

toneAudio

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Another Diamond In the Rough From South Africa

THE VALVE AUDIO EXCLAME 100 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER — Marc Phillips

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I LOVE INTEGRATED AMPS

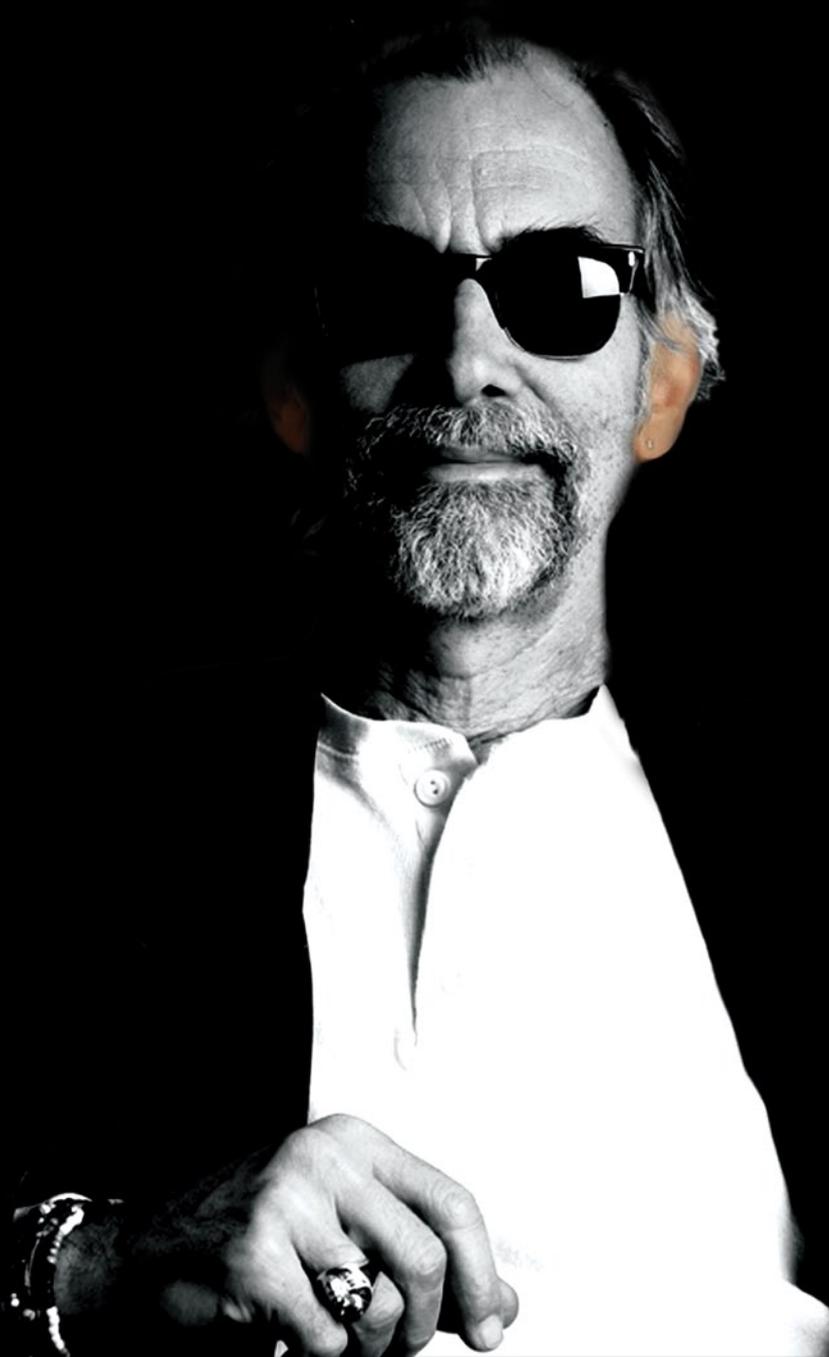
Sure, I love them for the usual reasons, such as their simplicity, their compactness, and the way they can really help to streamline an audio system. I love having to buy one less interconnect. And I love not having to explain to my non-audiophile friends what a preamplifier is. *(continued)*

"I'm a Believer."

"When everything is right, even the listener disappears. It's soulful, powerful, yet delicate and smooth. All we need now is the ears of the world. May it be so."

Rob Fraboni

- *Legendary Grammy-Winning Producer/Engineer for Eric Clapton, Bonnie Raitt, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and The Band. Co-Designer of the new Tetra 606 (a.k.a. Thee Fraboni)*



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But mostly I just love that in the 21st century, integrated amplifiers are really getting good. I think about all the integrations that have passed through my system in the last two or three years, from the self-effacing LFD Mistral, to the gloriously unstable vintage Scott 299B, to the stalwart Naim NAIT 5i, and I think hey, some of my best recent listening sessions have occurred with a decent integrated amplifier at the helm. It's been many years, I now realize, since I've told an audio novice that they should check out separates if they really want the best sound.

