

Amazing in Three Letters: GAT!

The GAT Series 2 from Conrad Johnson

By Jeff Dorgay

\$24,000 is a lot of money to spend on a preamplifier.

So, if this freaks you out, don't read the next six pages. With most phonostages and DACs having an output level of two to four volts, and most power amplifiers only needing about one to achieve full output, you'd think a simple attenuator would do the job. But it never seems to work that way. We've tried a few great passive models, and they don't deliver the goods; the sonic impact is always lacking. And a few of those have price tags close to the GAT 2.

Conrad Johnson's GAT series 2 is worth every penny they ask, for a number of reasons. Still with me? My main requirement of any component with this kind of price tag should have major visual excitement: build quality and aesthetics should be stunning. The GAT 2 delivers on both of these promises. If you're not a fan of the gold, get over it; C-J doesn't make 'em any other color.

conrad-johnson
GAT Preamplifier

Yet the execution of this preamplifier is outstanding, from the quality of the faceplate to the clear acrylic tube protectors. Whenever I look at the GAT 2 it reminds me of the Guggenheim in New York City. Maybe Conrad and Johnson were architects in another life. But this preamp is a beauty, and it looks like a statement product.

Being visually stunning alone isn't enough to command the big price tag. A component this expensive should floor you sonically; again the GAT 2 delivers. We can argue about tubes versus solid-state forever, but if there ever was a case for the glowing bottles, it's this preamplifier. Much fun as all my favorite rock and electronic tracks are, 30 seconds into something with acoustic instruments will have you fully under the spell of the GAT 2. Brad Mehldau's recent album, *Blues and Ballads*, is a perfect place to start. His gentle and complex playing is chock-full of nuance and overtones. If the rest of your system is up to the task, it feels like you've got a piano in your living room. Yes, it does.

It's in the details

The highest of high-end components are all about subtlety. There are plenty of great preamps for a couple thousand dollars that play music and sound pretty good. C-J even makes one: the Classic, and it's excellent. However the better your recordings are and the more capable the rest of your system is, the more you will appreciate the GAT 2. Listening to the GAT 2 in my second system, which consists of the Conrad Johnson LP125sa+, a Simaudio MOON 780D DAC and a pair of Focal Sopra no.1 speakers, cabled together with Cardas Clear cable, keeps me glued to the couch for hours on end. But that's only scratching the surface of what the GAT 2 can do. *(continued)*





Swapping a few different preamplifiers in and out of this system instantly reveals what the GAT 2 offers that is not available in a lesser model. Where a few others at my disposal do well with the fundamentals, the GAT 2 follows where the world's absolute best components are going. It offers a sound that is nearly non-existent, in and of itself, merely being a conduit for the music.

Yet, there is still something magic that a couple of tubes still seem to add to the mix; there's a life, a presence, a degree of dimension that I've only heard accomplished by a couple of solid-state preamplifiers. Where a lesser tube preamplifier can entice you with its "tubiness," i.e. warmth and body, they don't deliver the subtle shadings, musical textures and tonal contrast that the GAT 2 does. It's the same on the other side of the fence: lesser solid-state preamplifiers can grab you with complete silence, that inky black

background that we reviewers like to wax poetic about, and a bit more dynamic slam or impact, but again, the subtlety falls by the wayside.

Thanks to using the two vintage Philips PCC88 tubes for amplification and a pair of FETs as output buffers, we get the best of both worlds – this preamplifier is super quiet in addition to being a sonic delicacy. Bill Conrad assures me that he has "good stock" of this tube, so retubing down the road will be no problem. Like the previous GAT, that FET buffer will drive *long* runs of cable and there were no problems at all driving a 20 foot pair of Cardas Clear interconnects.

Fondly remembering

It's often said that no one remembers the second man on the moon, or the second of anything. However, the second high-end preamplifier I bought was a Conrad Johnson. A PV-1. Yeah, I'm that old. *(continued)*



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That little gold-faced preamplifier that did not go with the rest of my black components changed my perception forever. The music pouring from my 8 foot tall Acoustats, powered by a Threshold 400A power amplifier was beyond anything I'd experienced up till then. That was 1981.

35 years later history repeats itself. The ESLs on tap are now the Quad 2812s, and yet plugging the GAT 2 into a pair of Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks again raises the bar to somewhere I've never been before – a much bigger feat in 2016. And after all these years, I've grown to like the gold. As much as I like the click, click, click of the GAT's attenua-

tor, it's always a friendly reminder that I've always loved since the day of my ACT2. It adjusts the output level in .7dB steps, where most other manufacturers do it with 1dB steps. The CJ way feels smoother and less obtrusive.

