

# Von Gaylord Audio Starlet True Integrated Amplifier

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*Audiophile Voice*

**Dwight:** The only honest oriental rug dealer I know shared the philosophy of his small personal collection with me one day when he said, “If a rug has the power to make me say ‘Wow’ every time I see it, I know it’s worth owning.” This little 40-watt integrated tube amp from Legend Audio Design (LAD) wow-ed me from the first time I plugged it in, until I had to pack it up and haul it off to you, Dan. The “little amp that could,” did. Every time I walked into the room, it greeted me with an organic aural embrace that kissed me on both cheeks and said “stay for awhile,” and I did.

**Dan:** An audiophile’s version of Mae West’s “Come up and see me sometime?”

**Dwight:** No playful teasing here. I know we reviewers usually hold the verdict until the last few paragraphs, but I just couldn’t wait. I wanted to share my enthusiasm with you up at Maria’s restaurant, but abided by our “no tell” policy until you had a chance to make your own unbiased judgments.

**Dan:** The judgment here is that the Starlet is very impressive. Although it doesn’t provide the ultimate in performance, it is most definitely an overachiever.

**Dwight:** When I first heard that we were reviewing a 40-watt amp, I figured it would be a great audition for the bedroom system, but impossible for the big rig. Well, after the Legend Starlet (hey, is this an oxymoron?) kicked my NOS-retubed Golden Tube SI-50 Mk II’s butt all over the bedroom, down the steps and into the street, it set its sights on the heavy hardware in the living room. More on this later. Let’s get to the guts of this little marvel.

First of all, it’s not so little. At close to 75 pounds, I suggest picking it up backwards if possible, to get the load closer to the spine (sorry, the ergonomist in me cannot be muzzled). The “load” in this case is a shared custom-built power transformer, flanked by two massive output transformers that are specially built to handle low frequencies. And handle they did. Those woofer cones on my Meadowlark Vireos were visibly driven like tractor pistons anytime I had the volume knob above a quarter turn.

**Dan:** The Starlet drove my 91-dB SPL sensitive Dunlavys effortlessly, no matter what the demands of the music or the level at which I chose to listen. And the volume knob, just as with my social life, never went past 11:00.

**Dwight:** I found the packaging simple, attractive, and well executed. The ergonomics couldn’t be more straight-forward, with a power switch, a three-position, input selector labeled with one, two, or three dots, and a volume knob, labeled with dots that grow in size as they encircle the knob in a clockwise progression. The five mini tubes and four power tubes populate the floor of the two-level chassis, forward of the transformer enclosure. The tubes are protected by an artistic grille, comprised

of rod stock gracefully bent at either end and arranged in parallel, covering the entire chassis. The grille is the perfect compromise of protection against the intrusion of large objects, while affording the tubes to be installed and removed without needing to remove the grille. It has a matte-silver, textured, powdercoat finish, while the chassis is similarly done in purple. (When I asked LAD about the color, I was half expecting some erudite terminology, like galactic violet, but they simply called it purple.) The look is clean and simple, kind of neo-art-deco, and frankly I found it very attractive after coming to grips with my mental model that all stereo gear has to be black, gold, or brushed aluminum.

**Dan:** Although I'm more often turned on by blond- than purple-starlets, I was pleased by this Starlet's appearance, heft, and the feel of its few controls. In fact, while I'm usually a traditionalist, I might opt for this silver/purple version instead of Legend's more mainstream gold/black offering. I'm less enthused about other aspects of the Starlet's hardware, however, so let me first detail a few non-sonic — which is to say “of secondary importance” — gripes. First, I was confused by the 1-2-3 dot selector switch and RCA inputs jacks you mentioned; not by the correspondence between switch position and input but, rather, whether the increasing number of dots was related to greater input impedance. Knowing that impedance matching is important when connecting through a phono input (of which the Starlet has none), I wondered which of these three inputs was the proper one for my CD player. When the minimalist owner's manual unfortunately failed to provide any guidance, a quick call to you solved the dilemma, but Starlet owners shouldn't need to have an electrical engineer on call to hook up their components. For others who are technically challenged, all three inputs are suitable for anything except phono sources.