So, after spending the last year with a somewhat temperamental yet highly rewarding SET set-up in my listening room, **I welcomed the opportunity to place a somewhat conventional integrated amp into my system, just to, well...clean things up.**

The Valve Audio Exclame 100 integrated, however, proved to be slightly less than conventional. A hybrid 100wpc design, the Exclame uses a pair of Sovtek 6922s, which are directly loaded to a dual pair of MOSFET transistors. Sure, that doesn't sound too exotic, considering all of the hybrid integrated amps that have been popping up lately (think Unison Unico), and the Exclame's rather low-key appearance doesn't suggest anything revolutionary, either. But I knew something different was afoot before I even took it out of its shipping carton. *(continued)*

First of all, I was struck by the words 'handcrafted in South Africa' on the box. South Africa? I thought hard and couldn't think of another single audio company that hailed from South Africa. I've been as guilty as anyone of generalizing audio products according to their country or origin. French speakers, for instance, can sound a bit lightweight, British amplifiers can sound a bit polite, Japanese cartridges can sound a bit lush, and German turntables can sound a bit dead. But I had no preconceived idea what South African audio sounded like, so I knew plugging the Exclame into my system would be crossing a new frontier.

Secondly, there's the remote. It's a hell of a remote. You know that movie cliché where the bad guy empties his gun at the cop and misses, and then, in utter frustration, throws the gun at him? Well, if he had the Audio Valve remote with him,

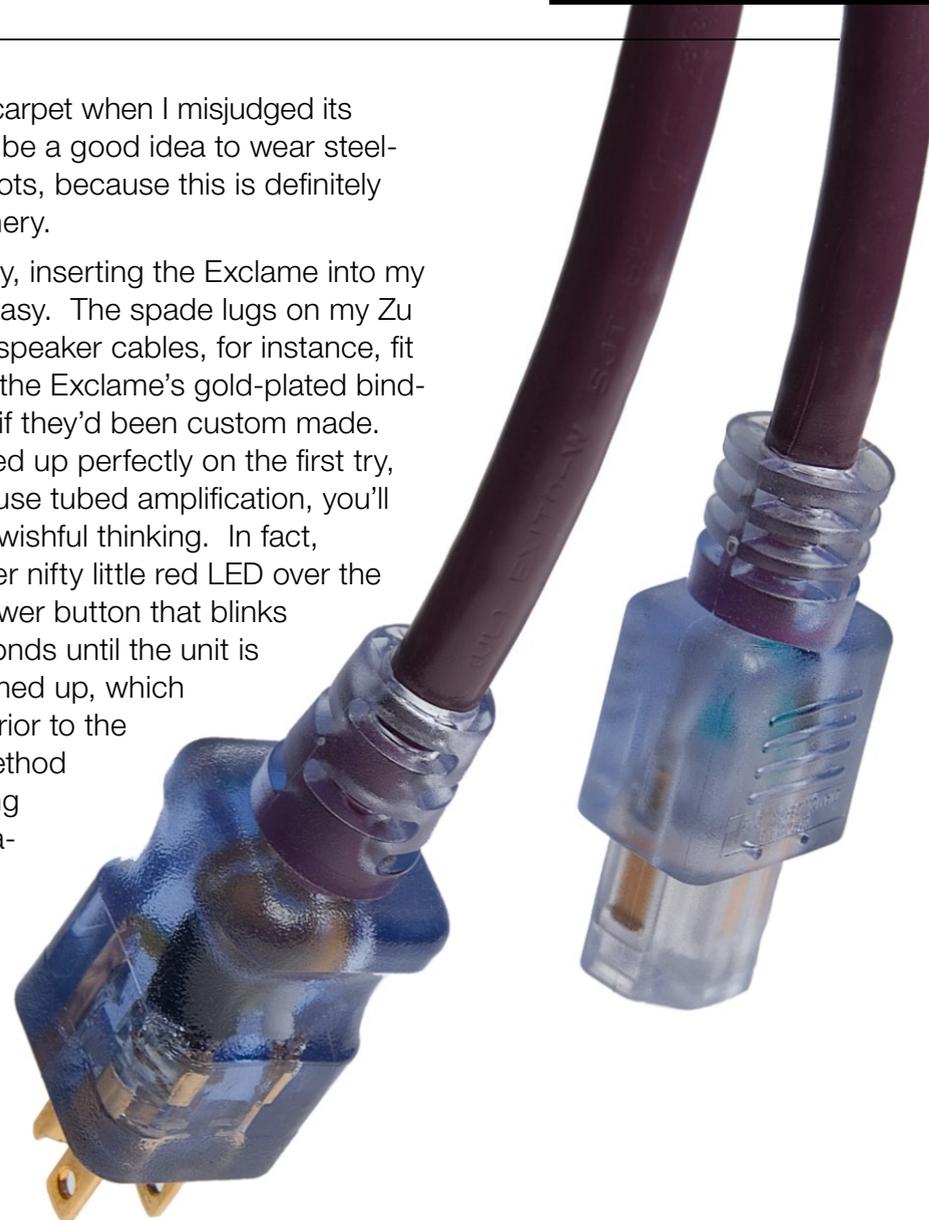
he'd triumph over the forces of good. **Every time I hold the remote, all I can think about is what a great weapon it would make.**

