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# Purple Rain

## *The Legend Audio Starlet Integrated Amplifier*

BY KEN KESSLER

**C**onfession time: I knew I was going to like Legend Audio's Starlet True Integrated Amplifier the instant I opened the box and found myself looking at something finished in a fetching shade of purple. Or mauve. Or lilac. Or violet. Or whatever the color chart calls it. Suffice it to say, I was as charmed—rightly or wrongly—by the hue just as I was by the Synthesis Nimis (seven shades of ice cream colors) and the Nightingale Armonia in its prototype shade of pale metallic lavender. This obviously brands me as shallow, as one who is as easily seduced by styling as by performance, but, hey—after 32 years of looking at an endless procession of black or silver boxes festooned with knobs, I celebrate anyone with the stones to go Kodachrome.

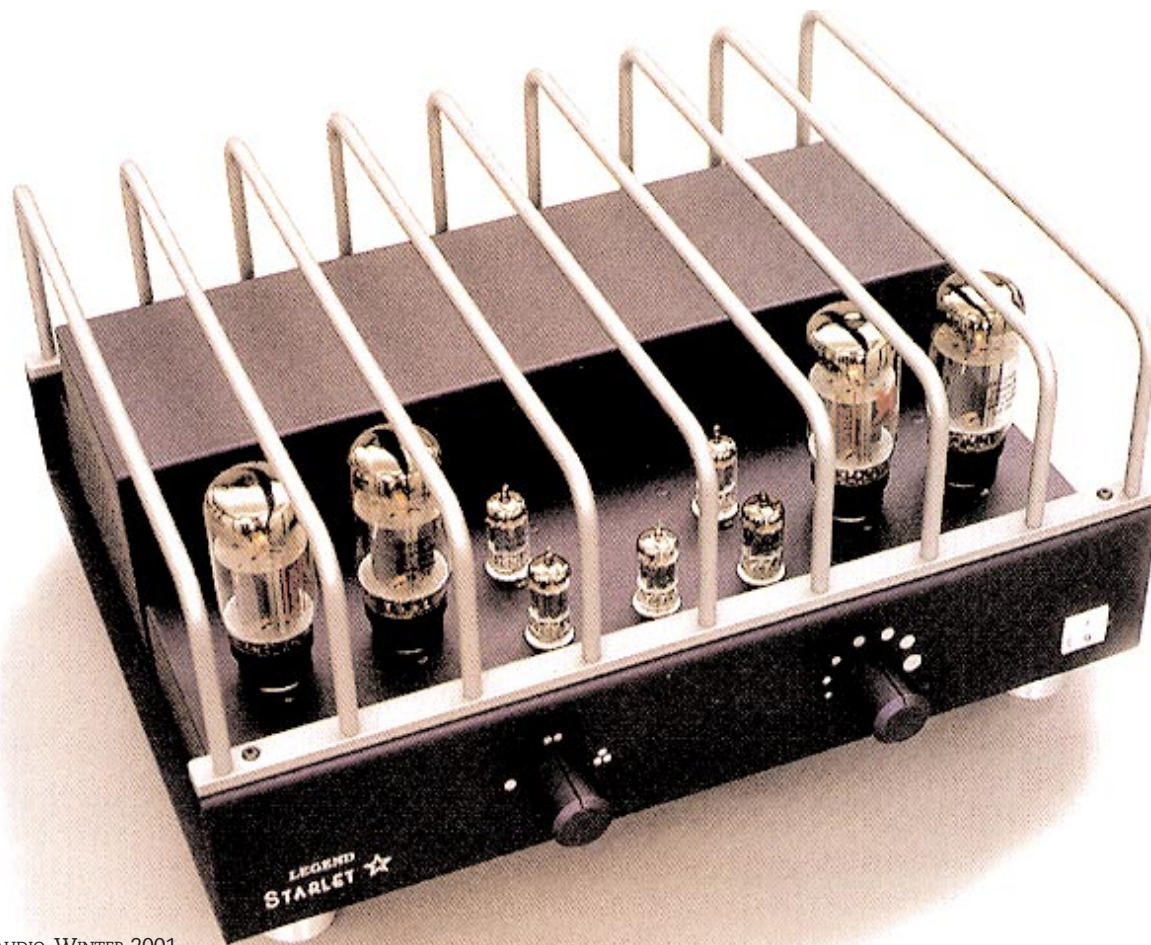
But it's not just the color that beguiled me: this unit is a winsome mix of vintage/retro styling fillips, post-modernism, neo-minimalism and a whole other bunch of "isms" which make it look like nothing else... despite consisting of a chassis, some

tubes and a cage. And it looks—how do I put this?—friendly, because there's something tongue-in-cheek about it, like a Bowie knife with a smiley face on the handle.

