



TUBE ROMANCE

IN THE **FAP-V1**, SURROUND-SOUND PIONEER JIM FOSGATE COMBINES MODERN HOME THEATER WITH THE OLD-FASHIONED WARMTH OF VACUUM-TUBE ELECTRONICS.

BY STEVE GUTTENBERG PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN PHILLIP

FOSGATE AUDIONICS' FAP-V1 IS A VERY DIFFERENT sort of home theater product. One glance at this creation immediately raises the question, "Why tubes in a surround-sound processor?" The reason the FAP-V1 uses tubes instead of a circuit board full of digital sound-processing chips can be summed up with three words: drama, soul and emotion.

There is nothing practical about tubes. Compared to products made with transistors, tube electronics generate more heat, use electricity much less efficiently and cost far more to build. And transistor sound, by every technical measure, is more accurate. But to the ears, tube sound is so much more involving. The music bypasses your head and goes straight to your heart.

The FAP-V1 offers plenty to delight those who are more interested in visual delights than audio pleasures; its back-to-the-future copper and bubinga wood chassis bespeaks high-end nirvana for audiophiles and design mavens alike.

Then again, pretty much everything about this processor is unique. The adjective is, of course, overused, but this is no hype: The FAP-V1's *raison d'être* is its all-analog implementation of Dolby Pro Logic II surround processing, which appears in no other product save Rockford Fosgate's RFQ5000 automotive surround-sound processor.

Pro Logic II is one of the most useful surround-sound technologies ever developed. It converts stereo sound from CDs, records, FM radio, TV shows, VHS tapes, older DVDs, etc. to

full-blown 5.1-channel surround sound. The Dolby-licensed, all-digital version of Pro Logic II can be found in virtually every surround-sound receiver and processor sold today, but the analog version is unique to the FAP-V1 and the RFQ5000. As it happens, Jim Fosgate, the FAP-V1's creator, also invented Pro Logic II. The FAP-V1 is based closely on his original all-tube Pro Logic II circuit, and it is a more faithful realization of Fosgate's original concept than the digital Pro Logic II found in the surround-sound receivers cluttering Circuit City's shelves.

Fosgate's pioneering efforts in surround sound stretch back to the early 1970s. Surprisingly, movies are not his first priority; his work is intended to be savored primarily by music lovers.

You can hear this in the way the FAP-V1 makes love to K.D. Lang's glorious voice, and you will swear there is nothing less than pure magic flowing through those tubes. K.D. is right there, her voice and body fully formed, belting out her amazing sound. The sound is softer and gentler than transistors would provide, but paradoxically the FAP-V1 also delivers an extra shot of adrenaline to rock CDs.

The icing on the cake is Pro Logic II's luscious surround sound. It is actually more realistic than what I hear from most of the Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio surround-sound recordings in my collection, and those "super" discs sport five completely discrete main channels plus a separate subwoofer channel. You can take your Pro Logic II surround "straight up"

or fiddle the front controls to tweak the sound to your liking.

The Panorama control expands or shrinks the wraparound effect, pulling sound from the front speakers outward and redirecting it toward the rear speakers. Turning up the Panorama control creates a deeper, more enveloping surround effect. The Center Width control mixes the audio from the center speaker into the left and right speakers for a bigger and bolder sound. Yes, you can overdo these effects, but even then the sound is never electronic or artificial. Last, the Matrix control spreads older, monophonic movies into all 5.1 channels—a useful tool despite the fact that it fails to improve Keanu Reeves' acting.

I do not fuss with the controls much after becoming accustomed to their effects; however, I do not leave them in their "flat" positions. I prefer the Panorama and Center Width controls up a notch or two. You also have the choice of switching off Pro Logic II and listening in pure, unprocessed stereo.

Operating some of today's more advanced digital surround-sound processors can prove a daunting task. That is why some manufacturers now resort to placing miniature video screens on the front panels to display a processor's comings and goings. In my opinion, all this complexity is getting to be a bit much. FAP-V1 owners have it comparatively easy. They will never be frustrated by incomprehensible on-screen menus because the FAP-V1 offers none. Only the FAP-V1's LED Logic Display centered on the front panel supplies any visual indication; it shows which channels (left, center, right, left surround and right surround) of the system are active.

Nor does the FAP-V1 offer any form of video switching or digital audio processing. And it steadfastly refuses integration with automation systems and modern touchscreen controllers. All you can do is flick on the power switch, sit back, watch the tubes glow and enjoy the sound.

Oh, there is just one other caveat: Fosgate did not include remote control capability. Blasphemy! FAP-V1 owners have no choice but to use their get-up-off-the-couch muscles to adjust the volume, change an input or adjust the surround-sound mode. The volume knob's feel is also different; instead of a vel-



RETRO ROCKET: The FAP-V1's lush sound softens lighter fare, yet adds extra thrust to rock and pop recordings.

ety smooth rotation, the knob moves through detents (you have a choice of 23 discrete volume settings). You see, Jim Fosgate carefully scrutinized every part that might adversely affect sound quality and found no conventional volume control up to snuff.

The usual digital surround-sound technologies—Dolby Digital and DTS—are, of course, nowhere to be found in the FAP-V1. However, many DVD players, including such universal SACD/DVD-A players as my Denon DVD-2900, already incorporate these technologies, and you can easily connect them into the FAP-V1. With one of these universal machines, you can use the FAP-V1's tube circuitry to warm up the digital surround sound in DVDs, DVD-As and SACDs.

Luxuriating in the tube sound is addictive. Even old, harsh-sounding DVDs like *The Godfather* sound absolutely marvelous. Comparing this quality with the sound of my favorite digital surround-sound processor puts the FAP-V1's talents in perspective; the digital unit does sound tonally cooler, yet more detailed. An apt analogy: The digital processor is high-resolution video, while the tubes summon up a lush Technicolor. Call me a hedonist, but I prefer my sound extra juicy.

The Fosgate FAP-V1 may very well be the ultimate product for the gizmo-weary music lover. And what an exclusive offering it is: Each of the 50 limited-edition units is hand-numbered and signed by Jim Fosgate. Get it while you can. **HE&D**

■ **PRICE:** \$13,000

■ **CONTACT:** 866.777.7282 or www.fosgateaudionics.com



In operation, the FAP-V1 seems more like a 1960s Fender Twin guitar amplifier than a modern surround-sound processor. It offers no buttons, no on-screen menus, no video switching and no remote control. Every user interface is old-style, either a switch or a variable resistor. While the FAP-V1's amplification circuits use tubes exclusively, the Pro Logic II circuitry employs a few integrated circuits.