It's certainly no bigger than your average remote, but it weighs the better part of a pound. It appears to be made from a solid block of brushed aluminum, but I don't think aluminum has this much mass. In fact, the weight of the remote is so surprising, I dropped it several

times on the carpet when I misjudged its heft. It might be a good idea to wear steel-toed work boots, because this is definitely heavy machinery.

Fortunately, inserting the Exclame into my system was easy. The spade lugs on my Zu Cable Libtec speaker cables, for instance, fit perfectly into the Exclame's gold-plated binding posts, as if they'd been custom made. Everything fired up perfectly on the first try, which, if you use tubed amplification, you'll recognize as wishful thinking. In fact, there's a rather nifty little red LED over the Exclame's power button that blinks for a few seconds until the unit is properly warmed up, which is vastly superior to the Egg Timer Method I've been using with my Yamaha amps.

The unit I received already had about 50 hours of use, but I tried to get another 500 under its belt before I made any rash decisions. Even freshly out of the box, however, I noticed bass, deep bass, even deep deep bass. I no longer had any doubt that my Zu Cable Druids measured flat to 35hZ. I brought out Paula Cole's **This Fire** just to be sure, and played the first cut, *Tiger*. Hate the music, but love Tony Levin's Chapman Stick, by the way. And yes, my windows rattled, and my coffee mug ambled noisily across my desk. I went outside to see if all the houses in my neighborhood had been leveled, which I thought was a distinct possibility when mating 101dB efficient speakers with a 100wpc amp. Nope, all was well. *(continued)*



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After the Exclame was properly broken in, the sound changed slightly, not profoundly. This is something I notice with British amplification, especially Naim, that break-in periods aren't as long, and changes aren't as drastic, as with some other gear. **In fact, the more time I spent with the Exclame, the more it reminded me of the Naim NAIT 5i I owned last year.** It had the same punchy delivery and tactile midrange, and it was as incredibly quiet as well, which is a small miracle with the Druids, which tend to place a sonic microscope on any electrical anomalies in my system.

With the Naim, however, I always felt that the sound was a bit rough around the edges, especially in regards to transients, that everything could have been a tad smoother. The Exclame, however, erred a little in the opposite direction, with the edges rounded out a bit more. This glossy character was more noticeable in direct comparison with my Yamamoto Sound Craft amplification, which did a much better job of making voices hang eerily in front of you, and making you believe that there's living, breathing entities making music in the room. Of course, the Exclame is also one-fourth the cost of my Yamamoto gear, so the comparison may be unfair.

At \$1695, however, the Audio Valve Exclame 100 is competitive with the Naim NAIT 5i, and I'll go as far as saying that it is better, even though I no longer own the NAIT for a rigid and possibly painful A/B comparison.

(continued)

But here's how I know: I sold the Naim after a few months. I'm not sure if I would sell the Exclame. There were many times during the review period where I said to myself, if someone came along and made me a decent offer on my Yamamoto gear, I'd go for it and keep the Exclame. Of course, I'd have to shop for a decent phono preamp, too, since the Exclame doesn't offer the option. But I'd still save a lot of money, and I'd probably be happy.

I'm certainly not saying the Exclame is as good as my Yamamoto A-08S amp and my CA-03L preamp. I'm just saying that sometimes I feel guilty for spending \$7000 on amplification, when I could have been satisfied with something like the Exclame.

Besides, the Exclame does something better than both the Naim NAIT 5i and the Yamamoto gear. It rocks. So do the Zu Druids, I found out. Sure, the Druids are an exquisite match for the Yamamoto, smooth and clear and detailed. **But you can't hold a rave in your house with such a set-up. You can, however, with the Exclame 100.** Every once in a while I gotta throw a CD from System of a Down or Tool or White Zombie into my trusty Naim CDX2. The Yamamoto gear will stare at me disdainfully and say, 'You don't really want to listen to this, do you?'

The Exclame, however, says 'Let it rip, dude. Just hold onto something first.' ●

