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JULY 2009



FIRSTWATT F5

A READER'S REVIEW: "FROM A SATISFIED OWNER"

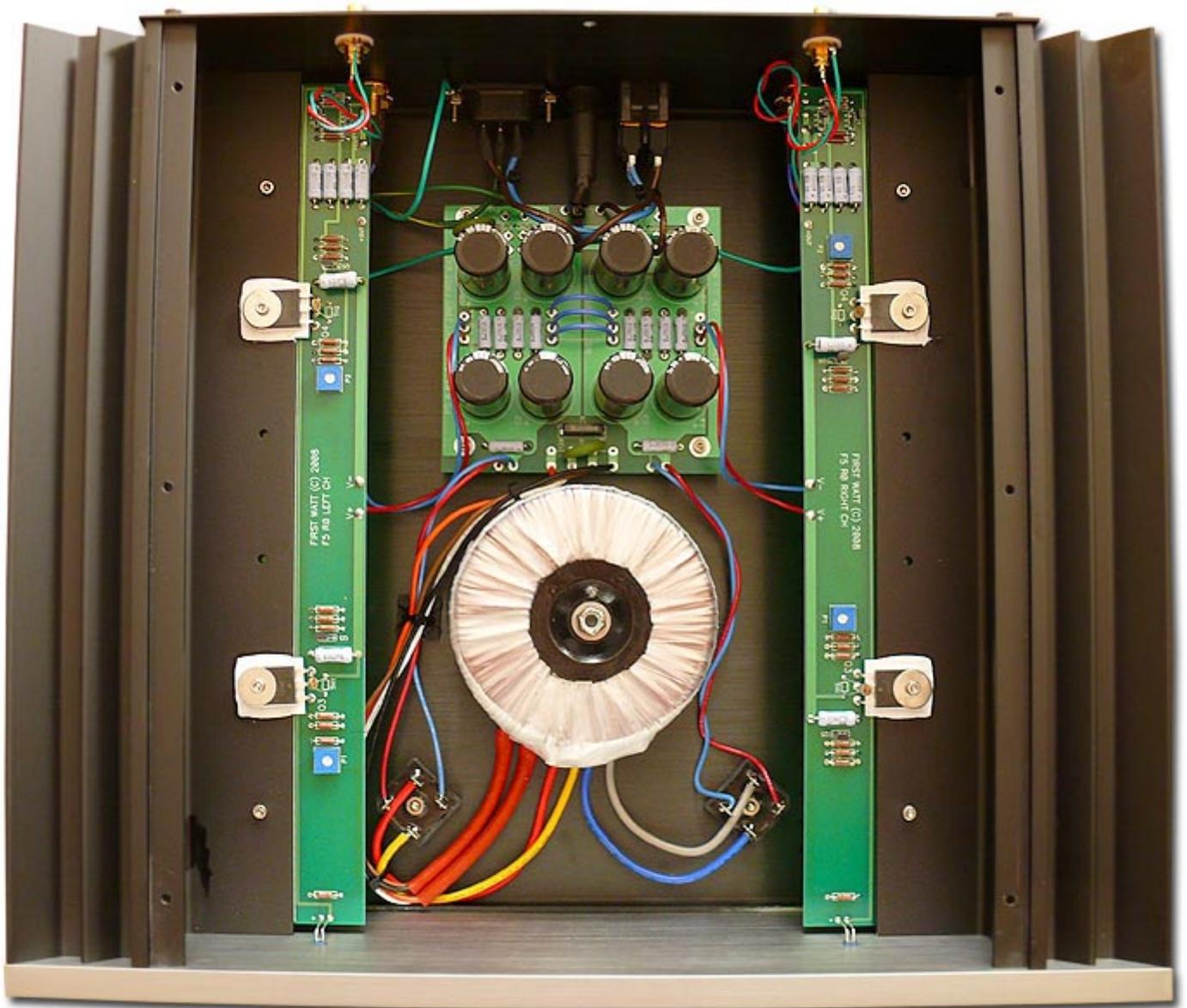
Since my [review](#) of the F5, it has since become SET man's favorite transistor amp. As such, it routinely appears in reviews and associated commentary. Off-screen, it also pops up in private e-mails as recommendation to inquiring readers. Then a Nelson Pass e-mail announcing a new FirstWatt amp made me aware - the F5 was near the end of its 100-unit life cycle. I posted a brief [industry feature](#) to alert prospective owners that time was running out. Reader Michele Surdi in Rome jumped on the opportunity to acquire one of the last F5s from the hands of the maestro. This he did purely on the strength of conviction, his in mine. When he subsequently offered to share his feelings with our readers, I accepted. If a man is trusting enough to purchase something unheard on my personal enthusiasm, I will publish his own take even if it contradicts mine 180°. Michele's satisfaction with his purchase here happens to mirror mine but that's not the point. The point is to offer a 2nd opinion. - Ed.



I love the Quad 405. I've owned several variants from the original Mk1 to the 606 to the 909, paired with everything from a Quad 33 to the Nagra PLL and driving anything from Dahlquists to 15-in. Tannoy studio monitors. It is a classic design by a great man, astounding value for money and also musically in great taste. What it is not is a state of the art component. When competing with cutting-edge big ticket products, it falls back onto its simple virtues, steadfastly refusing to kill giants.

