

# Affordable\$\$Audio

*Issue Thirty-One: July 2008*

## Ideal Innovations Elite 80+ Amplifier

By Jeff Brown

[jeffbrown@affordableaudio.org](mailto:jeffbrown@affordableaudio.org)

### Specifications:

20 Watts r.m.s. per channel, class A/B  
 Ultra-Linear Circuitry,  
 6-way binding posts for 8 Ohms speakers  
 Total Harmonic Distortion (T.H.D.) @ 1kHz, 8 Ohms: Less than 1% at 15 Watts  
 Frequency Response: 25Hz - 22 kHz (-1 dB)  
 Background Noise Level: Less than 1.5 mV r.m.s. at 8 Ohms  
 Signal to noise ratio: 90 dB  
 Input sensitivity: 1.2 volt RMS signal will provide full output  
 Input Impedance: 100 KOhms  
 Output Impedance: 8 Ohms standard 4 and 16 Ohm taps available  
 Power Source: 120VAC  
 Power Consumption: 85 Watts at idle no less the 150 Watts at full output  
 Dimension: 12" (W) x 8.75" (D) x 7.5" (H)  
 Weight: 28 lbs  
 Tube Complements  
 6AV5GA x 4  
 12AX7 or equivalent x 2  
 Price: \$679 Retail (Often on sale for \$550)  
 Website: [www.IdeallInnovations.biz](http://www.IdeallInnovations.biz)



I am so sick of hearing "...what do you want for \$600..." from people in audio. Well I want a well-built, nice sounding, 20 watt tube amp. I want it to be at least partially point-to-point construction, and hand-made in North America. I want it to have quality components; including an independent volume control for the left and right channels. I want all of this for \$600! Well Syd Beaumont of Ideal Innovations said "No problem, I'll send you one by the end of the week!" Now that's what I call service! While the actual retail price of the amp being reviewed is \$679, it is frequently on sale for much closer to \$550.

Knowing that I was getting an unexpected level of features, with an ultra budget price tag I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, especially since I was expecting the lower cost Elite 80. Ideal Innovations sent the amp in a well-built single box. The amp was very well wrapped in bubble-wrap, when you pull it out of the box it is basically a huge ball of bubbles. The instruction manual includes a section on how to properly unwrap your new amp, which was indeed very helpful! The manual also has some great warnings and some other good information on tube handling. I like good manuals, I know plenty of people that toss them to the side, but for audio equipment I read every page. It really is amazing some of the things you can learn from the guys that build this stuff!

The design is very compact because of this all of the connections are on the top of the amp. To reiterate, there are no connections on the vertical rear panel. It was a bit startling at first to have the interconnect plugs in the front top section, but after some time even my wife got used to it. The volume controls are also very close to the 12AX7 tubes, I



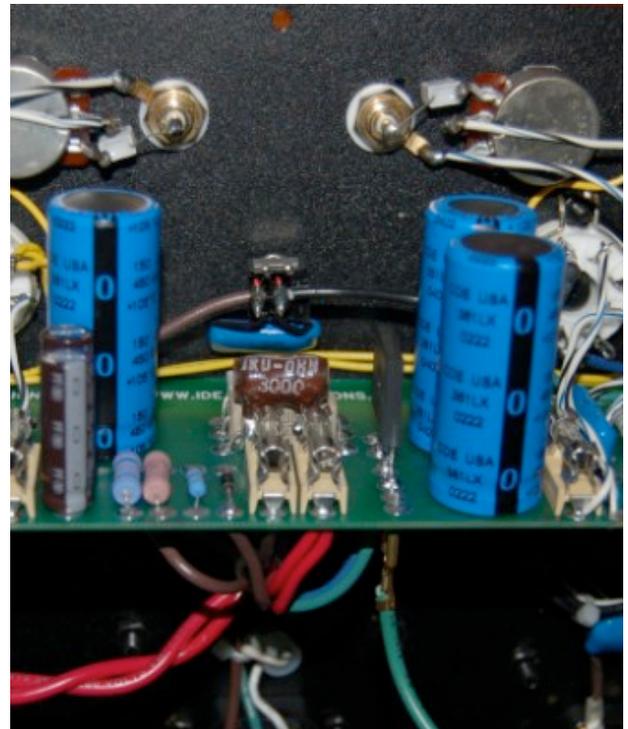
was initially a bit worried about possibly burning my knuckles on the hot tubes, but since I don't change the volume much mixed with the fact that I quickly added a my nOrh preamp to the setup ensured that I never burned myself.

The setup is very simple and simplified even more by a well-written instruction manual. The power tubes were matched and labeled, and the instructions indicated that socket 1 is the left most tube socket when viewed from the front. Because the amp does not require biasing and all of the connections are very easy to access setup was a breeze. A couple of notes about initial setup though. Because the interconnect cables attach in the front of the amp in order to avoid contact with the tubes they need to be routed either over the top or under the bottom of the amp. Many interconnects I tried with heavier shielding were too thick to fit under the amp and were routed over the top of the trans-

formers, all of that high current DC could be an issue for poorly shielded cables. Another small problem was that I couldn't play with alternative power cable options. The reason was that there is not adequate space between the IEC connector and the transformers to use any IEC connectors that are larger than the typical Audio/PC power cable that is included with the Elite 80+. It has been my experience that nicer power cables are almost always an affordable upgrade to budget tube equipment. This unfortunately is a casualty of the compact top connection design. The speaker connections are quite nice plastic 6 way binding posts. People with particularly large fingers could have a bit of trouble using bare wire or spade connections. The binding posts did cinch down securely on my spades, and they also kept a firm grip on the banana plugs that I used. Overall I thought that the ease of setup overwhelmed the one or two casualties of the compact design.

