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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vacuum Tube Logic IT-85 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

The VTL IT-85 integrated amplifier perhaps perfectly sums up the difference between UK and US audiophiles. And not just because we call them 'valves' and they call them 'tubes'. For UK listeners, 60 watts of 'hollow state' amplifier is impressively powered to slot in with our small rooms and small loudspeakers, but Stateside, the amp is considered almost low-powered.

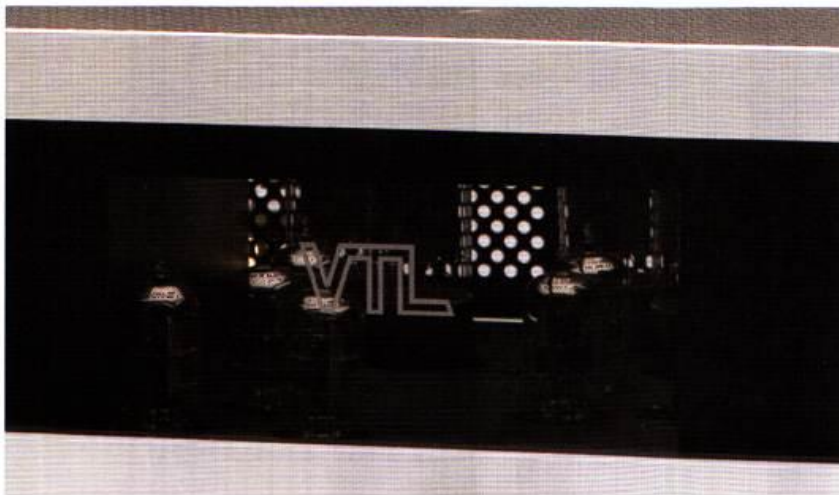
In fairness to our American counterparts, it's not surprising given VTL's other products; thunderous big tube power amplifiers like the Siegfried, capable of delivering 800 watts per channel.

Vacuum Tube Logic has been absent from the UK audiophile line up for too long, but now it's back, thanks to the newly-minted Kog Audio. To bring UK buyers up to speed, the brand makes a range of preamps, power amps and this integrated, all entirely, confidently tubular in approach. The company has a reputation for making completely unfussy, unbreakable amps that is second to none; it was already making ultra-reliable products when it took a hiatus to make

them even more bomb-proof. The decision is ridiculously logical; back in the day when tube amps were the only option, they were more reliable even though people knew how to handle them. Those days are gone, so an amplifier needs to be super-reliable and completely unfussy today.

The one throwback to the golden age of tube amplifiers is the size (and weight) of the amp. It's slightly smaller than modern designs. Packed into that smaller chassis are a pair of 12AU7, a pair of 12AT7 and a quartet of EL34 power pentodes. It's fully cased, although you can see the tubes glowing through the semi-opaque glass front panel (it's surprising how many tubes you see happily out in the open, despite it being in total contravention of EU safety standards). That means that holed top plate runs damn hot, damn quickly.

Tube amps can be judged in a very basic manner by weight; the amount of iron in the transformers will define in some respects the range and scale of the amplifier. At a packing weight of nearly 30kg, there's a lot of transformer in there. The result is an amplifier ▶



▶ that takes on all the benefits of tubes with the sort of “hit it with a hammer, you’re going to need a new hammer” build. That means a lot of VTL-made parts where normal manufacturers go for off the shelf products – fabricating your own speaker terminals is obsessive, but if the job’s worth doing... The end result is a product that oozes confidence and lifetimes of fuss-less use.

That’s the thing about VTL equipment – and the IT-85 is part integrated amp, part gateway drug to more VTL-ness – it’s so well made and its lines so right, that it’s hard not to see the beauty in the product. Strangely though, the pictures do not do it justice. No pictures do it justice. It just looks like some kind of 1950s radio on the printed page, but in the flesh it looks the business. It’s beautifully proportioned, the fit and finish is world class, the knobs feel right... the whole thing is how you’d imagine Modernist architects would want an amplifier to look and feel. It’s the kind of product you’d expect the hero of an Ayn Rand novel to build, while declaring something bold about individual rights and capitalism.

That power switch on the front panel makes the amp go into standby for 30 flashing blue LED seconds, then everything is up and running. There’s no need for separate taps for different impedances, just a single set of multi-way speaker terminals and five sets of phono sockets. Only mute and volume can be controlled from the little plastic handset and the front panel, and a processor toggle switch, ¼” headphone jack and toggle switch between speaker and headphone output completes the front panel, but more on that later.

