Subject: Chinese audio
Posted by colinhester on Wed, 25 Aug 2004 11:36:13 GMT
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I would like to continue the discussion Manualblock and I started regarding the price of kits versus prebuilt in the thread titled "SET Kits." Apologies to WhyAskWhy for getting off the original question.The point was made by Manualblock that "some of these DIY amps can run into serious money," even more than finished commercially proven products. As one who demands quality and at a fair price, I think the Chinese have some exceptional product offerings at prices-too-good-to-be-true. Come on, let's face it, tube amps are not rocket science and the technological resources needed outside manufacturing practices are nil. Look at some of the gear in these three sites and note the price. For shipping add 50% for big items (yes, even including the BIG speakers, which I have received quotes.) Now, some one please tell me these prices are not a great deal. What's more, some of these items are very similar to that offered by top name salon gear, but at about 80% savings.Sites (I am not a rep. or affiliated with these companies, just sharing info):www.nysound.com I ordered my ShengYa S-10 from here. Shipped direct from China, and I could not be happierhttp://www.cattylink.com/newenghome.htm (click products)Asked for and received quotes (quickly and professionally). I would not hesitate to order from here. http://www.mei-xing.com/doce/pro.htmJust sexy looking audio eye candy .....Colin

Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by akhilesh on Wed, 25 Aug 2004 12:00:19 GMT
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Colin,A good topic to discuss! Thanx for the links.My 2 cents: Yes, i have seen chinese amps make inroads into the market, in the last 2-3 years. I am going to list below concerns folk may have with amps made in china (esp SET amps). I do not mean to single out any cutlure or country, just listing concerns some folk here may have:1. Maybe using fake parts, esp. the trannies. Having grown up in a third world country myself, I can definitely say that the temptation to save3 bucks by putting in fake parts is a big one. 2. Maybe using poor solder..again..saving a few pennies per amp, maybe unavailability of good solder3. Maybe unreliable workmanship...always a problem when you are paying low wages4. No warranty coverage...at least not as reliable as a USA based companyIf you build an amp yourself, clearly that's most cost effective. BUt if you get one built here in the USA, you pay more, but you may have a little more peace of mind. Again, these concerns may go away as these amps get some reputation. AS of now, I think they are a GREAT price, with a little bit of uncertainty. Colin, hearing your positive experiences with them is a good item of info to have, at least for me. Takes away some of the uncertainty. thanx-akhilesh

Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by Manualblock on Wed, 25 Aug 2004 12:44:19 GMT

Colin; have you ever peeked inside and noticed if any of the passive parts are recognisable brands? Just curious whether caps and resistors are sourced through common producers. There is a case to be made that if the amp sounds good then the parts should be decent quality. Because if they are not then what does that say about the use of boutique parts in amplifiers and such if you can build a good sounding amp with poor quality parts.That leaves the transformers; I could assume they might fail at some point if they are not constructed properly, but many of the Chinese brands have been around for some time and have a good track record. And again if they work and sound good they must by definition be decently made.However Chinese tubes have a spotty history of reliability, but those are the most difficult parts to construct.A few thoughts, J.R.(I have had some of the newer western tubes fail out of the box so who knows?)

Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by colinhester on Thu, 26 Aug 2004 12:23:51 GMT

The points you bring up are very valid; however, I think the same arguments could apply to products made either domestically or abroad:1. "Maybe using fake parts, esp. the trannies. Having grown up in a third world country myself, I can definitely say that the temptation to save3 bucks by putting in fake parts is a big one."Happens in all industries. That's pretty much the name of the game.2. "Maybe using poor solder..again..saving a few pennies per amp, maybe unavailability of good solder."Again, who's to say this is not industry practice? As a consumer we take alot of construction techniques for granted.3. Maybe unreliable workmanship...always a problem when you are paying low wages.Wages are relative, even in the USA the geographic region determines one's pay. Granted domestic wages are higher, but it's all relative to the standard of living. Moreover, I think I could argue the point that wages have little to do with quality of workmanship - pride in one's workmanship is directed by the company's atmosphere and commitemnt to quality. 4. No warranty coverage...at least not as reliable as a USA based company.Again, this comes down to a commitment from management. If a company wants to offer and honor a warranty, the location of the company should be of no concern. Conversely, if a company does not want to honor a warranty, they could be down the sreet and it wouldn't help.5. If you build an amp yourself, clearly that's most cost effective. Not always true. Companies that mass produce have an economy of scale that the consumer does not. Please don't take my responses as negative. I think it's going to be interesting over the next few years watching China and how it handles global manufacturing and quality issues. I remember how Japanese products (cars in particular) used to be considered crap. Now look at them - they have far exceeded anyone's expectation with regard to quality. I hope Chinese manufacturing has learned from other's mistakes.....Regards, Colin

Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by Thermionic on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 04:17:59 GMT

A point I'd like to bring out in light of the context of all this is that if you want a TRULY hi-end amplifier, then DIY will save you enormous money over commercial offerings. By "hi-end," I mean Tamura or Plitron iron, Black Gate and motor run oil caps for power supply filtering, tantalum resistors, Teflon coupling caps, etc. You can build an amp (if properly designed) that will devastate commercial amps costing far more. You are buying 100% quality with your money, not pretty cosmetics and someone else's labor. Having said that, if you're not wanting to spend that kinda dough and/or are happy with a more "average" amp, you can still build an amp for a reasonable price that you know is not built with junk, has proper lead dress and layout, and good solder joints. An excellent 1.5 WPC EL84 SET can be built for around $400 using good parts like paper in oil coupling caps, Riken signal resistors, and SCR/Solen Fast Cap filter caps. As a longtime guitar amp repair tech I can tell you that Chinese made replacement output transformers for guitar amps are the biggest pieces of junk on the planet, as are also Chinese guitar amps in general. They are cheap, BUT..... I can only hope their audio transformers and amps are better.I guess what one calls a bargain is all left up to our own personal interpretation. :)Thermionic

Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by Manualblock on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 11:18:04 GMT

Good point. In this discussion we have addressed only those issues dealing with commercially produced amps that sound good for a reasonable price that happen to be built in China.You absolutely can build a great amp for 1000% that will sound better than most of the 5000% amps made commercially not to mention you can custom tailor the parameters for your speakers. But my point stands, if the amp sounds very good and I am sure Colinhester knows his stuff; then bad transformers must not matter to the quality of sound. If you can make a good sounding amp with poor quality parts then why spend that extra money. I pose this question rhetorically since I have spent planty of dough on amps. He claims the amp is excellent and I believe him and even using your analogy of the el-84 SET his amp is an integrated with I think a phono stage included. You would need another 400 for that and the labor and at the end it is worth diddly to anyone else.So is this a bargain or what?(Please understand I am now working on my second homebuilt so these questions are a form of self-justification et al.) J.R.

Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by colinhester on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 12:08:24 GMT

Point well taken. There is NO substitute for a labour of love, and as the saying goes, "if you want it done right, then do it yourself." However, there is a point of quickly diminishing returns, and given

limited funds this is a valid concern. Your point about guitar amps is interesting. I would assume these are more high volume sales items than "audiophile," low power tube amps. What kid doesn't want/have a guitar/amp setup? These items are not judged for the most part on sound quality. They are bought because mom and dad or junior don't have or don't want to shell out the cash. Conversely, home tube amps are a rather niche market, and thanks to forums like this word spreads as to their build / sound quality. If their reputation is bad, people interested in buying have hopefully done their research and will not buy based on poor reviews. And, if their reputation for sound / build quality is acceptable, the products reputation is justified. To be perfectly honest, I did not listen to either my Cayin TA-30 integrated or ShengYa S-10 CD player before I purchased. I read reviews, did my homework, and asked questions. The one spec I weighed heavily (no pun intended) was the product's weight. An item's mass adds both material cost and incurs additional shipping charges, and if corners are to be cut, it will show up by simply not weighing as much. Thermionic, a question for you: Do you see a weight difference in Chinese brand quitar amps that you consider sub-par versus those you consider to be of higher quality? I would assume those of quality simply weigh more because of better built cabs, more massive drivers, heavier trannies, goes to 11, etc..... I'm interested in your views / testing protocol regarding the trannies. I am certainly not doubting your claims in any way, shape or form. I'm just trying to learn from those much more experienced.....Best regards, Colin

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Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by Thermionic on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 13:06:11 GMT
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It's always been my experience that you can build a very good sounding amp with mediocre parts. Look at Bottlehead or Decware's offerings. They're built with very, very cheap coupling caps and metal film resistors, and indeed sound good. I've also built really decent sounding stuff with "shelf grade" parts. However, if you've not heard a similar circuit built will really good OPTs, a choke input power supply with no aluminum electrolytics, and top shelf caps and resistors, you just can't imagine the difference. I have a saying that I've used for a very long time now. "You can build a *good* sounding amp with poor parts, but you'll never build a *great* sounding amp with poor parts." But, it all depends on how much money one is willing/has to spend. And as I said before, one man's bargain is another man's ripoff!Colinhester, I can't say I can tell any difference in weight or heft in Chinese guitar amps, and the external fit and finish is definitely not too bad at all. Internally, the workmanship is poor and ratty. Pignoses in particular are indicative of this. One thing I didn't mention about Chinese guitar amp transformers is that they are typically made of inferior M19 or M32 steel laminations. They are much cheaper than the far superior M6 or M4 grades. Beware of using weight as a gage here. Weight/size can be deceiving, as the iron using the cheaper grades must be made larger to make up for it's higher core losses versus M6 or M4. Sadly, many U.S. made guitar amp transformers are now made of the same cheaper grades of lamination steels. Also, companies like Peavey and Fender have moved much of their production to China, Korea, and Mexico. Costcutting measures have done a heavy duty waste number on guitar amps. Marshall for example. They used to make some of the world's best amps. In the early 70's, they went to PC board construction with flying leads to the chassis mounted tube sockets. In the late 70's, they began reducing the number of filter caps. By the late 80's, they went to 100% PCB construction, and incorporated SS clipping diodes to get more distortion instead of another