I was disappointed to find those tightly-spaced, nylon-nutted five-way binding posts, which began challenging audiophiles about the time Fulton Gold cables began replacing lamp cord in high-end systems. Next, it's not clear what kind of protection this grill really affords; with 1.75-inch spacing, objects from adjustable wrenches to CD jewel cases become potential bottle-busters. Further, in the spirit of “if it quacks like a duck...,” the grill has all the earmarks of an excellent handle, which it's not, Legend has found it helpful to caution against use as one. Given the Starlet's weight and uneven distribution, one would hope a utilitarian design such as this could sport a couple of real handles without marring the appearance or greatly impacting the price tag. So, as a package, I found the Starlet True Integrated to be a bit less than completely user-friendly.

**Dwight:** Jeez, talk about tightly spaced .... You had better switch to boxer shorts and decaf — you're starting to sound like Andy Rooney. Two words buddy — banana plugs!

Anyway, Legend Audio has been around since 1992, is located in “Berzerkeley” California, and does not disappoint the expectation of “smart design.” They put the right stuff where it was needed in this chassis, if not on it. The power supply and auto-biasing circuits use solid-state components, and the driver circuits are printed, but everything else under the hood is glorious point-to-point wiring with a secret LAD silver hook-up wire, which has a little copper mixed in to prevent brightness.

This “true integrated” amp's preamp circuit (as well as the driver boards) uses a dual-triode Philips JAN 5814A new old-stock (NOS) military tube, which has very low noise specs, and according to LAD's Ray Leung is “built better than new tubes.” The company estimates an eight- to 10-year

lifespan for its minis, and has an ample replacement supply of about 10,000. On the output side are two pairs of closely matched Chinese 6550s from Ruby, running tandem push-pull, Class-A triode mode, with rather cool biasing, to generate 42.5 watts per pair. Lifespan of the 6550s is five to seven years, and a full set of replacement tubes will cost \$195. The unit received a three-day burn-in at the factory and after our additional 50 hours burn-in at home, it was ready to sing. There is no standby mode nor is there a warm-up cycle. The unit will play after only 15 seconds, but needs about 20 minutes to sound simply marvelous.

**Dan:** Although I was ready to brag to the world that I kept company with a red hot starlet for a few weeks, the truth is this Starlet never got beyond warm no matter how much I played it or how hard I drove it.

**Dwight:** Not surprised. Although I never actually peeked inside, the accompanying literature boasts of high-quality parts, including an Alps volume control, Holco resistors, Solen and Siemens caps, and Premier RCA jacks and speaker posts. I have no reason to doubt that LAD used premium-grade components throughout and put the expensive parts where they could provide the most sonic benefit. Input impedance is reported at a hefty 500 kilohms, bandwidth at one watt is 10 Hz to 25 kHz, S/N ratio 92 dB, and THD no more than 1 per cent at rated output from 20 Hz to 20 kHz. These are admirable specs for an integrated tube amp, and the clean sound suggests they are not exaggerated.

**Dan:** You're right about it being clean. In fact, the top end is so quiet a casual listener could mistake this performance for a rolled-off treble. Not so; the Starlet delivers highs in full measure.

**Dwight:** I think the clean sound is partially the result of having only two pairs of tubes working push-pull. In some amplifiers, as more tandems are added in parallel to increase power, minor mismatches can create sonic slush. This also has to be the most conservatively rated 40-watt amp I've heard, 'cause the thing embarrasses my "50-watt" Golden Tube without breaking a sweat. The dual, custom boat-anchor transformers let this baby produce bass notes with authority. The unit's standard load impedance is 4 ohms, but you can optionally order it with 8 or 16 ohms.

**Dan:** Mating the Starlet with my Dunlavy SC-IIIs (whose nominal impedance is 4 ohms) yielded a quality of bass which was the single most impressive aspect of its performance. On Janis Ian's ably-recorded *Breaking Silence* (Morgan Creek), the bass and drums are remarkably taut with an exhilarating degree of snap, and I never before realized just how vibrant and gloriously detailed the acoustic bass is on Ron Carter's *Jazz, My Romance* (Blue Note). I had similar ear-opening experiences listening to the two Eddie Vetter-Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan duets on the magnificent *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack (Columbia) and on Monty Alexander's tribute to Bob Marley, *Stir it Up* (Telarc). Electric and acoustic bass as well as kick drum, tabla, udu, and myriad other varieties of drum are all rendered superbly by the Starlet, and I found myself increasingly drawn to the world music in our collection.

However, although thrilled with the quality of bass reproduction, I sometimes found it to be too much of a good thing. Even on my Dunlavys (which are hardly a bass-emphasizing speaker), the lower registers often dominated the music, and more than once I wished for one of Quad's renown "tilt" controls with which to correct the anomalies. And while on the subject of wished-for controls, a standard left-right balance control would have been a useful convenience as well.

