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Hey, Lend Me an EAR!

by **Tony Fafoglia**

In the past, I viewed standalone phonostages with more than a bit of skepticism. In fact, I used to look askance and squint my eyes at them the way I do other questionable "geegaws" that permeate our modern lives. My cynical self (which is pretty prominent most of the time) tended to see them as another high-end wheez along the order of DACs, cable break-in devices, cables with "exotic" dielectric materials, boxes to end the plague of jitter, and most subwoofers. Now that I've irritated almost everyone I'll stop. Oh, did I forget to mention lettuce dryers?

It's not that I didn't realize outboard phonostages had their function as well as their practicality. Woe the poor audio wretch (and haven't we all been one of those at some point or another?) who bought the groovy linestage only to realize he was casting furtive glances at the shelf full of LPs gathering dust. Then there's the well-healed audiogeek who uses the mini-millivolt moving-coil cartridge hand-made in the Far East by monks, carved from some rare log. I knew outboard phonostages were for these guys, but not for me. Ever the practical audiofool, I figured one just bought a preamp with a good onboard phonostage and got on with one's LP-loving life, the bonus being that you didn't have to worry about things like another interconnect, which of course saves losing sleep over whether your wire of choice is truly optimized for the phono-preamp interface. I also subscribe to the theory that, to a fair degree, the less wire in a system, the better.

However, I look at myself as living proof that you can teach an old (analog) dog new tricks. That's where the EAR 834P and Exposure 13 phonostages, the latter of which I reviewed a while back, come into the picture. They've definitely made me rethink my stance on the whole outboard phonostage topic. Playing with both products has challenged my old view of spending money to optimize the cartridge over using some fancy phonostage in every instance. Don't get me wrong here. I'm not advocating buying some cheapie magnet cartridge and pairing it with a nice phonostage like those I mention as the road to LP heaven. But what did amaze me is the results that can be had by using a quality standalone phono unit with a respectably good cartridge in the say, \$300-\$400 range (which is where my Audio-Technica ML150 falls). All this brings home the point to me what a great hobby this is -- there's always something to obsess over! Oh well, enough navel gazing -- there's a review to write.

The EAR 834P is the handiwork of the company head and main designer Tim de Paravicini. His name may be familiar because he's been involved in everything from tape-deck restoration to building tube mics to mastering LPs for folks such as those at Chesky. Although he's worked with both tubes and solid-state



devices, his reputation looms large as a tube authority. Tim has also been a staunch advocate of vinyl playback, creating a fair degree of controversy at times on numerous topics within the audio-design community in the UK. In fact Tim's reputation as vinyl and tube expert was what got me interested in hearing the 834P.

The unit measures 5"x9"x3.5" and, if I had to guess, weighs in at around 8 pounds. (I don't keep a scale around as life has enough anxiety already.) I'm not an electrical engineer, but build quality seems very good, with above-average parts, although I didn't notice many of the parts deified by those who live and die by DIY audio-accessory catalogs. The 834P uses three 12AX7 tubes and a small toroid for the power supply. The power supply is shielded from the rest of the innards and takes up a large portion of the interior. One unique thing about the unit is that it contains an internal moving-coil step-up device. This is activated by a switch on the rear of the box and allows you to go between moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges easily. My AT150 is a moving-magnet design, so my main listening was done in this mode. The impedance is 47k ohms and the loading is fixed, so the unit doesn't really allow for you to change impedance for different moving coils. EAR USA head Dan Meinwald mentioned that the 834P can be special ordered to accommodate very low-impedance moving coils such as those from Ortofon.

The 834P uses a detachable IEC power cord, so tweakers can go ape to their hearts' content. The gold-plated RCA inputs and outputs appear to be of high quality, and there's a phono ground lug on the rear as well. I experienced no hum problems at all with 834P in my system. Yes!

