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John Mayer

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Portland's Rose Garden**

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IT IS ALL THAT

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A close-up photograph of the Manley Jumbo Shrimp microphone. The microphone is dark-colored with a perforated metal grille. The words "MANLEY" and "JUMBO SHRIMP" are printed in white on a dark oval area. Below this, a circular button is illuminated with a bright blue light and has the word "MUTE" printed above it. To the right, a portion of a volume knob is visible, with "OFF" and "ON" markings.

MANLEY
JUMBO SHRIMP

New and Improved

The Manley Jumbo Shrimp

By Todd Sageser

As much as I wanted to make fun of the name Jumbo Shrimp with a series of puns throughout the review, I must refrain. I've had so much fun listening to the Jumbo Shrimp that it's changed my listening habits, and that's a great thing. As a recording engineer, I am fully aware of Manley's reputation in my industry and I thoroughly enjoyed reviewing Manley's Massive Passive Stereo EQ back in Issue 17. It was my first experience with Manley's products, and I was blown away at how well it worked on a few of my mastering projects and the way it transformed my HiFi system. So I was curious to sample some of their home gear.



For those curious as to the difference between the old Shrimp and the new Jumbo Shrimp, Manley's Chris Dauray told us that in addition to the volume control functionality, they have added a White Follower buffer stage to better drive the volume control.

The Jumbo Shrimp has an MSRP of about \$2,300, and if I were judging by the pound while unpacking it, it certainly feels the part. For those curious as to the difference between the old Shrimp and the new Jumbo Shrimp, Manley's Chris Dauray told us that in addition to the volume control functionality, they have added a White Follower buffer stage to better drive the volume control. "This configuration also increases headroom while reducing distortion."

Affordable Excellence

As a reviewer on a moderate budget, I was glad to learn that the Jumbo Shrimp is affordable, as far as audiophile electronics are concerned. In today's world where \$10,000 for a preamplifier is commonplace, it's nice to see a product like this where every penny was put into what matters most, those things that maximize sound quality. Seeing six tubes under the hood brought back great memories of the Massive Passive – two 12AT7WA tubes are in the input section directly following the Input selector switch. Their output boosts the gain by about 12 dB, fed through the volume control, which is a high-quality Noble stereo attenuator, and two Noble balance-control potentiometers. A pair of 7044 tubes is used in the output stage. The circuitry uses high-quality polypropylene dielectric film-and-foil capacitors at all signal coupling points and a pair of metalized caps on the output.

Manley chose the simple, non-inverting single-ended signal path so that balancing ICs or transformers that could color the sound would not be needed, and the volume control is motorized, keeping additional circuitry to a minimum. It is controlled by the Remora Remote via RF.

In keeping with the overall look of other Manley products, the Jumbo Shrimp features a brushed dark-blue front panel in a standard 2U size with mounting holes. Its functionality is self-evident, with the volume control being the largest of the four control knobs. The remaining three control the power on/off, balance and five inputs. True to their old-school ethos, Manley includes a "tape" input. Nice. A small but bright blue Mute button

is directly underneath the backlit Manley logo on the front panel. Much like the ergonomics of their studio gear, you can get right to the business of listening without reading the instruction manual.

Around back, the Jumbo Shrimp features five pairs of gold RCA jacks for inputs, with two pairs of variable-output jacks wired in parallel. There is also a fixed output to use with a recording device of your choice. *(continued)*





Easy Integration

My modest system is built around a pair of Martin-Logan Summits, with the rest a combination of some old favorites and the equipment I use for studio mixing and mastering. My two main audio-input sources are a Technics SP10 MkII turntable with a Stax arm, Sumiko Blackbird MC cartridge and a modified Mark Levinson ML-1 preamp, and a pro DAC made by Digidesign, connected to a MacBook Pro. I mention these devices because the Jumbo Shrimp helped me rethink how I use each of them, and I will explain that.

For the first listen, I took the quarter-inch monitor outputs of my Digidesign DAC and routed them through the Jumbo Shrimp's RCA CD input jacks, then took the first pair of outputs to my amp, in essence just adding it in the chain of what I was already using. I put on some modern jazz just to see that I had the connections right and what gains might have changed. Immediately, I knew something good was happening. The music took on a new life. I had a flashback to the late 1970's when I connected my Audio Research SP-6 for the first time, but I knew that this was a far cry from the more staid sound of my last real experience with tube audiophile equipment.

With all of my initial music choices, I was hearing new layers, a wider sound space, and I noticed immediately that the low midrange had a power that I had not ever experienced in my current system. This was happening at no expense to the clarity of the lowest frequencies. The highs had a silkiness that gave me goose bumps. This was becoming a fun test drive, indeed.

After familiarizing myself further with the Jumbo Shrimp sound, I ventured into vinyl playback and made use of my SP-10, with the vintage Levinson preamp strictly as a phono stage going from the ML-1's tape outputs to minimize the signal path. Though I expected a warm, almost vintage sound from this arrangement, the bass was punchier than it sounded on the all solid-state Levinson preamplifier, and I could play the turntable louder than ever with no bass feedback.