**Dwight:** Changing as few things as possible my bedroom system (Audio Refinements Complete CD and Meadowlark Vireos), I kept my Kimber interconnects and speaker cables, and the Discovery power cable intact and cued up some of Sade's latest, *Lover's Rock*. I was wow-ed by the natural flow of the music — the pace and rhythm were fantastic, in fact the best I've ever experienced in a playback system. There was much more heft in the bass (my original system now sounds anemic), fastidious midrange detail was traded in for liquid, spacious, dynamic vocals that seemed to have a spotlight on them in a black-velvet background. The music sounded alive. By alive, I mean that the performance had an organic quality of a viable being, not necessarily as in sounding like a "live" performance, but in being lifelike. I think this experience is unique in my audio career. I believe the role of music is to express and communicate joy, and the Starlet did this, in spades. I had trouble believing the modest system I was listening to could deliver such an awesome emotional punch. Sade's husky, mournful, seductive voice connected with the marrow in my bones. This was not an intellectual experience, but an earthy, soulful, root-chakra connection. Dittos for other materials, including Ottmar Liebert's classical guitar, Steely Dan's irreverent lyrics, and Mary Black's Celtic clarity.

**Dan:** I find your black velvet analogy particularly interesting because the Starlet conjured up in me an image of the paintings (often of Elvis or Jesus) on black velvet. Although the notes — most notably in the treble — came forth very strikingly out of this "black" background, they seemingly did so at the expense of transparency. There's little conveyance of the space between the musicians/instruments, so my Dunlavys weren't able to create the kind of solid images of which they're capable and, whether derived from the same performance attributes or not, the Starlet rarely afforded much sense of soundstage depth. But the Starlet can indeed make a forceful presentation: on such an ordinary recording as *Thorogood Live* (EMI), when George says he drinks alone (with his friends Jack Daniels and Jim Beam), you are there with him. Great fun!

**Dwight:** I found the Starlet's bandwidth to be quite extended in both directions with a minor case of suckout in the midrange, which was apparently caused, or at least exacerbated by my Kimber cabling. In retrospect, I realized that the cables in my system tend to complement my electronics by accentuating the frequency extremes to balance the midrange prowess of the EL34 output tubes. Let's call this the "smile" response curve — deep, powerful bass and glassy highs. I say "in retrospect" because the realization came after trying out Legend's Lemaa 1.5-meter interconnect, which came with the amp. It completely neutralized the "smile" response and flattened the response curve. The bass was now tamed and the midrange detail blossomed. The warm, triode-like, sassy, glassy highs were now studio-monitor neutral — a lot more analytical, dry, with less zest, and a little less rhythm and pace. Don't get me wrong — for \$250 the Lemaa is a fine interconnect, and it does complement the Starlet's response curve as advertised, but at a cost. Not surprisingly, the best sound was achieved with my Siltech FTM-4Sg cables from the big rig.

**Dan:** In my set up, the Starlet and Lema pair didn't "smile," but they emphasized lower frequencies yielding more of a lopsided "smirk," and the combo provided a somewhat distant, round-edged, and dark presentation. Changing to my (admittedly, more expensive) Tara Decade interconnects and also to a Marigo Gen 3 power cord, mitigated these traits to a considerable extent. Everything was a bit closer, in much sharper focus, and with an improved, although still warm, balance, all of which elicited my own "smile response." You'll not be surprised, then, to hear that I did most of my listening with this set up.

I found the Starlet's ability to handle changes in dynamics exemplary. If you're inclined as I am to being easily startled, you'll no doubt find yourself involuntarily boosted from your seat when listening to music with sharply dynamic passages. The sense of realism in these cases can be extraordinary — if a mite hard on the heart — owing, I suspect, to the Starlet's ability to closely reproduce these transients without smearing the signal (recall, if you will, my earlier comments about bass snap). A case in point is what proved to be one of the highlights of my Starlet listening sessions, Ladysmith Black Mambazo's *Shaka Zulu* (Warner Bros.), on which the occasional right-in-the-mike yelps from a backing vocalist had me twitching and jumping. Additionally, about half way through the last track, the 10-man ensemble begins lightly tapping their tennis shoe-adorned feet in unison. They do this with rising and falling intensity and with periodic bursts of full-out stomping which conveyed the same visceral and emotional impact in our tunes room as when my wife and I saw them perform in person.