tubed gain stage. Marshall hasn't made a truly great sounding amp in nearly 20 years now, except for the reissues of their vintage amps! Again as with the audio amps, if you play guitar and all you've ever heard are Crate, Peavey, etc, mass production guitar amps, then you'll never know what you're missing. Good boutique amps such as Aiken or Bruno sound so much more refined and have such better tone that you literally will be ruined from then on. I heard a Bruno about a year and a half ago and still have that unreal tone going through my head!Once again, some would consider the $5000 Bruno a ripoff, while some would consider it a bargain, which is the same principle as with our audio amps. :)Thermionic

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Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by Manualblock on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 18:26:09 GMT
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Really good post! Maybe you wouldn't mind bouncing a few ideas my way. I play music also and know the diff. between an old Fender Reverb and a new amp. I know the transformer requires good steel and a good varnish between the laminations. If you were looking to build a transmitting tube amp, where would you look for a trans, and what would you look for?What is your opinion of having transformers hand wound. Thanks much, J.R.

Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by Thermionic on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 20:05:37 GMT
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A great example! There's even a huge difference in the way a blackface Twin or Super sounds and the way the crummy reissues sound. Fender has tweaked their '59 Bassman reissue in a little closer to the real thing year by year, because they were losing so many potential sales to more expensive but vastly superior Mom and Pop company boutique amps. The boutique amps really do sound like the real thing, versus Fender's reissue, which had the wrong rectifier tube type, wrong preamp tube type, inferior componentry, cheap foreign made ceramic magnet speakers, and incorrect cabinetry construction.By a "handwound" transformer, I presume you mean units from handwoundtransformer.com, perhaps? Though their transformers are of very good design and fine quality, their service is poor and extremely slow. I currently have a large quantity of iron on order from them that's now several months overdue. A friend of mine got his 300B transformers after nearly 3 months, while another's pair of 3.5K 5 watt SE OPTs took almost a year.They've lied about half a dozen times and said they would ship within a few days, the last of which was about 2 weeks back. I'm fed up and requesting a refund next week if I don't receive the iron by then. If you don't mind waiting an average of 6 months for a set of x-formers to do an amp, I'd recommend them. If not, don't waste your time. Hammond power iron would be good in your transmitter tube amp. As far as OPTs, there aren't many off the shelf units rated for that kind of voltage and offset DC current. I think Hammond makes one or two that can handle it, not sure. Perhaps Eric Barbour will see this and chime in, if he knows source of proper OPTs that you won't

have to sell a kidney to buy! Though offensively expensive, Plitron makes a couple models of transmitter tube OPTs. I've bought several OPTs from them before, both SE and PP, and they are unbelievable. The bass is very tight and extended, the midrange refined, fluid, and sweet, and the highs extended, completely transparent, detailed, and chimey. They seem to pass all the nuances and harmonic content that makes the music sound like REAL music. Though the highs are very similar, my Tamura F-475s sound veiled and grainy in the mids compared to my Plitrons, and the Plitrons' bass response and quality simply plows the Tamuras under. Plitron's service is also good; they WILL arrive on your doorstep within 4 weeks after you call in your order, bar none, and not a day later. I know I may sound like a Plitron salesman, but I'm not. They're just great iron.Thermionic

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Subject: Thanks
Posted by colinhester on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 23:19:35 GMT
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Thermionic, You've given me alot to think about and digest over your last few posts. Thanks for taking the time to write meaningful and truely insightful replies.....Colin

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Subject: Re: Chinese audio
Posted by Manualblock on Fri, 27 Aug 2004 23:34:28 GMT
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The handwound transformer guys have a pretty crummy rep. There are a couple other small places that do one-offs and custom wound stuff. There is a place in Australia that has really good stuff and even with the shipping the exchange ratio is so favorable that it is worth checking into. Electra-Print claims to do custom work also. I have been discussing this amp for some time and it is nice when guys like yourself share their thoughts, since the trans. is the most significant aspect of a SE design I appreciate your input.My quandry is do I try a modest pair of OPT's and use them to determine the worth of the design or just jump in and bite the bullet with top drawer stuff. Ever see the Magnequest Iron for big tubes?
