



Pass Labs XA30.8 class A stereo amplifier Review

By: Jack Roberts | January 2015



In my review of the First Watt SIT-1 mono-blocks, I said, “If you’ve been an audiophile as long as I have, Nelson Pass is probably nearly a legend to you. I remember in my early twenties drooling over the Threshold amps. In the mid 80s he designed the real bargain amp of the day, the Adcom GFA-555 amplifier. For the past few years I’ve noticed as I attended audio shows, that I consistently enjoyed the rooms that used Pass Labs amplification.” Still, this the first review of a Pass Labs product for me. I have used a couple of Pass Labs phono stages, but never long enough for a review.

The reason for this review is kind of interesting. I knew I had a pair of Wayne Picquet’s restored Quad 57 coming in for a while, so I was trying to figure out what amp I wanted to use with them. Years ago when I owned the 57 my two favorite amps to use with them were the Bedini 25/25 and even better, the original 25-watt Electrocompaniet. Both of these were Class A transistor amps. I was not able to find anyone who had either of these two to spare, so I begin to look for a current production amp that was a low wattage Class A amp. There were less choices available than I had expected, but the just released Pass Labs XA30.8 looked perfect on paper. When you combined this with the fact that one of the constants at audio shows is how good rooms with Pass Labs amps sound, I requested an XA30.8 for review and the people at Pass Labs were nice enough to send me one.

In fact, they were so quick getting it to me that I had the XA30.8 in before the Quad 57 arrived. Even though 30 watts is a bit of overkill for my 104 dB efficient Teresonic Ingenium XR Silver, I decided to start the review using it with them. I also used the XA30.8 with the new 47 Labs Alnico Lens II bookshelf speakers and the Audio Note K/SPe.

Pass Labs’ new line of amps, the “XA.8” are designed to bring us amps that are even closer to the company’s “Xs” amps. Pass Labs says the “XA.8” amps were issued to celebrate the company’s 23rd Anniversary. The output stages of the .8 amplifiers bias more deeply into the Class-A operating region. The XA30.8 tops out at 40 volts and 20 amperes and like all the other XA models, produces 26dB of voltage gain. Their larger push-pull Class-A operating

area is said to deliver lower distortion and additional loudspeaker control at ordinary listening levels. With the XA.8 they also uniquely molded each model's front ends to the specifics of its output stage so that the nine amplifiers' front ends vary in size, voltage, bias current, dissipation, and single-ended vs. push-pull bias distribution. They also used larger power supplies, more storage capacitance, more precise reference voltages, and new, larger heat sinks. The amp is really heavy and the heat sinks are fairly sharp, just a word of warning.

Description

The look of the Pass Labs XA30.8 has changed somewhat from the XA30.5. The faceplate in particular has changed. For last few years Pass Lab amplifiers have looked a lot like the X.5 series which has a two-part face plate. The front section had a circular opening framing the large round bias meter which was mounted on a second sub panel. Now, only the X.5 line retains this two-piece sculptured look. I'll be honest, I really thought they looked classy. While the new XA.8 series looks really nice, I still liked the older look. The XA.8 series has a simple .75-inch front panel that is a single slab of aluminum with beveled edges and the large round bias meter centered on the front face. The meter shows the current draw of the amp. When the XA30.8 amp is operating in Class A the needle stays at 12 o'clock or very close to it. When the amp goes out of Class A the pointer may move to the right. It never did this with any of the speakers I used, regardless of how loud I played them, and I like loud music.

The XA30.8 is 19 inches wide and 21.25 inches deep, which means it won't fit on a lot of people's racks; I barely got it on mine because the amp is double wide. One other point, be sure it has lots of room to breathe; like all Class A amps it runs hot, thankfully not as hot as the First Watt SIT-1, probably due to its massive heat sinks. They look like something you would see on an amplifier that puts out several hundred watts. One warning: the heat sinks are extremely sharp as I learned the hard way. (Wait a minute, those cuts on your legs I saw the other day, I thought it was from the door of your sports car... -Pub.)