**Dwight:** I was skeptical lugging the Starlet downstairs for a torture test with the Thiel 3.6s, which tend to be black holes when it comes to power. In its defense though, given the powerful performance upstairs, I felt I would be remiss if the young star didn't get an audition with the heavy gear in the living room. Wow! (Again!). The Starlet not only held its own against my NOS-retubed Audible Illusions L-1 preamp and Mesa Baron, but in many ways it outperformed them.

**Dan:** It takes a secure man to publicly opine that his reference system was in some ways bested by a unit costing half as much.

**Dwight:** I have to report what my ears experienced. Although I could only achieve moderate listening levels in my 5000-cubic-foot living room before clipping occurred, the first third of the volume pot gave me a new lesson in high-end sound. Ottmar Liebert's guitar was razor sharp, resonant, and had even more "pluck" than I'm accustomed to. His sweeping orchestral moods in his *Leaning Into The Night* allowed me to recognize for the first time what kinds of instruments were responsible for those weird sounds. The noise floor was subterranean and the frequency response so utterly flat I found myself saying, "So that's what that passage I supposed to sound like." There was no fuzz — everything was crystalline. The bass was respectable — but not as driving as with the smaller Vireos. There's a subwoofer-testing, swelling, deeeep subsonic roll on cut 8 of Dire Straits' *On Every Street*, which the Starlet found and reproduced, although not as loudly as the Baron. Midrange detail was excellent, but maybe a tad less than I'm used to—which is not a criticism. I thrive on detail, but the Starlet has taught me that sometimes the detail can get in the way of the music. Pace and rhythm were outstanding. The superbly produced Moon Beams XRCD put Bill Evans' trio in my living room. With integrated components coming back into vogue, the Starlet states its case to become a Legend quite eloquently, and with sound this good, it's difficult to justify separates and expensive interconnects.

**Dan:** Although I haven't seen or heard anything to suggest that integrated amps are (yet?) capable of equaling the performance of the very finest separates, the Starlet by far out-classed the last integrated tube amp I had in my system (a McIntosh, nearly 20 years ago) and, more importantly, out-classes many nominally high-end (and definitely high-priced) separates currently on the market. As I said at the outset, I'm very favorably impressed by this unit. If folks can get past some of the user-unfriendly aspects of its design (or, better still, if Legend resolves them), don't mind sacrificing a bit of transparency and depth to save a kilobuck or two, favor a slightly warm presentation (as I do), and don't require a phono input, they'll find snuggling up with this Starlet to be a treat.

**Dwight:** My only fear is that at its price point of three big ones, it will be erroneously perceived by prospective buyers as too expensive for "second" systems, and at 40 watts, it will be seen as too weak for prime time. I would suggest that the Starlet is good enough, and powerful enough, to build a high-end (sounding) system around. True, the speakers will need to be at least 88- to 89-dB SPL efficient, and the listening room can't be a dancehall, but anyone who relegates this little honey to the guest bedroom has way too much money. Legend Audio Design has demonstrated how simplicity and attention to detail can produce superb musical reproduction at a reasonable price. The Starlet receives my highest recommendation.

Legend's Starlet integrated amp puts straight-forward ergonomics into a well-executed package.

Legend's Starlet sounds good enough and is powerful enough to build a high-end system around. It takes a secure man to admit when his reference gear is bested by a unit that costs half as much.

## NOTES

**Von Gaylord Audio Starlet True Integrated Amplifier, \$2995.00.** Von Gaylord Audio, 2430 Fifth Ave., Units G & H, Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-2288, fax 510/843-3298; website [http:// www.vongaylordaudio.com](http://www.vongaylordaudio.com), e-mail [info@vongaylordaudio.com](mailto:info@vongaylordaudio.com).

## Associated Components

Dwight's big rig has an EAD digital front end, Audible Illusions line stage, current delivery via a retubed Mesa Baron feeding Thiel 3.6s, all connected with Siltech and moored by Sound Anchor. His bedroom system comprises a Golden Tube Audio SI-50 integrated amp, Audio Refinements Complete CD, Meadowlark Vireo speakers, Kimber interconnect and speaker wire, Discovery power cord on amp, and ceramic isolation feet under all.

Dan's system consists of an Immedia-Grado combination to handle analog signals, Sony CD player, Classé amplification, Dunlavy speakers, and cables by Yamamura, Tara, Audiotruth, and Meitner.