The IT-85 does it from the middle outwards. In other words, it excels at making a sweet midrange first and foremost. And that midrange really draws you into the music; the SACD remaster of *Let It Bleed* ably demonstrated this, with tracks like ‘Love In Vain’ highlighting the interplay between acoustic and electric guitar, while Jagger’s voice is wonderfully clear and articulate. Before you jump to the conclusion that it lacks treble and bass, guess again. It has excellent, foot-tapping bass and fine, extended treble. Fine dynamics, too.

In that respect, it’s the valve amp for people who don’t normally like valve amps. It’s the amp that people who like Naim would actually like. That’s not because the IT-85 sounds like a solid-state amp – the mids are sweeter and there’s none of the spitch and siblance that can sometimes trip up solid-state,

especially with metal dome tweeters – but because the sound has that same sense of bounce, which gives the same play-another-disc fun factor. And none of the ploddy, blobby bass that solid-staters dismiss tube amps over.

What the IT-85 has over many rivals is how adaptable it is. You could use a good CD player and a pair of standmounts costing half as much as the IT-85, or you could make it the cheapest part of the system. In particular, it really benefits from a top-flight CD player – the Kog guys are really in favour of a maxed-out dCS front-end and that highlights just what the IT-85 can do. Similarly, you can put the amp on a side table or a high-quality platform and – while the sound gets smoother as you go up the scale – it sounds good on a side table. There isn’t a platform plateau, either; it sounded natural to begin with, and even more natural on a Vertex AQ Kinabalu. In short, it’s an amp that will grow with your listening.

“That’s the thing about VTL equipment... the IT-85 is part integrated amp, part gateway drug to more VTL-ness.”

With a good front end and speakers appropriate to the price and appropriately partnered with the IT-85, one of the big pluses is the imagery. The soundstage is open, wide and deep, with instruments neatly rooted in space. It scaled well too, not struggling when moving from uncomplicated girl-with-guitar music to full-tilt Pavarotti pumping out *Turandot* with those XXL lungs he had. But most of all is a sense of lucidity and insight that draws you in and keeps you there. ▶

▶ The only place where the IT-85 shows where it's not a bigger amp is when you start to raise the roof. It has a distinct loudness ceiling, beyond which it starts to sound creamy. Push it further and it goes all 'wall of sound' and closes up.

Let's be sensible here. It's a sixty watt amp, not a six watt triode or a six hundred watt behemoth. No one's really going to partner up the IT-85 with a pair of huge Wilsons or Magicos (or – given the Kog Konnection – Focal Grande Utopia EMs), and hopefully no-one's going to think a pair of 108dB horns will be a good match. Between these two extremes, it's such a great amplifier, it becomes something of a natural choice for those after a really right sounding device that will give you years of pleasure.

I mentioned the headphone socket earlier for a reason. By putting a toggle on the front panel to switch between speakers and headphones bestows the IT-85 with two big advantages. The first is a logical one – no more having to unplug headphones any time you want to listen to the main speaker system. The second is purely sonic; unlike most amplifiers, the IT-85's headphone socket does not have an headphone amplifier behind it... it has the whole damn amplifier. As a consequence, this is the finest headphone amplifier you'll probably ever hear. There's the tiniest amount of tube-rush noise – which is itself remarkable given the all-valve nature of the amplifier – but it is precisely the sound of the amplifier in microcosm. I can imagine some hardcore VTL users using this as a headphone amp in its own right, and I can also imagine people starting with the IT-85 and quickly migrating up to bigger things in the VTL portfolio. The only thing I can't imagine is someone entertaining another amplifier brand after buying your first VTL.

I started this review with pointing out the differences between US and UK audiophiles. The IT-85 is a perfect amp for many UK audiophiles. It's powerful enough to drive the sort of speakers we use to the levels we play in the rooms we live in. If that fits you, this is the kind of amplifier you could use for a long, long time. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

VTL IT-85 Integrated Amplifier

Inputs / Outputs: 5 Single-ended RCA / 1 pair 5 way binding posts

Input Sensitivity / Impedance: Line in: 180 mV, Amp in 575 mV / Line in 20kV, Amp in 135kV

Output Impedance: Amp Out: 1.55Ω, Headphone out: 16Ω, Preamp out: 400Ω

Power Consumption: Idle = 200W, Full Power = 600W

Valve Complement: 2 x 12AU7, 2 x 12AT7, 4 x EL34

Output Power: 60w (into eight ohms), 80w (into four ohms)
20Hz-25kHz ± 0.1dB < 3%

THD: (Stable to 2W)

(Load settings: Speakers: 5W
Headphones: 50-500W)

Small signal frequency response
(< 0.2% THD @ 1W): 1Hz-75kHz -3dB

Class of output operation: AB1

Dimensions (HxWxD): 40 x 28 x 17.75 cm

Weight: 29.5kg fully packed

Price: £4,650

Manufacturer: Vacuum Tube Logic

URL: www.vtl.com

Distributor: Kog Audio

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URL: www.kogaudio.com