Take, for example, the labels for the source selector: instead of 1,2,3 or

CD/TUN/AUX, the company printed one, two and three dots. No numbers, no words. Talk about iconism: even the Koreans can't insist on use of the local lingo when you have pictograms so damned obvious. And the volume control? No 1-10 (or 1-11 for Spinal Tappers), no -infinity to 0 dB, not even a ring of indices. Instead, it's simply an arc of seven dots, smallest to largest. Again, if you need this explained, then you shouldn't be trusted with matches or be allowed to pee standing up.

You can't escape the Fisher-Price-ness because everywhere you look, there's some other anti-high-tech backlash detail. The second part of the name baffles me—"True Integrated Amplifier" as opposed to what? "The Bogus Integrated Amplifier"? And "Starlet"? Whatever can they follow it with? "Jaded Hollywood Hag"? "Oscar-Winning Diva"? "The Gwyneth"? Other than that, it's all warm and fuzzy. The feet



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are oversized, like Bozo's, or the clowns in *Dumbo*. Big knobs, big cage—anodized grey if you order the purple Starlet—a full-width cover to hide any ugly bits like transformers or capacitors. And the no-gloss finish is so, so tactile, so anti-techno-fear that it's almost as if someone in Legend Audio's Berkeley HQ had been seconded from working for Barney the Dinosaur.

### NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE

Underneath, though, it's another story. The Starlet is a dual-mono design with separate left-and-right driver boards, set to run in triode form—there are two 6550s per channel—in Class A mode. The pre-amplifier, with 20 dB of gain, and the driver section consist of five 5814A tubes, while the designer parts litany includes a high-performance ALPS potentiometer, Holco resistors, and capacitors from Solen and Siemens. I'm not sure who made the terminals, but the speakers are connected via solid multi-way binding posts and the inputs are secure, gold-plated RCAs. Legend Audio employs hard-wiring with the company's own silver cables, and the output transformer is a proprietary design created to extract the most and best from the bottom octaves.

If fuss-free set-up is any indication, then Legend Audio clearly doesn't want you hanging around waiting for musical bliss; the Starlet was one of the fastest-to-install tube products I've used. Upon opening the box, the first thing you see is a warning telling you not to pick up the unit by the cage. That's there just to protect the tubes, not to serve as grab handles. Once out, you see that Legend Audio ships the unit with the five pre-amplifier tubes in place, and the four output tubes packed separately. Because the design of the cage is so funky/modern, the rods are spaced far enough apart to allow you to insert the 6550s while still offering enough protection to prevent accidents through knocks and bumps. Unlike mesh cages, though, you could still conceivably drop some tool on the Starlet—a screwdriver, for example—which could hit a valve and wreak havoc.

Because the pictograms on the front made usage such a no-brainer, I didn't even look at the owner's manual. Which, it turns out, is so brief that it could have been written by Calvin Coolidge. At the

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front are the volume control, source selector and on/off rocker switch (in white, to match the logo). At the back, three pairs of RCA sockets, speaker terminals, AC input, and fuse holder. That's it: no bias controls, balance control, remote facilities, tape loop—nada, gornisht, zip.

Does this send out a specific message? If so, it's a confused one, because the unit exhibits a sort of schizophrenia that could only exist in audio. On the one hand, we have a product clearly designed to appeal beyond a market consisting of, say, single-ended triode casualties who automatically distrust anything that looks good. For those hair-shirt masochists, hi-fi equipment has to look like it was made by a blacksmith; the Starlet could have been made by Alessi. It makes me think of the Audi TT, the Canon Elph and other design icons that work within a given discipline, adhere to the rules, and yet still look fresh. Most of all, it says, "Buy me!!! Indulge yourself!!!"