Listening to Rusty Anderson's "Damaged Goods," a relatively compressed track that's never grabbed me sonically, though the music is lovely, now unfolds between my speakers with way more depth and delicacy than a 16/44.1 TIDAL track has the right to. In the past, Sir Paul McCartney's bass line was buried in the muck, but through the GAT 2, it not only comes alive, it jumps out from the mix

with authority. The GAT 2 has so much dynamic range and subtle tonal contrast, you'll find yourself digging through the "not so great" bin a lot, reclaiming a lot of treasure you might have thought lost forever.

Though electronic music won't tell you much about timbre, most of the genre is an air-moving, low-frequency torture test. Tracking through some favorites from Deadmau5, Skrillex, SBTRKT and Caspar reveals weight and grip I didn't realize my system had. For those not so inclined to wear the mouse hat, a healthy dose of Mahler, Shostakovich or Bax should bring the same smile to your face.

Track after familiar track feel brand new again, with an airiness and sense of space that feels like one of the world's best pairs of headphones, yet retaining all the jump factor of a great pair of speakers. Moving back from the Quads to the hybrid GamuT RS5is/JL Audio Fathom IWS system proves shocking. Once acclimated to the sound again, going direct from the dCS Rossini DAC/Rossini Clock to the Xs300s vs. the GAT 2, is no contest. Adding a linestage to the mix *shouldn't* reveal more music, yet it does to a staggering degree. Low-level musical bits and fine spatial detail that was impossible to hear going direct is now available. It's creepy good. *(continued)*



No electrolytic capacitors inside

Removing the bottom panel of the GAT 2 reveals massive CJD Teflon caps everywhere, even the power supply, instead of the usual electrolytic capacitors in nearly every other preamplifier on the market. These are incredibly expensive capacitors, and their contribution to the sound is an exquisite one. The longevity of film capacitors is also much better than electrolytics – if you're 30 or older, chances are the GAT 2 will outlive you. However, you will have to wait a couple hundred hours to hear what this preamplifier is fully capable of.

Like the ACT and ART preamplifiers owned and reviewed

over the last decade, the massive CJD Teflon caps take a while to form completely. The GAT 2 is better out of the box than past CJ models, but it still takes a few hundred hours to be all it can be. Should you not have a second GAT 2 to leave in a box with zero hours on the clock to compare, if you can make a habit of starting your listening day with the same track for the break-in period, you will be astonished at how much more liquid and effortless the GAT 2 becomes after a month or two.

Going Full CJ

At times, a full chain of tube gear can be too much of a good thing. Adding the TEA-1s2 phonostage (also in for review) and the LP-

125sa+ power amplifier (a personal reference component) to the rest of the system proves a fantastic combination. All three of these components are so extended, dynamic, and transparent, the resulting presentation takes on a life of its own.

I bristle at using the B-word, because I don't ever want my readers to think their purchases are less than, just because we've discovered a new darling. And in the 12-year history of the magazine, I've resisted temptation after temptation to make this claim. I've heard a lot of truly great preamplifiers, but the Conrad Johnson GAT2 is the best preamplifier I've experienced. It reveals more music, more tonal contrast, gradation and nuance than anything else

I've yet heard. And no, I haven't heard *every single great preamplifier ever made*, so on one level this is provisional.

The K-10 from Robert Koda and the Xs Pre from Pass Labs both come within close proximity, and they are both solid state – an amazing accomplishment right there. And, these two solid-state preamplifiers that serve as my daily workhorses do so because of the consistency of the solid-state design (i.e. no change in sound when swapping tubes) and the fact that they both offer balanced and single ended inputs and outputs – a must for a preamplifier that also has to serve as a tool. But this damn GAT 2 has just a little bit more in terms of palpability and we are

splitting fine hairs.

Another aspect of greatness is longevity. Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson are two of the brainiest guys I've ever met (Both have Ph.Ds from MIT and Washington State, respectively) and they've been building great gear for almost 40 years now. I've owned quite a few of their preamplifiers. Since *TONE* began, I've used the ACT 2, ACT 2 series 2, as well as the original GAT as reference components here. The only reason I moved away from the CJ was the need to have a linestage with balanced and single-ended inputs for reviewing purposes. Now, with another listening room available, I will be building a separate system around the GAT 2.

The GAT 2 gives you everything. After hundreds of hours listening and taking notes – and playing the best, worst, and most difficult records in my collection – the word “but” never enters my thought process. No compromise or regret is what you write the \$24,000 check for, and as I said at the beginning of this review, the GAT 2 is worth every penny asked.

For this reason, the GAT 2 series 2 receives one of our Publisher's Choice awards for 2016. I would never dream of expecting you to spend \$24,000 because I say so. But until I get that mind control helmet sorted out, I urge you to book a listening session with the GAT 2 series 2 if you are looking for your final destination preamplifier. ●



Conrad-Johnson
GAT series 2 Preamplifier
MSRP: \$24,000

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