

## HP'S 2007 GOLDEN EAR AWARDS

Equipment report

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# Amplifiers

## Western Electric WE-97-A

Offhand, I can't think of any company's first electronic component that can immediately take its place in the rank of classic designs, but this high-powered triode amplifier from the revived Western Electric is a formidable contender. To be sure, this is not a product of the Western Electric of old, but rather its new incarnation courtesy of one Charles Whitener, who just over a decade ago bought the rights to the name (and that of Westrex) from AT&T, as well as to the much admired and sought after 300B tube, itself in the category of legend among hard-core searchers after the Grail. And at the cool price in 1996 of \$1200, why not?

This amplifier, a monoblock, will set you back a not-so-cool 50 grand, and for stereo, of course you'll have to have two, not one. (The early buzz was that a solo amp would cost \$90,000, so perhaps there was a divine intervention.) For that 50, you'll get eight 300B tubes and a 100 or so watts of RMS power into 8 ohms. Whitener says it won't be long (say, the Winter Consumer Electronics Show) before a tubed CD player, linestage, and phonostage come along. Further down the pike, the company will also offer an amplifier built around the even more legendary 308B, "the highest powered class A triode power tube ever developed," Whitener says. The WE-97 was the work of the design team of Chiwai Lau (who has designed electronics for his company, Canary Audio), David Evett (the front panel), John Cheves, the production engineer, and Whitener himself. An old audio hand, one David Berning, will work on the company's future projects (he has retired from the National Institute of Standards and Technology). The amplifier was the logical result of Whitener's reintroduction and manufacture of the 300B tube in 1996. He says this: "Assembling amplifiers is no great feat. The trick is in the topology."

Up until now, the only triode amplifier that I thought as uncolored as some of the best tubed designs was the Sapphire 300B, a minimally powered unit with exceptional sound at the frequency extremes, and an across the board neutrality and lack of tonal coloration that left me wishing for more. The 97 provides the missing more. And it does something that startled me. It captured (on the Nola Grand Reference Mk IV Series II, one amp for each of the four towers!) an ambient field that all other amplifiers, at best, merely suggested. I'm not sure how to describe this, since in normal usage, we audio reviewers sometimes use slightly

hyped language in an effort to get across the way something strikes us. I have, in the past, for instance, described the way some components (vide, the c-j ART) can focus in on a singer or player and give a sense of the threedimensionality of that particular instrument. Here, we get the 3-D effect, but that extends to the backside of a human voice or played instrument. I am trying to suggest that, with no loss of focus and no euphonic second harmonic, we can actually hear “behind” images in the soundfield, an effect no doubt occasioned by the 97’s retrieval of extremely subtle ambient cues, the kind you take for granted when you’re listening to unamplified music. With this amplifier, the 3-D effect extends to the rear stage, where images are just as vivid as they are in the foreground with the best electronics. It’s as if you’ve suddenly both extended and expanded the depth of the soundspace so its field is as large as that of the original hall, and all this in a listening room not majestic in size. And there is not a trace of “bloat” in this effect. Smaller spaces remain smaller.

To top it off, there is not, in my present setup, a problem with the midbass, which so often happens in triode amplification, and the fundamental bass, including pedal points and thunder (even the real life volcano eruption on “The Lost World,” courtesy of Hearts of Space), actually becomes frightening in its reality. Yes, frightening. And no, I haven’t nearly finished its evaluation with other speakers and other electronics, nor have I gone in depth with Whitener about the tubes and why he says that they have an impulse response far better than of any other tube and one he believes that gives the 300Bs a unique advantage. More to come. Price: \$100,000 per pair.