But on the other hand, you see that it couldn't be any more minimalist if it tried, and minimalist hi-fi is the sole preserve of the hair-shirt masochist. As I said above: no tape loop, no balance control, no remote control. These omissions are NOT understood by non-audiophiles who put up with the sort of crap that must have marketing people in other industries laughing to the point of pain.

### THE CASTING COUCH

As this audience isn't the same as that for *Wallpaper*, it's not an issue. What matters for you is the sound, the whole sound, and nothing but the sound. And here—thank goodness—the Starlet delivers. But it operates within a clearly defined set of conditions, unlike powerhouse amplifiers which all but are oblivious to electronic mismatches. (I had a hard time explaining to a certain group of audiophiles that I like working with a big Krell when reviewing speakers because it laughs at low sensitivity, weird impedances, etc.) In this respect,

it's a bit like the typical 300B single-ended weedy amplifier which can only be used with horns because everything else will show it up for the gutless wonder it is. But not totally. Unlike an amplifier with a lone 300B per channel in single-ended mode, the Starlet does deliver a useful 40 W rather than 4 W, and I had no trouble driving what I hoped were four utterly disparate loads: LS3/5As (15 ohm type), Wilson WATT Puppy 6, Avalon Avatar and Quad ESL63s.

As I grow older, I have less interest in and time for tweaking-for-the-sake-of-it. I figure that I should use the time left to me listening to music, not screwing around with pointy feet, damping fluids or magic dots. And while I did try some weird feet for the heck of it, they made no difference: the unit is so well constructed that microphony, for example, had been addressed in the design stage. Aside from the need to kill a teensy-weensy buzz here and there, it was virtually tweak-resistant. So the Starlet was auditioned *au naturel*, fed by the Krell KSP25sc, resting on my concrete floor with its own feet beneath it. The only concession I made to tweakdom and to Legend Audio was to use the supplied Lemaa interconnect, a 1.5 m length, between Krell and Starlet. The speakers were connected to the Starlet with Harmonix SH-101 wire, which I have been wedded to for years because it's so neutral.

I don't know what Legend Audio's policy is regarding run-in, but the unit improved dramatically over a week of constant use before settling into the groove I hope to describe below. As I said, Legend Audio wants you to have fun in seconds, and the Starlet was impressive even from cold, but that first session—the Persuasions' "Love Is All Around," the new Keb' Mo' CD, Emmylou Harris' *Red Dirt Girl*—was misleading. First impressions were of an amplifier with "vintage sound" written all over it, classic fat sound with a bit more thwack down below. Which would be to do this an injustice: for a tenth

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of the price, you could just go out and find some old, serviceable Dynaco.

Glassware, cage, odd color, retro hints—this amplifier denies its appearance in the same manner as a retro sports car with modern innards: modern brakes that work, electricals that don't fry, wipers that clean. The Legend Audio Starlet only exposes its links to the past by mounting the tubes in your face, and by emitting that odd mechanical buzz, or low level hiss consistent with tubeware the world over. What happens after the amplifier has been running in for a week or so makes me think of the changes your computer yields when you defrag the disk: it got faster, leaner, quicker... zippier.

Settling down, then, to a unit with at least 100 hours on it, I was ready to torture the sucker. Returning to the Persuasions' eye-moistening take on "Love Is All Around," I heard just how big the amplifier can sound. The vocalists surrounded the speakers (both the Wilsons and the Avalons) in a way that was previously the preserve of the tiny LS3/5A but denied the

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bigger speakers. Because the sound was huge and of a whole, it was easier to hear each of the vocalists in something approximating individual spaces. But the clincher wasn't the spatial grandeur so much as the handling of the deepest voices. Repeatedly, I was taken aback by the sheer weight added to the performance by Jimmy Hayes' vocals. A human equivalent of the Kodo drummers? Perhaps.