During the next few months, I used the Jumbo Shrimp to audition my recording projects, and I patched in my Blu Ray player to use my system for two-channel playback of some of my favorite movies. *(continued)*

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Digital playback took another big jump in clarity and forced me to listen to many of my test selections again.

This preamplifier worked well, no matter what the situation. I became more and more a believer in this preamplifier's abilities.

The last step was to put the Jumbo Shrimp in the full control position of my system, eliminating the monitor control circuits, mute switch and level control (no doubt removing a handful of op amps from the signal path), going straight through the Digidesign DAC into the Manley. Digital playback took another big jump in clarity and forced me to listen to many of my test selections again.

The Sound

Joe Sample is one of my favorite go-to jazz artists, best known for his piano and keyboard playing with the Crusaders. With a number of his group and solo recordings on vinyl and CD, I started with *Carmel* for the balance of instruments in the mix. I've always been convinced *Voices in the Rain* was edgier and lacking life, but the Jumbo Shrimp showed me what I had been missing. With back-to-back comparisons to my vintage preamplifier, everything from the piano to the violin solos had more texture. Vocal textures that had been flat hovered hauntingly in the mix, and the vocal sibilance was gone.

I heard Sample's mastery of subtle layers of synths hidden behind the piano, the vocal and the real strings. Even the drumming showed plenty of new activity. The snare tones were varied so much, the side stick was so rich, and the bass drum that before could only be discerned as a thud was turned into a big round sound with incredible snap. When the drummer really got on it, I could distinctly hear varying stick technique on the cymbals. The mushiness that used to hamper the sound of the bass now could be heard as a whole variety of phasing and flanging effects, and the Jumbo Shrimp really showed the intricacies of the player.

I listened to Oliver Vernet playing a range of Bach organ favorites and could hear a

wider soundspace than ever – the action of the organ, the differences in voicing on different ranks of pipes and the occasional rumbling of the blower. I was amazed at how well this affordable preamplifier was at rekindling the excitement in my music system, proving you don't need to invest megabucks to get great sound. I spent a lot of time revisiting music that I've been listening to for years, both for enjoyment and equipment evaluation.

I must admit that I'm also a lover of pop music. I was blown away when listening to John Mayer's first album, *Room For Squares*, noticing how much more the variety of vocal overdubs and guitar layers popped out of the mix. The song "Neon" builds layer upon layer of subtle, beautiful guitars as it progresses, and the drum kit is stellar, with the bass drum now sounding like it is right in front of you.

I had a similar experience with Michael Franks' last album, *Rendezvous in Rio*, with Franks' voice on the title track standing out much better than before, with no hint of the vocal harshness I've noticed on other systems when playing this cut. I was even surprised at the great transient attack while listening to some of my favorite techno tracks; I had been worried that a tube preamplifier might round things off too much, but this was just another test the Manley passed with ease.

Conclusion

I could go on and on about my music selections and what I heard, but I can sum it up best by saying that I never thought a preamp in this price range could make such a huge difference in my system. If you are a music lover that has to work on a budget, I highly recommend the Manley Jumbo Shrimp. It is a solidly built product with a lot of musical character that should make for an excellent anchor to your system.

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I spent quite a few hours with the original Manley Shrimp preamplifier, and I was ready to give it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for last year, when Ms. Manley let me know that there was a newer model on the horizon and we should “stop the presses” for now. It was a great little preamplifier at a great price, but the new Jumbo Shrimp is an improvement in every way.

Living up to the promise, the Jumbo Shrimp is an outstanding preamplifier that offers up a slightly warm overall presentation. For almost all systems, this is a good thing; I’ll always take a touch of romance over a touch of harsh detail any day. The Jumbo Shrimp reminds me of all the great tube preamps of my youth from Marantz, McIntosh, CJ and ARC. It’s a simple, basic, no-nonsense design that delivers the goods.

While I had a great time listening to it through a few modestly powered solid-state amplifiers, I got all the way in the time machine by pairing it up with my recently acquired Marantz 8B power amplifier. Yeah baby, that’s tube romance at its best. Now you know why EveAnna Manley’s company slogan is: “Tubes Rule.”

There’s not much I can add to Todd’s insightful commentary in terms of the sound quality of the Jumbo Shrimp, but it is worth noting that the Manley website mentions that this new buffer circuit “will drive anything.” I can verify this claim, using a 20-foot pair of Cardas Golden Reference cables between the Manley and the Marantz with no problems whatsoever.

For 2,300 bucks, I can’t think of a better tube preamplifier on which to spend your hard-earned dollars, and I award the Manley Jumbo Shrimp one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010. ●

The Manley Jumbo Shrimp
MSRP: \$2,300

MANUFACTURER

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Sources Technics SP-10 w/Stax arm, Sumiko Blackbird cartridge, Technics SL-1200 w/SME 309 arm, Sound HiFi Mods and Clearaudio Maestro Wood cartridge

Phono Preamplifiers Modified Mark Levinson ML-1 (phono stage only), Nagra VPS/VFS

Power Amplifiers Acoustat TNT, McIntosh MC275, Marantz 8B, Moscode AU402, McIntosh MC402

Speakers MartinLogan Summit, Harbeth Monitor 40.1

Cable Shunyata, Cardas, Audioquest

