

Car Audio

Class 1

Milbert BaM-230

Don't read this unless you're as serious about car audio as I am. I still have fond memories of my first car audio system. A Finco FM-4 yagi was mounted on a roof rack, a Scott 310D tuner slung under the dash, an AC power convertor under the hood, a KLH Six speaker in the back seat, and an Eico tube amp in the trunk. Nowadays we use a souped up Jeep Cherokee as a test vehicle, allowing all kinds of speakers to be tried.

In our review of the first power amp ever to earn a Class 1 rating in IAR, we suggested that the compact Robertson 4010 would make an excellent heart for a car audio system. Amplifiers made for car use just couldn't hold a candle to a Class 1 amplifier from the rigorous world of home audio.

But we thought the Milbert car amplifier might meet these high standards of home audio, for it actually comes from the world of high end home audio. The Milbert is literally a mobile version of a Berning 230 power amp, with a built in extra power supply, in order to step up your car's 12 volts DC to the high voltages required by the Berning tube amplifier.

Given our high standards for car audio, we posed a stiffer than usual challenge to the Milbert. We wanted to see how it would fare not just against other car audio amps, but also against a Class 1 solid state power amp from high end home audio, such as the Robertson 4010.

The Milbert won.

The tube sound qualities of the Milbert really do make an important musical difference, compared to solid state amps. Instruments sound sweeter and more liquid, in a musically correct way. Singers have a richer body to their voice, which gives their lyrics better projection. Music is simply more natural all around. Stereo imaging is very good, a bit better than the Robertson.

Most surprising, the Milbert actually is better than the Robertson 4010 in revealing treble details of music. Usually, good solid state amps excel in delineating high frequency information, compared to tube amps — especially tube amps with old fashioned tube sound, which is sweet but defocussed and veiled in the trebles. But David Berning's tube products all exhibit a crystalline alacrity to music's trebles. And so the Milbert approaches what we call the hybrid ideal, combining the best virtues of tube sound and solid state sound. It consistently outpointed the Class 1 Robertson 4010 in the revelation of treble information, as well as in the natural musical quality of the information revealed.

Through the midranges of the spectrum, the Milbert is way ahead of the solid state Robertson, as would be expected of a tube amp. The Milbert's bass quality is very good, but, as would be expected from a small tube amp, not the equal of a good solid state amp. Note though that a car environment inherently boosts bass quantity, so you don't really need an amp

with enormous bass capability. And a car environment inherently degrades bass quality, with its upper bass resonant modes, so that an amp with ultimate bass quality would be wasted.

The modest 30 watt per channel rating of the Milbert should not concern you. The Milbert actually plays plenty loud for music listening, even into moderately inefficient mini-monitors. Further enhancing its loudness usefulness is the fact that the early stages of clipping sound quite benign, like a simple increase in soft grudge, whereas most solid state amps emit an ugly crackle the moment they enter clipping. The Milbert is not intended, though, for the volume levels some kids employ which make the walls of their cars bulge on every bass note. If you do want these insane volume levels, or beefier bass, then the Milbert would make an ideal upper spectrum amp in a bi-amped car audio system using efficient drivers.

The happiest part of the Milbert's performance is its adaptability to different kinds of music. On the best quality program material, both classical and jazz, its clarity and musical naturalness shines forth as no solid state amp can. Then, on distorted program material, such as much rock music, the Milbert with all its revelatory powers is actually more forgiving than are less revealing solid state amps. This sonic magic is in the best tradition of tube sound, and makes many rock albums far more pleasant to listen to; the Milbert manages to hide the program's distortion while simultaneously revealing more of the music. The Milbert emerges as your best choice for all music listening, whether you want to revel in the highest fidelity, or you want to get the most listenable enjoyment from low fidelity recordings.

The Milbert's price is eminently fair, when you consider its superior sonics and its adaptability to all kinds of music. It outperforms a Class 1 \$1000 power amp from the world of high end home audio, and it includes its own power supply for car use. The package is well built and convenient, and comes with all the quality hardware and wiring for easy installation.

In sum, the Milbert is a high class product with high end sound. If you're serious about car audio, the Milbert will make a big improvement for your music on the road.

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