

# THE APPLES IN STEREO

College chart-toppers tackle a different kind of essay question: solid-state or tube?

There's nothing like skateboarding on a skyscraper. Just ask Robert Schneider of the Apples in Stereo. Taking a break from another installment of our "S&V Sessions," where we invite artists to audition home equipment using their own work, Robert used his own four-wheeled equipment to tour the top-floor veranda outside our midtown Manhattan sound room.

On second thought, there *is* something like skateboarding on a skyscraper. Just listen to the Apples' current album, *The Discovery of a World Inside the Moone* (Elephant 6/spinART). Its neopsychedelic but solidly grounded pop is a fitting soundtrack to the image of Robert doing wheelies on the canopy of the concrete jungle.

How cool are these Apples? *Moone*

(don't drop that *e*), their third full-length CD after *Fun Trick Noisemaker* and *Tone Soul Evolution*, spent three weeks at No. 1 on the CMJ Top 200, college radio's most influential chart. "Know Your Cult Icons," a handy A-to-Z guide in a recent issue of *Pulse!* magazine, declared that "E is for Elephant 6" — the "collective" of primarily Denver-based bands spearheaded by the



The Apples at *Sound & Vision*: from left, Chris McDuffie, S&V's Gaughn (rear), Eric Allen, S&V's Richardson, Robert Schneider, John Hill, and Hilarie Sidney.

Apples and also encompassing the Olivia Tremor Control, Neutral Milk Hotel, and the Minders, all of which Robert has produced. And a forthcoming episode of Cartoon Network's *The Powerpuff Girls* will be based on "Signal in the Sky (Let's Go)," a song Robert wrote for the show's brand-new "inspired by" CD, *Heroes & Villains* (reviewed in this issue). How cool is that?

Features editor Mike Gaughn anticipated that this "S&V Session" would be rather different from our previous outings with XTC, Chris Cornell, and Phish. After all, Robert has emulated Phil Spector, Brian Wilson, and other pop obsessives by recording vintage instruments (like an old Sears Silvertone guitar) on vintage tape machines in a studio called Pet Sounds. So instead of having the Apples compare speakers, Mike suggested a more "vintage" kind of face-off: solid-state vs. tube.

Valve Amplification Company (VAC) provided the tube gear: the PA100/100 stereo amplifier (\$4,000), rated at 100 watts per channel, and the Standard Preamplifier (\$2,500). For the solid-state equipment, we used components of our reference system: a pair of Krell 250M monoblock amps (\$5,000 each), pumping out 250 watts per side, and a fully loaded Lexicon DC-2 digital preamp (\$4,000). We also tapped our reference system for the B&W Nautilus 803 speakers (\$5,000 a pair) and, to spin CDs, the Panasonic DVD-H1000 DVD player (\$3,000). Of course, we matched the levels of the solid-state and tube setups to avoid

listener bias (since louder is almost always perceived as better).

Tube gear has a reputation for "warm" sound, whereas solid-state equipment is thought to be more neutral. Would the Apples be able to tell the difference? A speaker's sonic signature can be easily identified even by untrained listeners, but differences between electronics can be subtle. To establish that the band could indeed tell tube from solid-state, we began the session with some blind testing.

First, we flipped a coin. Twenty times, to be exact. In this way, we plotted a 20-step switching plan (heads = tube, tails = solid-state) for two songs from *Moone*. The Apples didn't know the plan, nor did they know if we were even switching at all in each case, since the coin tosses resulted in a sequence that sometimes meant A/B toggling but other times meant keeping the same gear engaged for as many as three steps in a row.

The band happily defers to Robert as its chief spokesman, since he wears the multiple hats of primary songwriter, producer, tech-head, and manic pop visionary, so we sat him in the sweet spot. But all the other Apples were present, too: bassist Eric Allen, guitarist John Hill, keyboardist Chris McDuffie, and drummer Hilarie Sidney. The first track we offered was "The Bird That You Can't See." If, as Robert has said, *Moone* recalls Spector and Wilson but "adds Led Zeppelin and Sly and the Family Stone dancing around a theremin," then this funk track is a Sly one.

