

Ampzilla—Solid State Comes of Age

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The solid-state power amplifier that so many of us enjoy nowadays had quite a rocky start in the world of high-end audio. Reliability problems and hard, irritating sound were the norm. Early high-powered amps were all quasi-complementary (now virtually extinct), since the devices needed for high-power fully complementary amplifiers didn't exist. At that time, designers were still unaware of the sonic price paid for high feedback and low static distortion. Consequently, even the best examples sounded mediocre. Until the early 1970s, quality tube amps had a clear advantage over any solid-state amp, though the latter had grown quite muscular, it nothing more.

The first designer to get a high power (200Wpc) fully complementary amplifier on the market was James Bongiorno, then designing for SAL. The Mark IIIC was a giant step forward for solid-state sound, but it was the Ampzilla, which he designed and marketed himself, that really put solid-state on the minds of serious audiophiles. Ampzilla was originally a 200Wpc kit introduced in *Papular Electronics* magazine in 1974 as a do-it-yourself project for \$375. Bongiorno soon began a fully wired version (which he personally built in his apartment) for \$525. It was quite a deal, even in 1975.

The sound was very much *unlike* any transistor amplifier before it. Gone was that "solid-state sound" that tube lovers hated so much. Instead, the Ampzilla had a warm, sweet, beautiful sound not unlike the favorite tube amps of the day, but with tremendous power reserves and at a far lower price. The sonic benefits of a fully complementary input-to-output configuration along with some ingenious circuit design and the proper use of feedback quickly became clear to the audio world. Long-time audiophiles will undoubtedly remember the almost magical

Ampzilla Audio Research SP3A Dahlquist DQ-10 combo. Such a system gave me some of the most involving listening of my life. And Ampzilla was a perfect match for the power hungry Magneplanar speakers just invented by Jim Winey.

Ampzillas success prompted James to start the Great American Sound Company (GAS), which manufactured the amplifier and its matching preamp (Thaedra) and tuner (Charlie the Tuner—get it?) until the end of the 70s.

Though Ampzilla sonically paved the way for solid-state, it wasn't without problems. Those gorgeous-sounding original Motorola output devices turned out to be as fragile as eggs, and many (if not most) Ampzillae with the original output transistors had very short lifespans. One of the kits I built (for an individual) lasted just over two days. My personal Ampzilla lasted over a year, but that was surely a fluke. GAS replaced the Motorola output transistors with Toshiba devices, but the amplifier lost its magic. Finally, Sanken produced a rugged, gorgeous-sounding output device just in time for Ampzilla II, which had even more innovative circuitry. Ampzilla II never quite matched the warmth of the original, though its bass and midrange were cleaner and it was rugged. Ampzilla IIa, made after Bongiorno left GAS, had a sweeter treble and was the one I chose for a complete makeover.

In 1979, Bongiorno started Sumo and designed two of the most advanced power amplifiers ever seen. The

130Wpc model called "The Power" and a 120Wpc pure Class-A version called "The Gold" were pure balanced-bridge amplifiers with each speaker terminal driven by a separate output string (neither grounded). While "so-called" balanced amps are common today, not one carries it this far. I've owned a Gold for years (with updated parts). Through its balanced XLR inputs, it's put numerous modern "\$8000 wonders to shame". Though Bongiorno sold Sumo to battle liver cancer, and then hepatitis C, he's back at it today, some 23 years later, with a new Ampzilla—far more advanced than even the Sumo amps—and an upcoming preamp. His Web-site (www.ampzilla2000.com) also contains some fascinating audio theory ("The Quest"—*highly recommended*) that only an audiophile/musician/engineer like James Bongiorno could write.