

The Sweet Sounds of Vinyl

Pass Labs XP-15 Phono Preampfier

By Lawrence Devoe

Nelson Pass is a living legend of high-end audio for good reason. Whether with his first company, Threshold, or current enterprise, Pass Labs, he and his co-designers consistently produce stellar equipment—excellent not just for the money, but for outstanding performance. Audiophiles that know Pass' company understand it's thoroughly dedicated to vinyl reproduction, as witnessed by the excellent line of phono preamplifiers issued over the past 15 years.

My analog journey includes time spent with every one of these pieces, beginning with the Aleph ONO and continuing on to the subject of this review, the one-box XP-15. As Pass phonostages evolve, each successive generation improves upon the recovery of the delicate signals contained in those beloved LP grooves.



Putting the Pass into the Picture

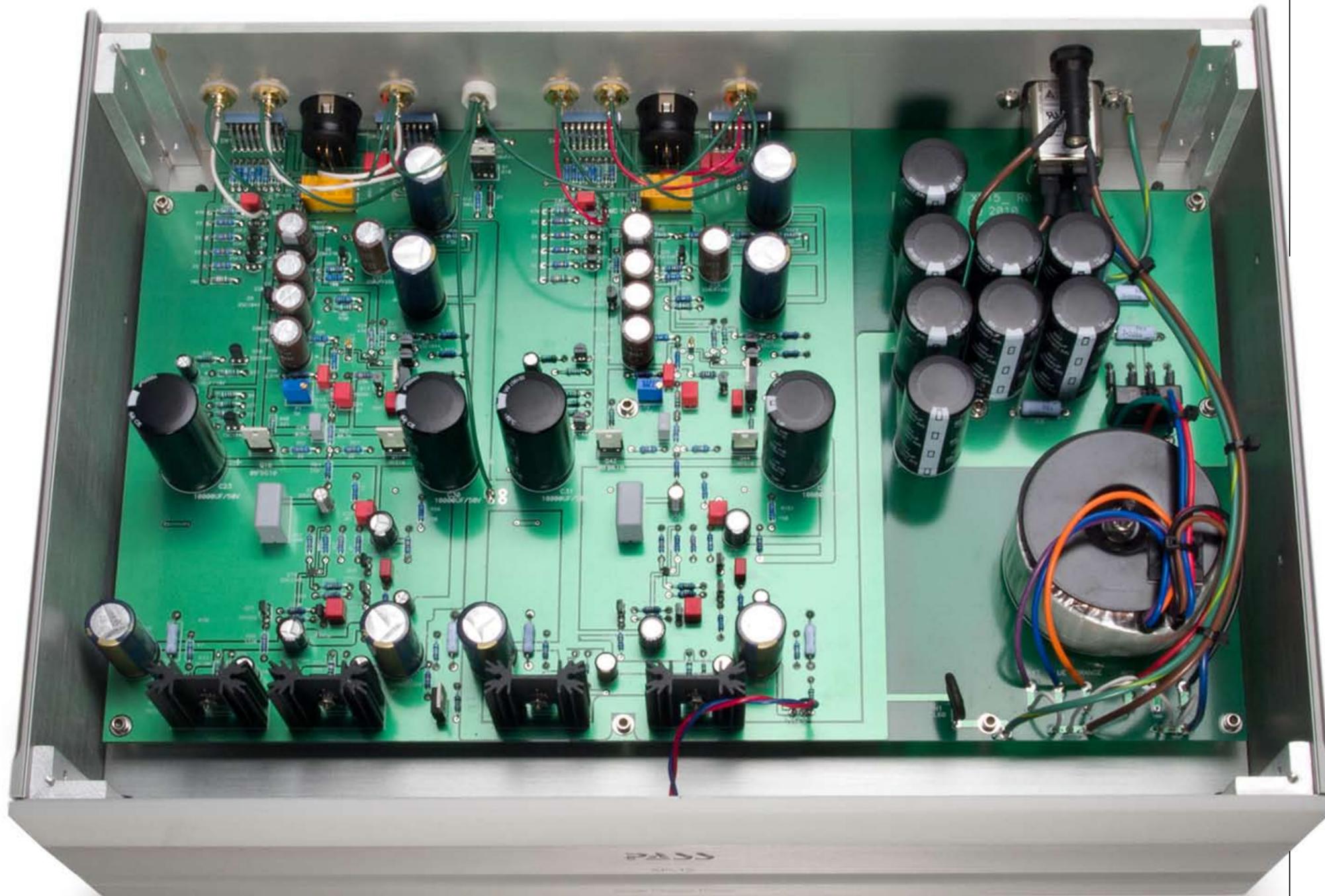
Like all current-generation Pass equipment, the XP-15 sports an attractive brushed-aluminum chassis with an engraved logo and small blue power light located above the model number. The rear panel is relatively sparse, with a ground post, balanced and unbalanced outputs, and separate inputs for MM or MC cartridges. Cartridge gain is fixed at 46dB for MM and adjustable from 50dB to 71dB for MC (an additional 6dB is available for balanced output). Paired dipswitches are available for adjusting MM capacitance from 100 pF to 750 pF. MC resistive loading has (count 'em) 18 settings, including a 47k ohm option used for most of my own listening.

To keep phono newbies from going bonkers, Pass provides an excellent owner's manual with tables and pictures depicting routes to the desired settings. Looking at this guide will be a one-time exercise unless you own more than one cartridge. Out of the box, break-in time will be at least 100 hours, and with further use, the sound continues to slightly improve.