We didn't expect anyone to correctly identify switches between the Krell/Lexi-

con solid-state system and the VAC tube rig right away. So we were impressed when Robert started nailing our scheme fairly early: he correctly ID'd the sequence from Step 6 to 7 as an actual switch and the sequence from Step 10 to 11 as no switch.

"The Bird" took us through Step 12. We then used "Submarine Dream," a lush track, for Steps 13 through 20. By the end, both Robert and Eric were not only noticing when we made an actual switch but also correctly ID'ing which system was solid-state and which was tube.

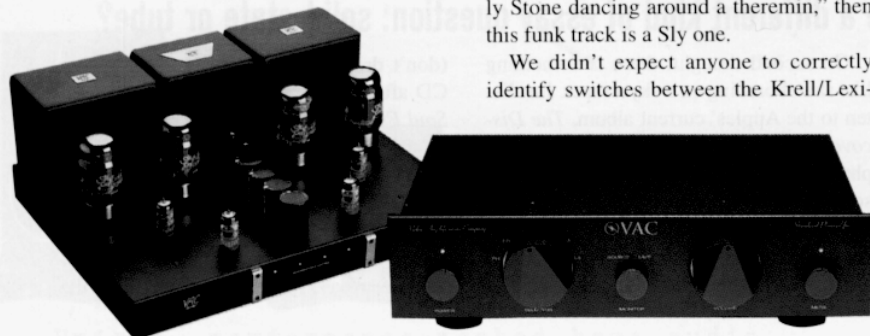
And how did the systems sound? Surprise: contrary to "conventional wisdom," among audiophiles, Robert thought the solid-state setup had "fatter bass" and the tube had "more definition." In fact, on "Submarine Dream" he felt the tube gear was "brighter" than the solid-state. "With the tube, I can hear into the mix better, especially the drums and the keyboards. The solid-state seems warmer, but the tube is a better representation of my engineering."

Our blind test done, we asked the band to drive the session for "I Can't Believe," whose big guitars and tough attack sound like . . . well, I'll let Robert do the talking, which he did as soon as he had us start the track through the VAC tube system. "God! So hi-fi! That sounds so clear and open — especially in the real bottom end and the ambient high end. I wanted that track to sound like Led Zeppelin, and it does."

When we switched to the Krell/Lexicon solid-state system, Robert and Chris felt the sound had a "more woofy bass." And then Robert surprised us again: "The solid-state may be less open, but I still like it — and it sounds more like what I think vintage stuff sounds like." Really? More "vintage" than tube? "Well, solid-state's pretty old, too!"

Complementing Robert's 10 songs on *Moone* are a couple by Hilarie, "20 Cases Suggestive of . . ." and "Stay Gold." We cued up the latter, and Hilarie focused as much on the "incredible" sound of the B&W speakers as on any differences in the electronics. "I'm not used to listening like this," she admitted. "When we mix, the ultimate test for us is if a recording still sounds good on the crappiest thing we can find."

"Yeah, I bought a \$30 CD boombox at Wal-Mart," Robert chimed in, "and I keep



In this corner, the tube gear: VAC's PA100/100 amp and Standard Preamplifier. And in that corner (facing page), the solid-state: Lexicon's DC-2 preamp and Krell's 250M monoblock amp.



it in the bathroom. So I bring mixes home from the studio and listen to them on that when I'm taking a bath. John listens on his boombox and his car stereo. Of course, we do listen on good stereo systems, too. Chris has some fine Altec Lansing speakers. And when I'm at the studio, before I make any final decisions I always walk into another room — where I'm hearing a random mono sound reflected off whatever — because I figure that's how most people listen to music, walking around and stuff."