The only button on the Pass Labs XA30.8's front panel is for power but around back you'll find both unbalanced RCA inputs and balanced XLR inputs. It comes with U shaped jumpers in the XLR sockets. If you chose the RCA inputs then the XLR input sockets must have the U shaped jumpers connecting the input pin 3 to pin 1, ground. You will also find four massive speaker cable binding posts that unlike the X.5 amps, they do accept banana plugs, the main AC power switch, a 5 Ampere fuse socket and below the fuse is an IEC power cord receptacle. The last thing on the back is the one I was most thankful for, two big, heavy weight handles. Come to think about it why doesn't everyone put them on the back instead of the front.

Setup

My reference system consist of the AMG Viella V12 turntable, Soundsmith SG-220 Strain-Gauge cartridge, Emia Remote Autoformer, Teresonic Ingenium XR speakers with Lowther DX4 silver drivers, High Fidelity Cables CT-1 and CT-1 Ultimate Reference interconnects, speaker cables, and power cables plugged into a HB Cable Design PowerSlave Marble. The amp the Pass Labs XA30.8 replaced was my beloved Wavac EC-300B with NOS Western Electric 300Bs and NOS Western Electric front end tubes. When I say beloved, I like this amp so much that I built my system around it. With a shipping weight of 106 pounds the hardest thing about setting the Pass Labs XA30.8 up was unboxing it and getting onto my Box Furniture Company D3S Audio Rack. With it in the system I plugged an iPod into the Emia Remote Autoformer and let it play for the Labor Day weekend. I figured I got about 100 hours on it while I watched baseball, college football and enjoyed a day in the Napa Valley. It continued to slightly improve for the next couple of hundred hours.

Breaking-In and Warm-Up

The Pass Labs XA30.8 amp requires a lot of power; it draws 375 watts from your AC. So, it should be no surprise that it takes a while to break-in. This amp was brand new and when it was first turned on it's got the new electronics smell that I have noticed before with some new equipment. By the way when it goes away the amp is more than half way broken-in. Now don't get me wrong the XA30.8 sounds great right out of the box but just slightly veiled. These veils will be lifted with time. Warm-up is an issue I seldom talk about. My Wavac EC300B sounds great in about 15 minutes and I never turn off my Electrocompaniet in the other system. Because of the heat and draw of the XA30.8 you will probably want to make use of that standby switch. The amp takes nearly an hour to come to life when coming out of standby but if you turn it completely off with the switch on the back, then it's a different story. It takes at least half a day of playing to come around.



Listening

IMPORTANT, don't miss this point. I'm going to spend a lot of time comparing the XA30.8 to the sound of my Wavac EC300B (\$31,000 with the tubes I am using in it) and the First Watt SIT-1 mono blocks (\$10,000). Please remember the XA30.8 costs \$6,500 and puts out three times the power of these amps. My first impression of the Pass Labs XA30.8 was that this amp was powerful and really controlled the speakers. The second thing was that it had real immediacy, transparency, and the alive sound I value so much, but it sounded fundamentally different than my Wavac EC300B or Nelson Pass' First Watt SIT-1 mono blocks I reviewed not long ago. Don't misunderstand me, just because they sounded different from my beloved EC300B didn't mean they don't sound damn fine; they do.

What do I mean by fundamentally different? Well, it begins with the way the XA30.8 really controls the speakers. It controls them even more than the First Watt SIT-1 did which I thought excelled at this point. By control, I don't mean a lack of dynamics. Still even with 30 watts versus 10, the 30.8 is no more dynamic than the Wavac EC300B. The XA30.8 gets really big or really loud without losing control, but it does not have the same ability for the sound to swell and become bigger as well as louder in the same way the Wavac EC300B or the First Watt SIT-1 could. To help you understand this I'm going to go back to my review of the First Watt SIT-1 where I said: "For example on Ella and Louie, Louie's trumpet swells, comes to life, and gets very loud without a hint of glare or edge. Another example is Nancy Bryan's voice on "Neon Angel" which swells, comes to life, but also sounds really under control. It took me some time to decide if this was a plus or minus, but in the end it was a bit of a minus to me. To others it could easily be a plus, but to me I prefer the raw aliveness of the Wavac." This difference I'm describing was very close between those two amps, but is more significant with the Pass Labs XA30.8.

