

Review:

PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid Tube Integrated Amplifier

by Michael Lavorgna



My hifi underground, yours may be a different one, spoke with a unified voice about the PrimaLuna EVO 300—"You have to hear this."

No sooner had I received this message which resulted in an email to my contact at Upscale Audio Distribution followed, not long thereafter, by a heavy box entering the Barn by way of FedEx. One of our FedEx drivers is from Brazil where he worked as a DJ, something he still enjoys, before moving here some years ago so we usually have time for quick music-chat before he has to drive off in his poorly-maintained company vehicle with tires as slick as dog sled runners.

Herman van den Dungen is the main person behind PrimaLuna, who you may remember (I do) from his AH! Njoe Tjoeb CD player, c.1998. I remember Herman, and the AH! Njoe Tjoeb CD player, because I owned one, purchased from Upscale Audio way back in the day. This connection between Herman and



Upscale's Kevin Deal is still going strong and the two have worked together to bring the PrimaLuna line of electronics into the world and the US of A. Beyond being PrimaLuna's US Distributor, Kevin Deal was also consulted on the development of PrimaLuna's products.

The PrimaLuna line is comprised of a number of tube and hybrid integrated amps, preamps, power amps, and a tube DAC all manufactured in China with a very careful eye on quality and consistency, something Deal demanded before agreeing to become PrimaLuna's US Distributor. These products are the result of a number of additional engineers brought on for their specific experience and know-how.



Here's Upscale on the EVO 300 Hybrid Tube Integrated Amplifier basic topology:

The EVO 300 Hybrid uses the same preamp gain stage as the award-winning PrimaLuna EVO 400 Preamplifier, which was designed by Marcel Croese, former chief engineer, Goldmund Switzerland. That means all-tube and dual mono. The only thing we left out was tube rectification because it isn't appropriate for this application. It took two years of research and experimentation to perfectly pair it with the output circuit designed by [Floyd Design's] Jan de Groot who has designed all of PrimaLuna's MOSFET circuits, and was behind all the Sphinx Audio designs from 1995 to 2000.



As you can see, six 12AU7s (2x Input, 4x Driver) are used in the all-tube dual mono preamp stage, while cascading JFETs from Linear Systems and two complementary pairs of custom MOSFETs from Exicon comprise the solid-state output stage responsible for the EVO 300's 100 Watt per channel output (into 8 Ohms/160 Watts into 4). Premium parts abound inside including a pair of massive custom-wound potted toroidal transformers, TAKMAN resistors, Vishay diodes, Swiss-made, silver-plated, oxygen-free continuous crystal (OCC) copper wire with a Teflon dielectric in the point-to-point wired pre-amp section, premium quality sealed relays for input selection, and an ALPS Blue Velvet Potentiometer. I recommend a visit to the PrimaLuna website where you can read more and watch a video (definitely watch the video!) about why these choices matter.

Here's a favorite Kevin Deal quote from that video:

"Don't try to power your way to good sound. Do it by dropping the noise, and that takes parts and it takes engineering."

Drop the noise!



The EVO 300 offers 5 stereo RCA inputs, a stereo RCA Home Theater Bypass input, a single set of speaker binding posts, RCA Stereo/Mono Subwoofer out, Stereo RCA Tape Out, and a 1/4" Headphone jack mounted up front that is powered by the same internal amp as the speakers (look ma, no op-amps). There's also an optional belly-mounted MM phono stage, absent on the review sample (the case is there, the optional phono board isn't in it).



The EVO 300 Hybrid Tube Integrated Amplifier is built like a tank (for music) and is about as heavy, weighing a lift-with-your-legs 68.3 lbs. which feels much heavier today than it did in 1998. An curved removable tube cage is provided to keep those 12AU7s and you safe, while the front face comes in silver and black and sports two control knobs for input selection and volume and a 1/4" headphone jack.



In a bit of a twist, a pair of switches reside on either side of the EVO 300—the switch on the left side powers on/off the EVO 300, while the switch on the right is for setting the output for speakers or the headphone amp. If you suddenly and unexpectedly find no music coming out of your speakers, make sure you didn't inadvertently hit that switch to its "HP" position. Not that I did, mind you (wink). The included aluminum remote is nearly heavy enough to be tactical. Nice.

The PrimaLuna EVO 300 saw playtime with a number of loudspeakers including the Credo EV 1202 Ref. (more info), the over achieving Q Acoustics Concept 50 (review), and the DeVore Fidelity O/96. Digital music was streamed through the totaldac d1-tube DAC/Streamer (review) and the review EMM Labs NS1 (review) / EMM Labs DA2 V2 Reference Stereo DAC (more info) combo. All cabling was from AudioQuest with the exception of the proprietary EMM Optilink interface that runs between the NS1 and DA2.

