

car audio

AND ELECTRONICS

CHOOSING TUBES

A lawyer chooses a vacuum-tube amplifier to warm up the sound of his bright CDs.

Dinosaurs and vacuum-tube amplifiers are not as common now as they used to be, but tube amps are still found in high-end audio systems like those owned by Jeff Silberman.

"I believe in tube amps," Jeff said. "I have a tube amplifier in my home, and now I have a Milbert tube amp in my car. You just can't beat the sound, especially when playing CDs. I think CDs tend to be bright and harsh, and a tube amp warms up the sound. I'm not a technical person, but I studied the literature for all the high-end amps, and I could tell that Milbert was serious about music."

Jeff, who lives in Baltimore, MD, is a 28-year-old lawyer specializing in real estate. "Music," said Jeff, "has been a lifelong obsession." He has put a quality sound system into every car he's owned since the first used car he bought at age 16. "The factory system in a car is junk, and it is the first thing I change. When I was a student buying older cars, the sound system I installed would often be more valuable than the car itself."

Jeff's current car is a 1986 Audi 5000. "You might not believe this, but I bought the car with stereo in mind. The salesman was amazed to discover I was more interested in the fact that the front speakers fire toward the driver and passenger than in the 0-to-60 acceleration statistics."

Buy the Best

"My philosophy in car audio is simple—why upgrade? Buy the best the first time around and pay for each item only once." Jeff has followed this philosophy in choosing components for his system. His

head unit is a Nakamichi TD-1200 Mark II AM/FM cassette tuner.

"I chose the Nakamichi for several reasons," Jeff explained. "First, I can't afford to have tapes eaten by the player. I am a Dead Head, and I have made master tapes at Grateful Dead concerts. Nakamichi's pullout tray for loading and unloading prevents tape tangles. Second, the Nakamichi has automatic azimuth control. I trade tapes via mail, and the only way I can properly play back tapes others have made is by having automatic azimuth. I like the Nakamichi so much that after my original unit was stolen, I bought another one just like it."

Professional Install

Jeff admits that the combination of the Milbert amp and Nakamichi head unit was a financial stretch. Jeff tried several installers before finally settling on Ralph Stoffel of Manchester, Maryland. When they first got together, Ralph was working for a high-end car audio store in Baltimore. Today, Ralph is in the satellite TV business, but he still does car audio installations on a freelance basis.

Ralph said he never chooses equipment for Jeff, nor does he design Jeff's systems. "When Jeff first came to me, I straightened out the mess in his car. Now I spend lots of time rearranging the equipment as he adds components. Jeff is constantly changing the system. He never replaces anything, he just adds more."

Jeff doesn't like listening to car audio demos in stores. "I don't feel I can properly compare side by side demo systems meant for a car when they are mounted in a showroom. I also find that even a demo

car does not provide the same environment as whatever car I am driving.

"You have to buy on faith, advice, specs, and price," continues Jeff. "Before I bought the Milbert, I did take a test ride in a demo car, more to see how the tubes withstood the bumps and jolts caused by the road than for a sound-quality assessment.

Jeff added a CD player to his system when he decided that CDs sound better than cassettes. His choice was the Alpine 5950 changer "because it has a low-profile control unit that fits under the Nakamichi in my dash. It has a jukebox-like assembly in the trunk that holds up to 12 CDs. I can select any CD in the stack and then listen to the exact cut I want."

One Set of Speakers

Perhaps the most unusual part of Jeff's system is his speaker placement. "I have only one set of speakers in the car because I did not want to disturb the interior. I wanted to use the factory cutouts. So I went with the a/d/s/320i separates. I have the tweeters up front in the dash and the woofers in the rear deck. I did have to cut another hole in the rear deck to fit the a/d/s/ subwoofer, but it was worth it because I like bass.

"Several installers said it couldn't be done this way without a loss in sound quality, but this is what I wanted, and I am happy with the sound.

"I like to think I am a smart consumer. I don't rush into things. I decided to try this speaker configuration for awhile. After all, I can always add additional speakers. At the moment, I don't feel I have to make any changes in the speaker system, but I may anyway at some future time. I am

always looking at better, more expensive speakers.”

Equalizer Possibility

The subwoofer amplifier is an a/d/s/P80, the amp that drove the whole system before Jeff bought the Milbert tube amp. He uses a Nakamichi EC-200 for subwoofer crossover and the speaker cable is from Monster Cable. Jeff estimates his

current system's value at \$5,000.

Jeff continues to plan additions to his system. “I’m considering adding an Audio Control equalizer. People who seem to be experts tell me I don’t need EQ and adding it might degrade system sound quality. I’ve never subjected my system to spectrum analysis, but someday I will. Then if I find I really should have equalization, I’ll put it in.”

“I buy the best because it sounds the

best, not because it is the loudest or has the most popular brand name,” Jeff explains. “I am fortunate to be able to afford this. As far as I am concerned, once you have been exposed to quality sound, it is hard to consider anything less.”

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