But back to "Stay Gold." Hearing it on solid-state, Robert said it had "a fuzzy sound, kinda like distortion in a really nice way. We go for a little grainy sound, and the solid-state gives a pure representation of that." We switched to tube. "Man, that sounds crisp. The tube is what I *want* our records to sound like, but the solid-state is what they *realistically* sound like. . . . Maybe we should get one of those VAC



tube amps to record through. *That's it!*" At which point, Robert said to Mike Gaughn and me, "This is really fun, you guys!"

Hey, "fun" is our middle name! To wit: Mike suggested playing a mystery track by the Olivia Tremor Control followed by a mystery track (by a mystery band) that appears to be a direct influence. The Apples were game. Robert asked to hear both songs all the way through on the tube system. So from Olivia's *Black Foliage* (Elephant 6/Flydaddy), which Robert produced, we cued up "Hideaway." (No, not "Hideaway." *Drop that a.* These Elephant 6 folks sure have fun with vowels.) A glow of recognition came over Robert, and as the track ended, he said: "Sounds good. So clean."

Then we played the influence track: "Heroes and Villains" from the Beach Boys' landmark *Smiley Smile*. "God, that's great," Robert exclaimed. "I can really hear the air on the harmonicas. . . . Amazing. . . .

So many little things are going on, and even though it's mono, I can hear way back into the mix."

As "Heroes and Villains" ended, Robert immediately asked to hear it again, this time on solid-state. "There's a lot more bass now. It's not deep bass, it's just a real warm lower-midrangey kind of thing. Same with the organ tones; they were deep on the tube, but now they're thicker in a warm kind of way. You don't hear the harmonicas as much, the clarinets, the crisp things at the top, but the whole mix seems bigger and fuller."

To start wrapping things up, we asked the band to pick a track from its own back catalog. The choice was "Strawberryfire," a beautiful drone from *Her Wallpaper Reverie*, the "mini-LP" that preceded *Moone*. (True story: the track was used by Sony in a commercial for high-definition TV. True revelation by Hilarie: "But Sony never sent us a TV! And they promised!")

We began with solid-state. "This has a real presence," Robert said, "but something irritates me. There's a boost in the lower midrange, around 400 or 500 Hz, which I don't like. Now I'm hearing the bassiness too much in things other than the bass itself, like the vocals." Over to tube. "Again, I love the tube because it sounds more like what I *want* my production to sound like." And back to solid-state. "This is softer on the ears, but the tube has more depth."

**F**inally, we asked each band member to pick an influence track from a stack of CDs we had brought along. Eric chose "I Want to Take You Higher" from Sly and the Family Stone's *Stand!*, and he wanted to hear it on the tube system. "Four stars!" he concluded, noting the detail of the handclaps, the harmonica, and the trombone. Chris tapped "In the Light" from Led Zepelin's *Physical Graffiti* on solid-state. The opening keyboards elicited a lot of oohs and aahs, and when the track was done, Chris was impressed: "The panning across the stereo field was as good as I expected."



Hilarie, John, and Robert joined forces to pick "Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey" from *The Beatles* (okay, okay, "The White Album") on tube. Robert was quick to comment: "I hear a lot of definition. But there's a samey quality that I've heard across all the records we've played today on the tube system; they all sounded like they were going through that specific kind of system. Which is great, because it sounds incredible. If you want to have this sparkling quality on all of your records, then tube is the way to go. But with solid-state, it seems like you hear the different qualities of each recording."

So is solid-state *truer* to the recording?

"I'm not sure if it's truer," Robert said, "because it's warmer, and it packs more of a punch. There's a lot more clarity on the tube system, with a lot more going on in stereo separation."

"Of course, the tubes themselves are only one part of the chain," Chris noted. "Things like output transformers and all that stuff can have an effect on the sound."

"Sure," Robert replied. "But I'd say that, in general, if you want a real high-definition, high-end kind of sound, I'd take the tube. If you want what I'd consider a more vintage kind of sound, more punchy and more grainy, I'd go with the solid-state."

Heading out the door, Robert thanked us for "the best press thing we've ever done." Then he turned and said, "You know, in the end, I like both systems. I'd take 'em both: one for each channel!"

SEW

