

# The History Man...

by Richard S. Foster

## Attack Of The Killer 300Bs... Not all tubes are created equal.

Some are more equal than others. After 18 months, with more than two dozen quad sets – I require four power tubes for my pair of Manley Neo-Classic SE/PP 300B amplifiers – and kit from almost half a dozen different manufacturers, I’ve had first hand experience of the fact that not all 300B tubes are created equal: in fact, far from it. The Manley amps allow me to switch between single-ended and push-pull topology and although the latter tends to give a more focused and definite sound in my system, I’ve spent time with each set of tubes in both configurations. I’ve listened in single-ended and I’ve listened in push-pull, I’ve listened long and I’ve listened late.

I began this journey in late 2005 with Issue 42 (The History Man discusses the Euro Audio Team 300B) and continued it through Issue 48 where I reported my results with the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Mesh Plate Tube. Now it’s time to round things out and include the legendary Western Electric, as well as a few other options in passing. It’s been an educational journey – so what have I learnt? That once again, in all things audio there is no true right or wrong; personal preference and bias play will play an important role in one’s personal selections, a fact that should temper any inclination to rush out and follow “advice”.

It’s important to bring the EAT 300B and the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess Mesh Plate into my final thoughts. Add to these tubes, the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Carbon Plate, the Golden Dragon 4-300B and Golden Dragon 4-300BM (Carbon Plate and Mesh Plates), the OEM supplied Electro-Harmonix and the (in)famous Western Electric 300B electron tube and I’ve covered a fair spread of the available options, some of it more than once, still others never to be revisited or mentioned.

While I’ve commented on the Electro-Harmonix before, I think it’s a fine tube, especially when used as an OEM product supplied as standard. In fact, standard pretty much sums it up, as that’s what it sets – the benchmark for 300B performance. A good all-rounder, it’s a tube you can live with, but it’s not going to be elected prom queen. Its sonic shortcomings were noted in Issue 42 and I should repeat here that my experience of it is not without noise and crackle issues which, in addition

to limited headroom, were the cause of my search for superior alternatives. The EAT 300B was a giant leap forward and remains one of my top choices today, but the Electro-Harmonix is affordable and serviceable. Don’t knock it unless you want to drop the coin on the fancy contenders.

Having received both types of Golden Dragon 300B tubes, I was anxious to hear the differences between them. Unfortunately, these tubes didn’t last long in my system as there were biasing issues with both quad sets. Which was a shame because both these tubes deliver an airy, open and unfettered view over the musical landscape. There’s a delicate, almost translucent quality to their sound which can be stunning on the right music (think pastoral, think RVW). Unfortunately, the bias on both sets of these tubes kept drifting. Perhaps there was something amiss, but I was quite surprised that both types of tube in both amplifiers gave me consistent biasing problems. They just wouldn’t hold their bias properly for a solid hour (barely long enough even to get a proper handle on their sound) and so they had to go. Which is a great pity because what’s good about the Golden Dragons is very nice indeed...

While I really enjoyed the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Mesh Plate Tube, the contrast to their equally enjoyable S.E.T. Princess 300B Carbon Plate is fascinating. While I felt the Mesh Plate had an openness, clarity and sweetness without euphonic colouration, I feel the dynamics of the Carbon Plate are more at play. The difference in perceived dynamic power displayed by the Carbon Plate brings it much closer in sound to the Euro Audio Team tube. It seems a more powerful tube than its sibling, with valuable additional headroom. It offered me all the positives of the Mesh Plate without missing a beat, but with the added sense of directness, life and energy that comes from that wider dynamic range. This tube is extremely stable, holding rock-solid bias and delivering a direct, no-nonsense approach to music. Nor is there any glare, edge or thinness at any stage ▶



▶ of operation – even when you push your amplifier to the brink. I found this to be an ideal tube for large orchestral works and heavily amplified rock music. Whether I played the fabulous EMI TWO 404 – Louis Frémaux conducting the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in Saint-Saëns *Organ Symphony*, or my promo of the AC/DC masterpiece, Back in Black on U.S. Atlantic SD 16018, the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Carbon Plate tubes just sang. Listening to the unmistakable voice of John Lee Hooker on the Antilles soundtrack (AN 8755), The Hot Spot was simply divine. His moanin' and humming was exceptionally well defined in the complex mix of Tim Drummond's bass, the trumpet of Miles Davis as well as the slide guitar of Roy Rogers and drums of Earl Palmer, all woven together (Coming to Town).