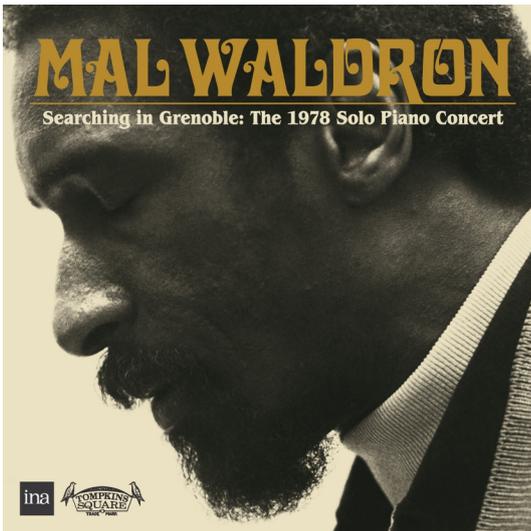
The sound of the PrimaLuna EVO 300 is characterized by a crystalline clarity and superb control with more than a touch of ripe timbral richness. There's also a more difficult to describe character that makes reproduced music feel as if it's being lit from within, not a halo effect but rather like fireflies where instruments, sounds, and voices radiate in room. These traits traveled with the EVO 300 regardless of the speakers being driven so I'm not going to get into specific combination details.



Suffice it to say that I had favorite things about each combination, from the \$2999/pair Concept 50s to the \$19,995/pair Credos. But to get to the nitty gritty heart of the EVO 300, I spent the majority of my listening time with it driving the DeVore O/96 because I know these speakers better than the others, which allows me a deeper dive into the sonic workings of the PrimLuna.



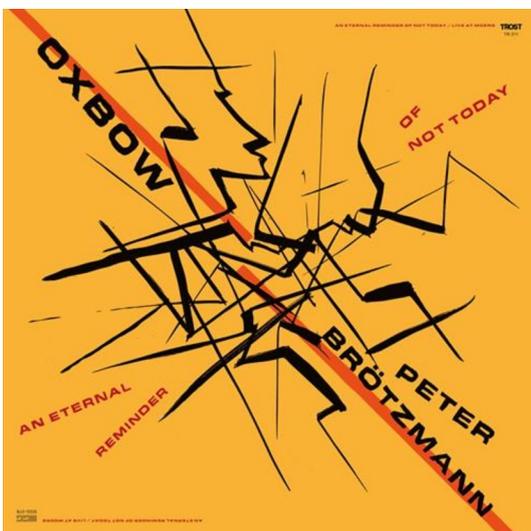
Mabe Fratti's latest, *Se Ve Desde Aquí* finds the Guatemalan-born, Mexico City-based cellist, vocalist, composer and multi-instrumentalist exploring the sounds —and of equal importance the sounds of— a broad array of instruments including a collection of vintage synthesizers in a spare beautiful album. The PrimaLuna/DeVore pairing brought this record to lush life in Barn, with a vast yet rock solid sound image filled with the exploding varied voices of crunchy guitar, violin, saxophone, drums, tape loops, cello and vocals. With music like this, which is at times sparsely populated, sonic elements including micro detail, nuance, and scale become critical in order to convey the full musical message and I was fixated on *Se Ve Desde Aquí*, pinned to the red Eames chair for its full 38-minutes.



I have a big soft spot for pianist Mal Waldron. His album *The Quest* from 1962 remains a favorite for its quiet searching off-kilter beauty. San Francisco based Tompkins Square has just given us more Mal in the form of *Searching in Grenoble: The 1978 Solo Piano Concert*, 1 hour and 44 minutes of previously unreleased live music recorded at the “Five Days of Jazz” series in Grenoble, France on March 23, 1978. Listening to solo piano on the hifi can tell us a lot—a lot about the performer, the quality of the recording, and the quality of our hifi. With this system, DeVore O/96/EVO 300 fronted by the stunning EMM Labs NS1 Streamer/DA2 DAC, Waldron’s communion with the keyboard filled the Barn with a rock solid singing sound that captured every last ounce of nuance, drive, body, dynamics, heart and soul of this soul stirring performance.