The 834P comes in two basic variations and finishes: black with an on/off switch and with or without an Alps volume pot, and chrome with only a gold-plated on/off switch. The sexy-looking chrome-finished model sets you back \$1195 as opposed to the black unit's \$895. There is also a moving-magnet-only version, available only in black and without volume control, for \$695. Knowing this hobby as I do, I'm sure there are those who will swear the unit with chrome finish sounds better. The black 834P can also be special ordered without the volume pot for the average user with a preamp. This is the wisest path, cost and sound-wise. The sample I reviewed was the black model with volume pot. This does allow users the opportunity to use the 834P as strictly a preamp to drive a power amp. In terms of my listening, I used the unit in all three configurations. This was encouraged by Meinwald in my initial conversation with him. I should also point out that when using the 834P into a preamp, Meinwald suggested leaving the volume pot turned up all the way for best performance. Warm-up time seemed to be about 20 minutes, and I noticed a fair degree of improvement in sound quality if I left the thing on for long listening sessions.

All listening was done via my trusty Linn LP12/Valhalla/Cirkus/Ittok LVII combo with the Audio-Technica ML150 moving-magnet cartridge. This all resides on the Sound Organization wall-mount turntable shelf. Preamps used were the tubed conrad-johnson PV10a and an Exposure 19 solid-state linestage. Amplification consisted of Exposure 18 Super and NYAL Moscode 300 amps, all of which came out of my trusty Spondor 2/3 speakers. Cabling used on the 834P consisted of meter runs of Kimber PBJ and Nordost Flatline Red Dawn. Oh, I also use a Roomtunes Justarack. Whew!

The first LP I threw on was the was the new Classics Blue Note reissue of Ike Quebec's *Soul Samba* (Classics/Blue Note 84114). I liked what I was hearing even though first encounters with a new component can be disorienting in some ways. At this point I'll mention that I still had the volume pot online and full up. Musically this is an amazing record featuring Ike's warm soulful tenor sax and Kenny Burrell's tasty guitar comping on a set of bossa-nova tunes. The mood is very "late night" (I think they used to refer to this type of stuff as make-out music). There was plenty of detail, though things seemed a bit restrained in the pace department. The audioweenie in me began to wonder if the 834P leaned towards

the lush end of the sonic realm. I went back to my CJ PV10a preamp and came to the realization that the EAR was just smoother and had less grain. It then hit home with me: The brutal truth that those who say all tube gear has a similar sonic signature are "wrong 'em boyo." Still, the main thing was that I was groovin' to the music. Waiter, another vodka and tonic please. I think part of the reason I needed a drink was the realization that the 834P overall was whuppin' the phono stage of my c-j preamp.

I threw a number of different records on the platter including Classic's reissue of the Webster/Edison *We Wanted to do One Together* (Classics/CBS CS 8692), Neil Young and Crazy Horse's *The Year of the Horse* (Reprise 46652-1) as well as my fave Boccherini *Guitar Quintets* on Philips (Philips 9500789). All were enjoyable, yet something was not quite there for me. It was hard to pin down as I didn't notice any sonic aberrations such as soft bass. Besides, I hate that kind of sonic analysis where every aspect of a unit's sound is laid out for the anxious audioneurotic whose every buying decision hinges on what reviewers write. To quote former prez George Bush, "not gonna do it."

That's when I took the next step of using the 834P strictly as a preamp after several days in use with my c-j preamp. This is where things start to get interesting. In this mode I had the volume control at about the two-o'clock position as this seemed to work best in my system. The best analogy I can use is that of fine tuning the focus on a TV set. Oops! I just used one of those dopey visual analogies applied to audio that I hate so much. Boy, am I a sell out. Getting the c-j preamp out of the path wrought serious improvements in the EAR's overall performance, allowing it to better work its stuff on my phono signal.

Beside improvement in the usual sonic parameters like soundstage and image depth, every record made more sense musically. The best way I can describe it is the difference between a piece of gear you think is nice as opposed to one that makes you hate to shut it off and go to bed or work or wherever else you go. The EAR was more exciting to listen to. Bass lines were now more forceful and dynamics less restrained. One LP where this really hit home was on the reissue of the Mercury Living Presence version of Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges* (Classics/Mercury SR 90006). I had listened to this while the EAR was running into my preamp with the pot in the signal, and I enjoyed it. As a straight preamp, the 834P really allowed the ebb and flow of the piece to come through. I started playing more records (always an important sign).

The next step in this whole process was to go whole-hog and actually remove the volume pot from the signal path and run the 834P into my preamp again. In this mode the EAR seemed to retain the strengths it possessed as a strict preamp. However, this time I had the flexibility of playing CDs if I so desired plus the advantage of having one volume control interacting with my system.