The Elite 80+ is essentially a power amp with potentiometers. While this inclusion could to some make this device an integrated amp I tend to disagree. I know there are some proponents of passive preamp designs out there that will disagree with me, but once I started using active preamps I never looked back. The argument that anything added by a preamp can't be good only held weight with me until I heard the increased presence and widening of soundstage that a good active preamp can provide above and beyond the simple volume attenuation provided by most passive solutions. While I didn't use the passive portion as a preamp, I did use it as a form of tone control. For this purpose I was very pleased with the added versatility that this feature added. By increasing the passed through current I was able to increase sonic quality I refer to as "air" to the amp. By reducing the current I could accentuate more of the lower midrange frequencies. This feature gave me the ability to tailor make my own sound based on what I wanted to hear from a particular recording. While we would all like to think that a great piece of equipment will just pass through the sound of the original recording, it is so often not the case. This ability to tweak the sound to match the tone I wanted was actually much appreciated. Most of the time the volume pots were set to just about 50%, and occasionally as high as 75%, once I found the sound I liked most of the time I left it there.

While I had this neat little amp I had some interesting things come through my listening room. Several speakers, including the little SVS monitors, a few speaker cables and interconnects. The Elite 80+ was more than adequate to the task of revealing subtle differences that each change made to the system. This I feel is as good of a measurement of a good piece of equipment as any. While my Elite 80+ was a stock amp, Ideal Innovations builds all of their own products and they are able to offer 15 upgrade options at the time of your order. Some of these seem very worthwhile, and others seem a bit redundant. You don't need to limit your customizations to the 15 listed either, I have it on good authority that they would even rear mount the power cord if you asked for it. If you can dream it Ideal Innovations will probably at least try to accomplish it, for a small (it really is quite small) fee. There are so few audio companies willing to



do anything special for you these days I find it impressive that Ideal Innovations is providing all of this and still asking, "What else can we do for you?"

Ideal Innovations chose to use a unique tube for this amplifier. According to the information I could find about the 6AV5GA it was once thought to be a mythical tube, but in reality it was a military invention. It turned out that they needed a tube that could handle most of stress of a KT88 but in a smaller package, slightly smaller than the 6L6 in size. So they designed and built a stockpile of these for an unknown military purpose. The tube looks like a squat 6L6, and sounds a bit like one too. The 6AV5GA does have bit of a different personality to it, but the tone is sweet and deep in to the low midrange. I really like the sound of the tube, and in this amp it runs rather cool leading me to believe it may have more power in reserves.



I decided to change things up a bit with my listening and I was please with how the Elite 80+ followed me through the progress. In the past I have setup a new piece in my existing system for A-B comparison with my existing system using music I am intimately familiar with. For this review I put the Quicksilver's away and left them there until the very end. I just listened to and enjoyed the Ideal Innovations offering until most of my notes were done. Then I pulled out the reference rig just to do a quick gut check on my opinions. The results were startling. At every comfortable volume level the Ideal innovations provided very a musical environment. I did this because while everyone needs a reference to know what good sound is, even with out it I can still recognize sound qualities that I either like or don't. The idea is that what I really want to know is whether or not I find an affordable piece pleasing and useable, I'm not trying to answer the better or worse then my existing system or not.

I did listen to all of my standards with the Elite 80+, and at times I found it difficult to detach from the music to listen for the more critical elements, every time that happened I was reminded of the WOW factor that is so awesome with affordable equipment. I am also impressed with the power and tone provided by these rare, but very heavy duty tubes. Once again these tubes run rather cool. The imaging detail was adequate with all recordings, and the soundstage could be very impressive with well-recorded pieces. Like any quality audio equipment if you feed the Ideal Innovations product garbage it will spit that right back out at you. There are affordable pieces that are very adequate at polishing up and smoothing out bad recordings, this isn't a trait I look for since I am usually trying to get as close to the music as possible. I much prefer the sonic characteristics of the Elite 80+ to the ilk of amplifiers designed to "clean" or "polish" to a particular sound.

The Ideal Innovations Elite 80+ epitomizes why I prefer affordable equipment to ridiculously priced products. I feel like there is real value in this product, and I have had no problem showcasing it in my listening room for groups of impressed audiophiles. No one I know of that has heard this piece has been less then impressed, and that is about the best praise I can think of for any piece of equipment. So thank you Syd for showing us exactly what every amp under \$1000 should be striving for.

#### Review Equipment:

Roku Soundbridge M1000 Network Music Player (WAV files served wireless)  
 Quicksilver Audio Silver Mono amplifiers  
 nOrh ACA2B Preamplifier  
 Fritz Frequencies loudspeakers  
 LJM Originals Loudspeakers  
 SVS SBS-01 Bookshelf Loudspeakers  
 Dayton Audio interconnects (3 foot)  
 Dayton Audio SCP-6 speaker cables (6 foot)  
 Audioquest Sidewinder interconnects (3 foot)  
 Audioquest CV-4 speaker cables (10 foot)