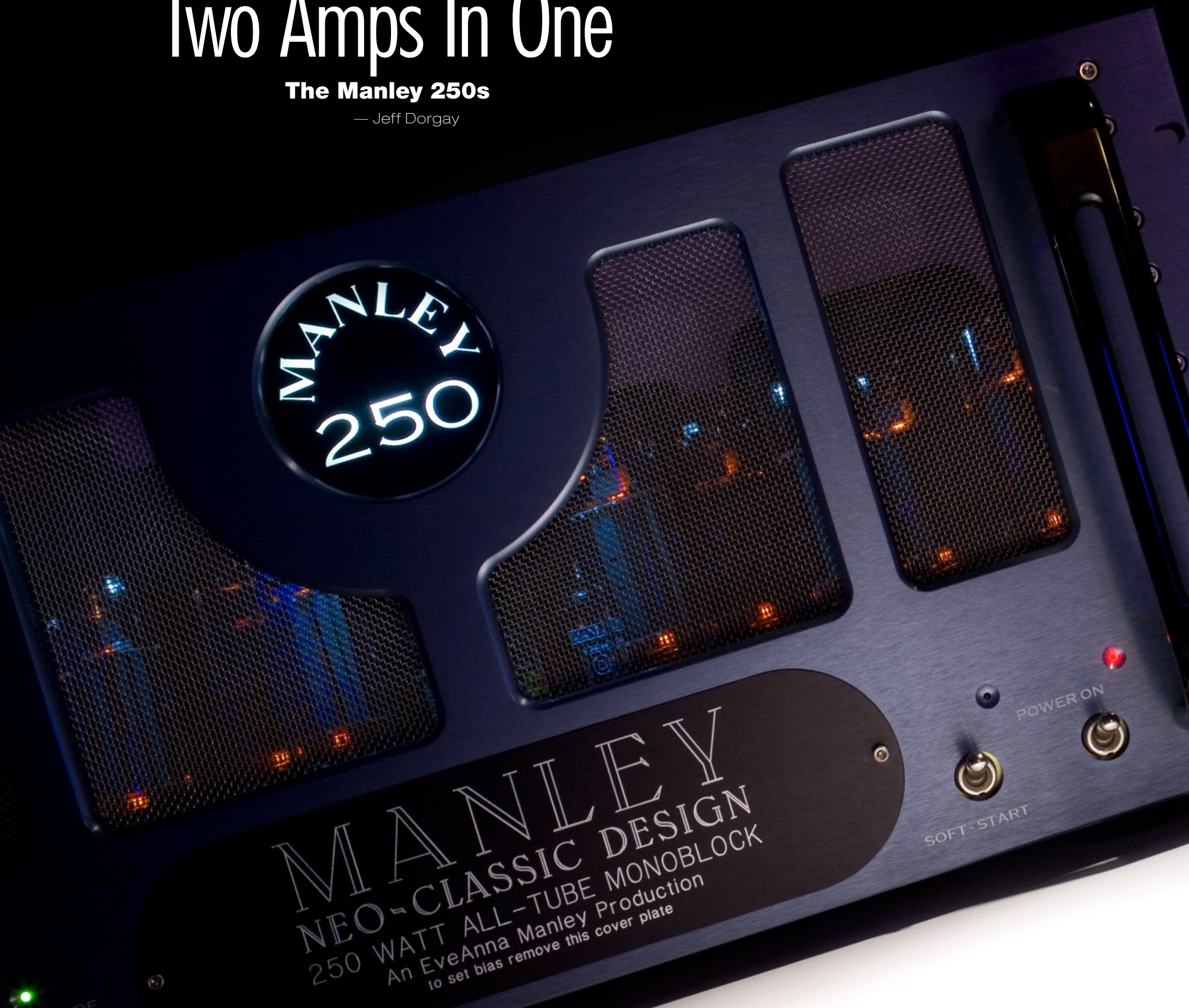


# Two Amps In One

**The Manley 250s**

— Jeff Dorgay



I've owned a lot of tube amplifiers over the years and most of them have been of the 30-60 watt per channel variety, either powered by a compliment of EL-34 tubes or the 6550/KT 88 variety. It was always a very pleasing sound, though if someone put a gun to my head and MADE me decide, I would pick the EL-34s because I know I would give up a bit of tightness and control on the bottom for that extra magic in the middle.