A sure sign came to me that things were happening with the 834P was when I put on the 180gm pressing of Chick Corea's *Remembering Bud Powell* (Stretch/Concord SLP2-9012-1). There's a break in the cut "Mediocre" where drummer Roy Haynes does this amazing drum solo. The way the solo filled the room made me laugh out loud. Things weren't just sounding good but tasting good as well. I threw on my UK Decca copy of the Stones' *Beggars Banquet* (UK Decca 4955) and listened as the Stones' mini history lesson "Sympathy for the Devil" unfolded. The 834P allowed me to hear even better the interaction of all the percussion parts in a song I've listened to hundreds of times. I realized that all this high-end stuff can be fun for other things besides hearing room reflections in purist recordings.

Being a moving-magnet person, I was still curious to hear what the EAR could do with a moving-coil cartridge. So I lugged the thing over to the house of a friend who uses an MC and whose system I'm very familiar with. He uses a Dynavector 17D2 on a Well Tempered 'table. The Dynavector is an extremely

low-output coil (around .15 millivolt), and I was intrigued to hear how the 834P would work with such a low-output cartridge. Let me say three words here -- *like a champ*. In the past a few people warned me about using very low-output MCs with tube phono stages. I think they've been using the wrong phono stages. We listened to a bunch of Coltrane and classical, and at no time did we hear any so-called tube nasties. What we did hear were some great records over a few hours.

Another thing I should point out about the EAR is that at no time did I get the sense that I was listening to a tube component. What I mean, and should clarify here, is often tube gear is associated with a sort of mellow non-detailed sound. This is a generalization that is, of course, broad but used often by many as a put down or to signify a piece of gear as being euphonic (another overused term). The 834P is a well-designed modern tube component. Sonically I wouldn't call it analytical as it struck a great middle ground between detail and musicality. The EAR never seemed to make poorly recorded material sound easy. Yet its emphasis on music-making sure helped me make sense of the less-than-audiophile LPs that tend to dominate my collection. In terms of use, I don't think you'll find an easier phonostage to use. Although tube, it's a plug-in-and-play unit that should ease the fears of most tube-o-phobes.

Interestingly, the EAR runs very cool and my laying of hands on it barely revealed its inherent tubeosity. This translates into long tube life for you, the home user. In fact, EAR-man Meinwald estimated several years of use from a set of 12AX7s. The 834P does have something for everyone in that tube rollers can get down to their hearts' content. I used the 834P with the stock Yugos because (1) I'm not really a tube roller and (2) I believe that you, the average audioweenie like myself, should rest assured that a reviewed stock unit delivers a high level of performance (it does, by the way). There's a mantra that I would like more reviewers and manufacturers to repeat: "Not everyone who likes good sound is a HOBBYIST." So yes, the stock Yugos are fine in my opinion. But for those of you with a cache of Telefunkens and Bugle Boyz in the safe, you go!

Overall I really enjoyed listening to this unit. Not to be redundant, but for me, the EAR 834P landed in that fine ground between detail and music-making. It delivers high value for the dollar based on its performance. Yes there are units that in some ways outperform it, but at two to three times the price. The question for me would remain: Does the price of some more-expensive phonostages really translate into more LP enjoyment? To my ears (no pun here) the 834P makes more music than the phono stages in some \$3k preamps I've listened to. So for those of you who want to get serious and want something better than the entry-level stuff but don't have serious money, the 834P requires a listen. Besides, you can take the cash you'd spend on a more-expensive phonostage and buy more vinyl.

...Tony Fafoglia

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Postscript

Through the good graces of my tube buddy Carter, I replaced the stock Yugo 12AX7s with some old-stock RCA 12AX7s, and I hooked up a VansEvers Power Cord to replace the Radio Shack unit I was using. All I can say is that this phonostage really responds to TLT (tender lovin' tweaking). The top end is more open, and the space thing that tubes seem to excel at is even more enhanced. The bottom tightened up as well. Looks like I've become a...oh, heck...if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!

EAR 834P Phono Stage

Prices:

- **chrome finish, no volume pot, \$1195 USD**
- **black finish with or without volume pot, \$895 USD**
- **moving-magnet version without volume pot \$695 USD**

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