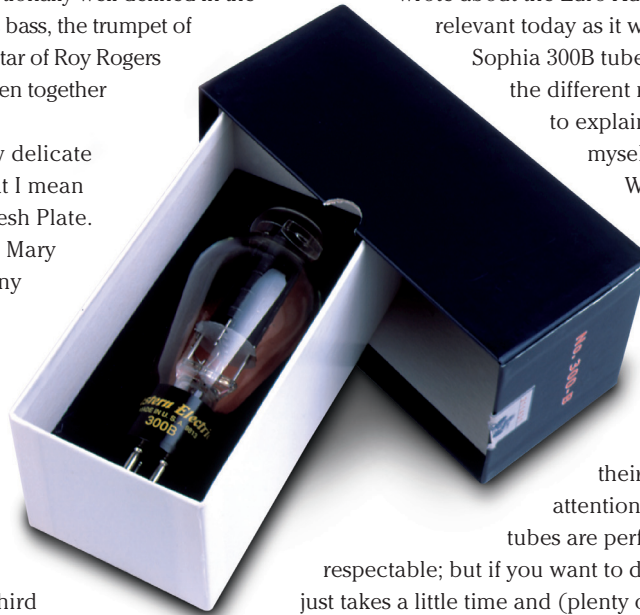
Oh, and have I mention how delicate this tube can sound? That's what I mean about it losing nothing to the Mesh Plate. Grab your Hybrid SACD copy of Mary Chapin Carpenter's fabulous Sony disc (CS 85176) *Time·Love·Sex·* and turn to track number nine, 'Someone Else's Prayer'. If you've ever wondered what it would be like to be in a recording studio, this track will fulfill your most intimate dreams. It definitely exposes all. The noise floor is so low on this DSD recording, that in the third verse you can clearly hear her mouth open and lips part before she begins to sing. It's so scary you'd swear you were in the room with her. This is a great tube and I think anyone who is looking for an all-round solution, should seriously consider this Carbon Plate gem from Sophia.

Have I saved the best for last? I knew you'd think that. Well maybe yes and maybe no. There are many who think the Western Electric 300B is the best of them all. It's certainly an outstanding product and I know fellow Torontonians and *hi-fi+* contributor Peter Downard champions its cause. It's a tube that does its job and doesn't get in the way of the music, almost standing behind it and giving it a solid shove in the back, such is its emphatic delivery. It is incredibly solid and purposeful, really well grounded, offering music with a firm spatial and dynamic foundation. It's slanted a little more to the warm side of the yin-yang equation, majoring on sheer presence and solid colour, as opposed to say the vivid energy and excitement of the EATs.

Against that you have to weigh its considerable cost and a slightly muscle bound quality. The WE lacks the fluid grace of a tube like the Sophia Mesh Plate, the absolute

sense of air and delicacy. In my system, with my amp and speaker combination, it's the one flaw in an otherwise daunting arsenal of attributes.

And in the end, that's the point. These tubes each have their own particular characters; throughout the listening I was never in doubt as to which tube was reproducing my music. None of the tubes I've lived with were troublesome (except the aforementioned Gold Dragons) and each has offered its own blend of virtues. There is no doubting that the Western Electric 300B is one stellar tube, but what I wrote about the Euro Audio Team product is as relevant today as it was 18 months ago. Both Sophia 300B tubes are outstanding for the different reasons that I've tried to explain, while currently I find myself swapping between the WEs and the EATs as the mood takes me. It's a nice position to be in and rather underlines the fact that, as good as the Western Electrics undoubtedly are there are other 300Bs which each make their own case for your attention. The Electro-Harmonix tubes are perfectly safe and reliably respectable; but if you want to do better you can – it just takes a little time and (plenty of) money... 



## Prices And Availability

300Bs are available from too many sources to list. The suppliers listed are those who gave tubes for review. The prices are for guidance only.

Western Electric 300B  
\$849US per matched pair

Axiss Audio  
Tel. (001)310 329 0187  
Net. [www.axissaudio.com](http://www.axissaudio.com)

Sophia Electric 300B  
From \$450 per matched pair

Tel. (001)703 204 1429  
Net. [www.sophiaelectric.com](http://www.sophiaelectric.com)