Normally, this wouldn't be so shocking. This is kid's stuff for big pre/power combinations with 10 times the power. But this is a 40 W/ch integrated amplifier,

and I have a six-foot pair of speaker cables that costs more. Still, let's not get carried away here: the Starlet is not a juggernaut of an amplifier designed to knock down walls. Its limits are reached when huge dynamic sweeps come along, and it was those self-same Kodo drummers that showed how the Starlet could be made to sound undernourished. It's here that you admit that correct speaker selection is paramount—out with the Avalons, in with the Quads, out with the Wilsons, in with the LS3/5As. It's not even about sensitivity or impedance—it's about power delivery combined with

speed and range, and the Starlet is a 40 W/ch integrated, not a kilowatt floor-shaker.

#### ROLE-PLAYING

Stay within its bounds, though, and the rewards are plentiful. That bass control and extension underlines a warm yet clean midband which strikes me as partial to woody sounding instruments and rich male voices. A dollop of Emmylou Harris revealed that there are sweeter sounding amplifiers out there as far as the upper-midband is concerned—the Starlet favors voices with texture—but the effect isn't debilitating. And I'm actually inclined to blame the Russki tubes rather than the amplifier itself, because the sound exhibits precisely the differences I noted between US-made 6550s and their ex-Commie cousins.

Where the Russians beat the Yanks, though, is in speed, and this amplifier is deliciously fast and capable of handling rapid transients. I don't make a habit of listening to guitarists who place speed above finesse, but some lightning if vintage plucking from Alvin Lee showed that the Starlet could keep the notes from congealing into a Fender-driven muddle. Better still, the amplifier showed remarkable recovery speed when fed punchy brass courtesy of Louis Prima. During sax/trumpet interplay with Sam Butera, the Legend Audio kept everything in pro-

portion, the two instruments contrasting vividly while complementing each other.

Something about the Legend Audio, though, kept driving me back to leaner material, and not because the unit couldn't keep up with complex or bombastic works. It's just that the Starlet sounds so relaxed and comfortable with intimate material. Beyond the Persuasions, I fed it Keb' Mo's latest, *The Door*, especially enjoying his take of "It Hurts Me Too." This offers up a tasty stew of Keb' Mo's rootsy take on the blues with lower octaves straight out of a drum 'n' bass dance session.

If, as the first paragraph suggests, I'm soft on this amplifier because I like the color, then maybe I should confess, too, that the price has a lot to do with it. \$2,995 ain't chicken feed, but the Starlet offers so much in the way of perceived value that I wouldn't have balked if they said it cost another \$1,500. And while the oldster in me says that more power wouldn't go amiss, I have to keep telling myself that the audio community has for nearly a decade embraced amplifiers with wattages in single figures; today's high sensitivity speakers will ease any fears.

It's an eyeful, a floorful and an earful. I listened for hours without fatigue, pulled out disc after disc, didn't miss a remote for a second (heh, heh, I used the Krell's variable outputs...) and couldn't take my eyes off the thing. In fact, I'm really going to miss the Starlet when UPS

or FedEx arrives. It was a pleasant surprise, a blissful arrival with no fanfare or preconceptions on my part preceding it. And it delivered the goods. I suppose it's not unlike a blind date that actually succeeded.

And another thing: those with less nerve when it comes to wild color choices for their hi-fi—you know, the guys who'd only have their Ferraris in red or their speakers in walnut—should know that this amplifier is also available in black, with brass details. I'd like to think that only the British would be boring enough to buy that color scheme. ●

► **Legend Audio Design Starlet Integrated Amplifier, 2430 Fifth Street, Unit G&H, Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel.: (800) 783-7360. Fax: (877) 386 4042. Web site: [www.LegendAudio.com](http://www.LegendAudio.com). Designer: Von Gaylord. Amplifier type: Two-channel, Class-A triode. Tube complement: 2-6550/channel, 5 x 5841 (driver tubes). Frequency response: 20 Hz to 20 kHz @ 40 W/10 Hz to 25 kHz @ 1 W. Power output: 40 watts/channel (20 Hz to 20 kHz at no more than 1% THD). S/N Ratio: 92 dB. Input sensitivity: 150 mV. Input Impedance: 500K. Load Impedance: 4 ohms (8 and 16 ohms) option. Inputs: 3 line level. Weight: 65 pounds. Dimensions: 18 x 14 x 9 inches (w x d x h). Price: \$2,995.**