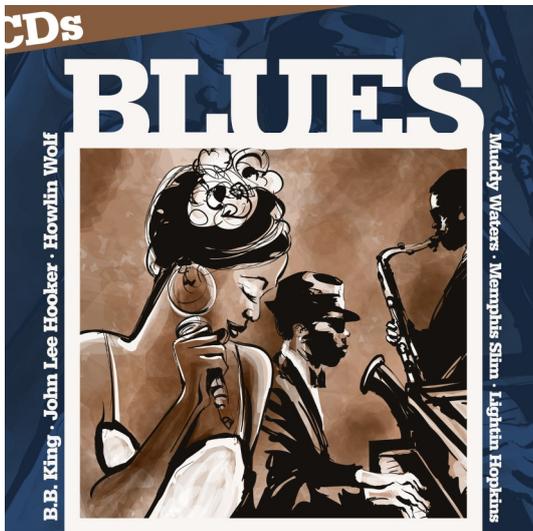
There are people who shy away from ‘hybrid’ amplifiers, which is interesting because these people tend to hail from the further reaches of ‘opposing’ camps—solid state and tubes (I put opposing in air quotes because extremist views don’t belong anywhere). I think the thinking goes that a hybrid design will taint the extremist love for the accuracy of solid state or the lush beauty of tubes, to put it in cliché’d terms. On a personal note, I’ve owned my fair share of amplifiers and integrations, solid state and tube and hybrid, from 2 Watts to more than 200. If we add in reviews, we can extend the count and power output to 1 Kilowatt. And I have favorites of every stripe including a number of hybrid designs (see my list of Favorite Integrated Amps).

While I love ideas as much as the next person, I enjoy listening to music on the hifi even more so my favorite systems aren’t limited to low power SETS or high powered ‘FETs, or vice versa (three of my favorite amps of all time are the Komuro 212E 55W single-ended triode-based monoblocks, the Pass Aleph 3 that offers 30 Watts of single-ended, class-A solid state power, and the Riviera Labs Levante Integrated and its 25 Watts of hybrid power). The point being, there’s no single path to great sound and in some cases extremists for a single approach to hifi may be fixated on their gear instead of the music it makes.



One thing we want from an amplifier is controlled clarity, even when music gets gnarly, nasty, and loud. This gets us back to Kevin Deal and *Drop the noise!*, one the EVO 300’s outstanding features. *An Eternal Reminder of Not Today / Live at Moers* a live recording by OXBOW with sax-monster Peter Brötzmann is gnarly, nasty, and meant to be played loud, really loud, but there’s real musicianship at work amid this sonic onslaught. The EVO 300 kept its cool, offering an iron grip on Dan Adams’ bass, capturing the dynamic slam of Greg Davis’ relentless percussion, with Niko Wenner’s wiry guitar and Eugene S. Robinson’s vocals riding roughshod over the

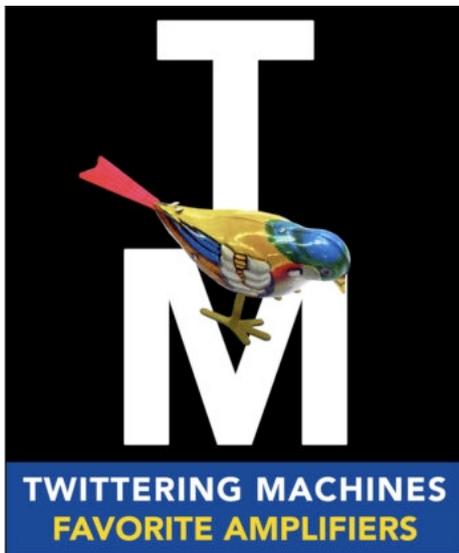
top. Then there's Brötzmann and his saxophone sounding like a manic alter-ego commenting in full Brötzmann squeal and skronk, reaching maniacal heights of interplay. Even amid a storm of sound, this system gave full voice to every element in *An Eternal Reminder*, providing a rich and righteous experience. Whew!



The EVO 300 spent nearly two months in Barn, so the referenced music above represents but a slim picking of the music played through it. Regardless of music and mood, my tastes run far and wide, there was never a sliver or crack in the EVO 300's way with music that broke the spell.



Delicacy, detail, and power, from a whisper to a scream. To my mind this is what an integrated amplifier needs to deliver and the PrimaLuna EVO 300 proved to be a heavyweight champ. What's more, the EVO 300 operates from a place of crystalline clarity with a rich timbral voice, a real marriage of strengths made in hifi heaven. Add in iron-fisted control and you've got one helluva highly recommended integrated amplifier from me and my hifi underground. Bravo!



Specifications

- Power: 8 Ohms 100 watts per channel (0.2% THD)
- Power: 4 Ohms 150 watts per channel (0.2% THD)
- Inputs: 5x Stereo RCA, Stereo RCA HT Bypass
- Outputs: 1 Pair Speaker, RCA Stereo/Mono Subwoofer, Stereo RCA Tape Out, 1/4" Headphone
- Frequency Response: 10Hz-80kHz +/- 3dB
- Damping Factor: 160
- S/N Ratio: -105dbA
- Input Sensitivity: 415mV
- Input Impedance: 34k Ω
- Power Consumption: 99 watts (no signal in), 645 watts @ 4R
- Standard Tube Complement: 6 – 12AU7 (2x Input, 4x Driver)
- Dimensions (WxHxD): 15.9" x 8.1" x 15.2"
- Weight: 68.3lbs