From 100Hz down, this sounds as close to a 2A3 as I’ve heard another tube come—and that’s a compliment.

I’ll tell you what: You don’t have a complete idea of what a low-power, single-ended amp can really do until you hear this. If natural warmth, rhythmic zing, and gobs of non-mechanical detail sound like mutually exclusive things, then you obviously haven’t heard Doc Watson’s “Tom Dooley” through a Wavelength Duetto. The Duetto somehow keeps the harmonica and the complex, frenetic picking separated out from one another. Every note stands out and rings realistically—yet nonetheless works as part of the music’s overall, ineffable flow. This amp sings and dances.

Spatially, the Duetto is a little more laid back/pushed back than most SE amps I’m used to. Both my Audio Notes are a lot more forward sounding, especially right at the speakers. I don’t know if that means anything or not.

Musically, by comparison, the AN is a little less controlled in the way it manages jangle and clatter. It is no less joyous, but the Duetto goes about its business in a less noisy manner. It is cleaner and more precise.

Incidentally, the Wavelength Duetto is beautifully built. It’s the only amp in this mini-survey that’s hand-wired, point to point, and as much attention seems to have been given to circuit layout as to circuit design—or for that matter to the selection of parts: (Whenever I see entirely different kinds of capacitors or resistors or whatever used in different circuit positions, I come away with the impression that, well, someone at least put some thought—and probably some listening—into this one.) It’s wild to think that there are amps in the Wavelength line that may be even better than this.

Hey, I thought the Kit One was a pretty great amp. And it still is. But when I heard how much more present and real the human voice sounds through the Duetto, I couldn’t help being a little bummed. The sound of the Duetto is unmistakably that of an amp with less crap between the listener on the one hand and the music on the other. And, no, the irony of uncovering a product this “universal” in an article intended to encourage people to loosen up and try collecting more than one amp isn’t lost on me. In any event, I very strongly encourage you to give this beautiful thing a listen.

Wavelength Duetto
Quality: ★★★★-3/4
Value: ☑️