Pass Me the Platters, Please

My current reference turntable—a VPI HRX with rim-drive and Nordost-wired JMW 12.7 tonearms, along with Clearaudio Goldfinger v.2 stereo and Lyra Titan Mono cartridges—provided the test bed for the XP-15 listening sessions. Previous experience with Pass phono stages reveals the maximum-output setting yielding the best balance of tonality and lowest noise floor. The XP-15 is no different, and while it provides great sound in balanced and single-ended mode, I leaned toward the former preference. *(continued)*





As vinyl purists know, spinning LPs becomes addictive when playback equipment is up to the task. Enter the XP-15. On Dire Straits' "Your Latest Trick," from a four-sided reissue of *Brothers in Arms*, Mark Knopfler's husky voice sounds just right and never swamps the background percussion details. Via her Grammy-winning *Chamber Music Society*, Esperanza Spaulding plies a Brazilian number, "Inutil Paisagem," with Gretchen Parlato. The XP-15 righteously clarifies the overlapping female voices, keeping distinct the lyrics and articulate the underlying bass (listen closely for the fingers on the fretboard).

Large-scale orchestral music, replete with vocals, is always my favorite acid test. And for it, I use my old reliable—the closing scene from Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, a classic 1958 Decca recording recently reissued in a superb collection titled *The Decca Sound*. The cut starts with a high-powered musical thunderstorm, followed by a rainbow-bridge crescendo that must be heard to be believed. Sir Georg Solti, his singers, and the orchestral forces come right out of my speakers, giving the passage the visceral feel it deserves.

Getting the monaural soundstaging just right is vital for listeners whose collections include older jazz and pop vocal albums. On Analogue Productions' 45RPM reissue of Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong's classic *Ella and Louis*, the warmth of Fitzgerald's voice

and sound of Armstrong's unique raspiness literally pops out of the background. The Beach Boys' *Smile* reveals their individual voices crisp and clear on "Wonderful," with solid recreation of the band's trademark studio reverb. While I thought I knew these songs well, I now realize I'm really hearing them for the first time. And it's definitely worth the 40-year wait.

Finally, a Mercury original pressing of Holst's *Suites for Band*, with the Eastman Wind Ensemble and Frederick Fennell, shows why the single-point mike technique is right not just for its era but for all times, with the XP-15 illustrating the proper stage size.

Passing Judgment

Even after hours of listening to dozens of LP sides, I find it nearly impossible to drag myself out of my chair and power down the XP-15. This phono stage easily bests Pass designer Wayne Colburn's previous efforts, which aren't sonic slouches. The XP-15 does practically everything right: soundstaging, tonal colors, background information. And its flexible setup should satisfy about every cartridge on the planet.

If doing so wouldn't drive up the price, I'd love to see adjustment switches on the front panel (as on the flagship XP-25) or have them accessible via remote control. Quibbles aside, your record collection is worth many times the cost of the XP-15, making this phono stage an excellent all-around buy.



Further Listening

By Jerold O'Brien

While Mr. Devoe has a lifetime of experience with Pass phonostages, I come from the opposite side of the tracks: I'm a lifelong Audio Research guy. Skeptical of all things transistorized, I had the pleasure of listening to the XP-15 after it spent a few hundred hours in our publisher's listening room.

For those entrenched in the vacuum-tube camp, the XP-15 gives up very little midrange palpability in comparison. Paired with a vacuum-tube preamp and power amplifier, the sacrifice is miniscule, and the gains made via my workhorse ARC PH-3SE with super-high zoot tubes are tough to deny. The ability to get at the adjustments is awesome, and encourages more cartridge fiddling—a good or bad habit, depending on your level of OCD.

My listening tests featured the Oracle Delphi V turntable and SME 309 tonearm, chosen for its removable headshell. Fiddling, you see. The Shure V15 vmxr, Grado Master Reference 1, and Lyra Skala cartridges all constitute excellent matches for the XP-15. And yet, I remain highly impressed at the performance the XP-15 extracts from a relatively inexpensive cartridge like the V15.

Since Mr. Devoe covered jazz classics, female vocals, and classical selections, I'll concentrate on rock and ambient music. Again, it is worth noting that the XP-15, especially in the context of an all-tube system, does not leave you yearning for the glowing bottles. I'm constantly surprised at how well it produces a large, dynamic soundstage with some of my favorite Led Zeppelin, Who, and Nirvana records, usually played louder than prudent.

In search of a bit more air, Lou Reed's "Goodnight Ladies" from *Transformer* floats the singer out in front of the rest of the band—and with enhanced separation. Moreover, the bass-drum blasts at the beginning of Keel's "The Right to Rock" from the album of the same name are reproduced with serious weight and texture.

While many listeners enjoy the extra flavor tubes can bring to the picture, the XP-15's dynamics clarity and ultra-low noise floor are tough to beat, and may convince the most hardcore tube lover to make a switch—especially if one's MC cartridge has an output of less than .5mv. The unit certainly has me thinking about never again having to pay a premium for an ultra-low-noise matched set of tubes for my PH-3SE. ●

Pass Labs
Phono Preamplifier XP-15
MSRP: \$3,800

MANUFACTURER
 Pass Laboratories

CONTACT
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PERIPHERALS
Preamplifier Pass Labs X-30
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