With the Pass Labs XA30.8, it's the speakers not the sound that is controlled. By this I mean Louie's trumpet comes to life, gets very loud, and has more bite than either of the other two amps. It does this still without any hint or glare. The fact that the trumpet has more bite doesn't mean it sounds quite as alive as the Wavac or the First Watt. The trumpet sounds just as loud or louder with the XA30.8 but not quite as big and not as much air as it has with the other two amps. Now if we know that Louie didn't walk up and stick his trumpet in the mic the XA30.8 is more accurate. If he did as I often experience at live performances than the other two amps are more accurate. We can't know this or do I know if it matters. What matters is that all three amps are very alive sounding and extremely emotionally involving.

Another way that the XA30.8 is fundamentally different from the two is how it builds the sound. Both the EC 300B, an SET tube amp, and the First Watt SIT, a single-ended class A transistor amp, build the sound from the midrange out. It's like the midrange is the main attraction, and the bass and treble are there to finish out the sound. The Pass Labs XA30.8 builds the sound on a foundation of bass, mid-bass and power. The midrange is immediate, but does not sound as scary real as it does on the other two amps. I guess I'm saying that the Wavac and First Watt have that bloom that SET lovers so revere. Still, the XA30.8 is very intoxicating to this SET lover.

The bass of the Pass Labs XA30.8 has more weight, more slam and is still faster than the other two amps. What this amp did for the bass of the Audio Note K by the way, was just beyond words. I know everyone seems to think you need to play Audio Note speakers with their amps, but a couple of the best sounds I have heard from Audio Note speakers was with the XA30.8, and another time with a pair of Goldmund amps.

Like some great vintage amps and the deHavilland amps the 30.8 has big tone. This is the last thing I had expected from a 30-watt, class A transistor amp and may I say it was a wonderful surprise. This combined with the control and power of the amp is quite amazing. Don't misunderstand me, in no way does the Pass Labs XA30.8 sound "tubey." It just has a big, full colored tone.

Along with "big tone" the XA30.8 has great scale and a huge soundstage. In both of these areas it betters the Wavac EC300B and First Watt SIT-1. It's not the kind of big that makes everything big, but it has appropriate scale for instruments and voices. Likewise the soundstage is not always big, but it can be wider, deeper and taller than I have heard my system get before. It's the kind of soundstage that when combined with good imaging and detail lets you hear the recording with realistic, holographic imaging. Another area where the XA30.8 bettered the two single ended amps was in top-end sparkle. It was not the least bit etched, just simply beautiful.

There were three areas where both the EC300B and SIT-1 excelled that the Pass Labs was a close second on, and surely the best I had heard from any amp having more than 10 watts. Those areas were the exceptional layering the XA30.8 had. It was very close here to the other two more expensive amps and the best I have heard from any other transistor amp other than the SIT-1 monoblocks. Next was the way it let you hear the space and air around performers, and that was also the best I have heard from any amp that was not SET or the SIT-1.

Then lastly, the Pass Labs XA30.8 excelled at musical flow, something only a handful of amps do very well. The music flowed in a most natural and realistic way. Where the other two amps highlight the midrange and have a very impressive sense of air, the XA30.8 will simply let the music flow in so that you can experience the performance in a wonderful balanced and natural way.

Conclusion

From a dyed-in-the-wool SET guy, let me tell you I could easily live with the Pass Labs XA30.8. I will go further than that: If I was the kind of guy who owns more than one amp at a time, I would own this amp. The longer I listen the more I feel that way. If you don't want tubes or you need more power than many SETs, I can't imagine where you would find a better amp. At HiFi show after HiFi show you see more rooms that use Pass Labs amps. It has also been my experience that these are often the rooms that sound great. This along with how much I liked the First Watt SIT-1 made me very excited to hear the latest version of Pass Lab's 30-watt amp in my own system. I tell you in no way was I disappointed. At this point in time I can safely say the Pass Labs XA30.8 is the best amp I have heard for under \$9,000 and with many speakers it's the best amp I have ever heard. Very highly recommended and stay tuned to hear how the XA30.8 sounded with Wayne Picquet's restored Quad 57.