But the dilemma is always power. Somewhat like any other controlled substance, power can really be addictive. Over the last year and a half, having a few hundred watts per channel has added a big dimension to my musical enjoyment, but this time with solid state amplification. I have no regrets 98 percent of the time, but what if I could have that tube magic along with all that power? Hmmmm.

Honestly, I did try a few amplifiers (which will remain nameless) with big power, but we were back to my less than favorite 6550 tubes. Again, classical columnist Dan Babineau provided the necessary insight. 'Dude, get a pair of those big Manleys – they use EL34s and they really rock!' And so my quest began.

### Big, Blue, Beautiful

When you get your pair of Manley 250s out of the box, just feast your eyes on all of those EL-34s! Ten per channel. I really appreciated getting these right after CES, when it was a bit chilly here in the Northwest.

The front panel is finished in a dark blue anodized finish with a big circular 'Manley 250' logo in the middle. Not understated Euro design by any means. These are robust, American amplifiers and I like them quite a bit. One quick peek at the giant power and output transformers and you know that something pretty major is under the hood.

As good as they look, I suggest tucking those front panels away in a safe place for a day or two. *(continued)*

**'Dude, get a pair of those big Manleys – they use EL34s and they really rock!'**



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With any tube amplifier, I always suggest keeping a close eye on bias at first. My test samples were on the money right from the factory, but it's always a good idea to double check. Being a little finicky with this will result in better sound and longer tube life; it's kind of like giving your turbo-charged car that extra minute for the turbo to spool down when you pull in the driveway, so the oil can cool down. During my test period, the bias did not change at all. However, I would suggest checking it twice a year just to be safe.

### Initial Setup

The Manley 250s went in my main system, replacing the Premier 350, so I was very curious indeed as to how the sound character would change. Though I did use them a lot with my Tetra 506 Customs, I also used them along with a number of speakers we had in for review over the last few months to see how they would perform in a variety of different situations.

The 250s had their own dedicated 20 amp line and a Running Springs Duke power conditioner, so they would not be starved for juice, especially on rare occasion when it was time to really rock!

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**Remember when you put that can of octane booster in the tank of your muscle car? Same thing.**

I did try them on the same circuit as the rest of the system and most of you should be fine under any circumstances. But if you can give them their own power, they will give you just a little more oomph at high volume. *(continued)*



You can use the 250s in single ended mode or balanced, just flip the switch on the rear and use your input of choice. While I did most of my testing with the CJ ACT2/ Series 2, which has only single ended outputs, I did try it with a couple of balanced preamps as well, with great results.

All of the usual suspects in my system were in place, the only change was swapping the 250s in for the Premier 350. Solid State vs. Tubes, here we go! The power up sequence on the 250s takes a minute or two to get used to. You actually turn on the main switch, and then click the standby switch up, once the tube filaments are warm. They can be left in a stand by mode, which is handy if you are going out for a while and don't want to power the amplifiers down all the way, however I suggest (again in the interest of tube life) not leaving them in this mode all the time.

However, I don't recommend leaving any tube component on for long periods of time unattended.

### The Sound

So what was the first thing I played with the Manley 250s once all those tubes warmed up? As much as I'd like to say I cranked up Who's **Next** (though I did that later) I just put on some Michael Hedges and listened to some acoustic guitar riffs. Pretty sweet, with a lot of inner detail as well as power, definitely the EL-34 magic here.

This amplifier had a lot of detail as well as power, and that's what is so impressive about the 250s. Often times Manley gear gets compared to muscle cars and Harleys, but honestly I think that is a little unfair

because there is more than a fair amount of finesse here. I guess if I had to compare the 250s to a car, I would compare them to a C5 Corvette that's been tuned by Chuck Mallett. Yep, it's still a Corvette but it goes around a corner as well as a Porsche and it can stop in a hurry too. (And you can still do a huge burnout at the stoplight with all that power!)

Ok, enough being mature and intellectual, now it was time to play Who's **Next** and

**This amplifier had a lot of detail as well as power, and that's what is so impressive about the 250s.**

crank it up! Honestly, I stayed on that path quite a bit with these amplifiers. No matter what I played from the Yayhoos

to Pink Floyd, the 250s just never ran out of gas. However, even at lower levels, that extra headroom just comes through, giving the sound an ease that you just don't get with a little amplifier. I was hooked! *(continued)*

No matter what kind of music you listen to, I firmly believe that having the extra power on tap that a big amplifier can provide really adds something special to the presentation. The funny thing is you don't really realize it until you go back to that 60 watt per channel amplifier that you thought you were really happy with. It just seems kind of dull, so don't open this door unless you can afford to stay! I guarantee that once you have a taste, nothing else will do!

**What really impressed me about these amplifiers was how well controlled the bass was.**

I was expecting to just get that standard EL-34 sound kind of scaled up. What I got was that perfect balance of having the control of a 6550 based amplifier without losing the midrange magic of a smaller amplifier with a single pair of output tubes per channel.

**Two Amps in One**

You can even take this a step further, by clicking the 250s into triode mode! It cuts the power down to about 110 watts per channel, but you do get the additional sweetness that triode mode provides and if you have speakers that are efficient enough, even a touch more midrange warmth to boot! Fortunately my Tetras are 92 db, so it was a perfect match indeed!

I know that there are a few of you out there that are thinking about tube rolling, so I have to admit I didn't bother with this one. With coolio NOS EL-34s going for up to \$500 a PAIR, it was out of the question from an economic point of view. *(continued)*

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Besides, they take the time to handpick the tubes at Manley and they voice it around current day stock, so why bother? It sounds great as is, but it does make you wonder if you were filthy rich, what 20 NOS EL-34s would do to the sound...

I tried a number of different inefficient speakers, including my 82db Apogeos and I assure you, nothing was a problem for the 250s. They only have one set of output binding posts and claim to be optimized for a five-ohm load. (Again, my Tetras are six ohm, so this was sheer perfection.) I can't imagine anyone having a compatibility issue here.

Because the tetrode mode is extremely powerful, with a touch less finesse and the triode mode has a ton of detail, warmth and finesse, with a bit less power, it really is like getting two amplifiers for the price of one. That's the best feature of the Manley 250s.

### Definitely a Music Lovers Pair of Amplifiers

I have a wide range of musical taste and can listen to anything throughout the course of the day. One minute I'm listening to Boulez and the next minute Run DMC, so I tend to err on the side of

musicality instead of holding out for that last molecule of detail that other listeners might prefer. If you are one of those listeners, these may not be the amplifiers for you.

But, if you value musicality over anything else and you don't mind keeping up with a lot of tubes as well as their ventilation and space requirements,

**With all that power on tap, you can pretty much swap speakers to your heart's content.**

the Manley 250s could be the last amplifiers you ever need to buy. With all that power on tap, you can pretty much swap speakers to your heart's content and not need to make an amp change. Thanks to the balanced inputs, you can change preamps too.

These amplifiers do so much right, that at a price of \$9000 per pair they earn a TONE Exceptional value award for 2007. I know that \$9000 isn't small potatoes, but considering how much these amplifiers have to offer, I truly feel that they are a value. Plus, taking into account the longevity of the Manley company, you know that these guys will be around to provide service ten years from now, should the need occur. (And by the way, Dan's Manley 240s which are the first generation of these amps are still going strong after 16 years!)

The Manley 250s will be greatly missed around here... ●

**Manley 250 Monoblocks**  
**MSRP: \$9000 per pair**

### MANUFACTURER

**Manley Laboratories, Inc.**  
13880 Magnolia Ave.  
Chino (not China) California  
91710  
909-627-4256  
www.manleylabs.com

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers:** Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Aesthetix Callisto Signature, Aurum Acoustics CDP

**Speakers:** Tetra 506 Custom with REL B2 subwoofer, Penaudio Serenades, Martin Logan Vanquish, Apogee Calipers

**Analog Sources:** SME10 turntable with SME V arm and MoFi 3.5C cartridge, AVID Volvere with SME 309 arm and Shelter 90x cartridge, Aesthetix Rhea phono preamplifier, TEAC 6300.

**Digital Sources:** Meridian 808, Wadia 581, Aurum CDP

**Interconnect:** Cardas Neutral Reference, Tetra Artet, Tara The ONE

**Speaker Cable:** Tetra Artet

**Power Cords:** Running Springs Mongoose and Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference

**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Jaco and Running Springs Duke

**Vibration Control:** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature Racks, with Cereballs and Cerepucs

**Room Treatment:** Gik Bass Traps, Sonex Classic