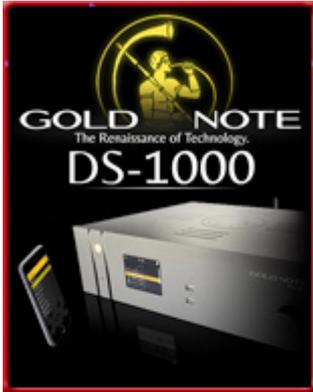
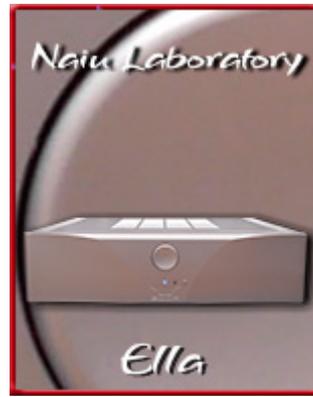


When I ordered one of the -- very last as it turns out -- F5s from FirstWatt, I was not looking for a trusty Quad-like backup to my Nagra VPA monoblocks. I already own a winsome pair of Manley Mahis which work perfectly in that role. What I wanted to see after reading Srajan's raves was whether a low power, low impedance, low distortion, very reasonably priced sand amp could complement my high internal impedance, balanced push-pull, zero feedback, DHT powered Nagras driving 12-in. coaxial Tannoy Yorkminsters in an all Nagra rig.

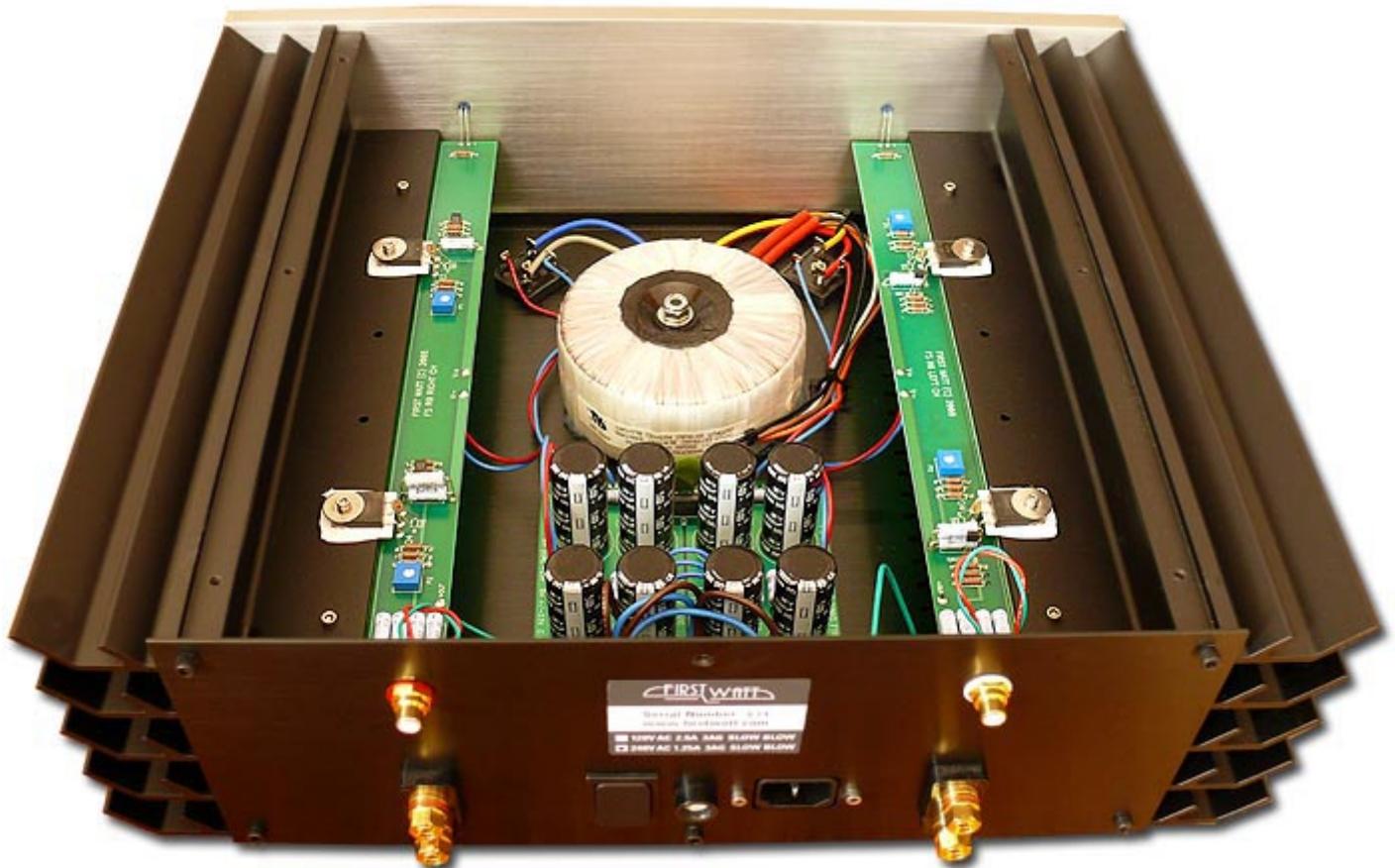


After a week of auditioning (under 30 hours actually since I am quite skeptical about the relevance of extended burn-in for solid state), the verdict is in: *the F5 plays in the same league as the Nagra's at about one eighth of the list price*. I am not saying it is better nor am I saying that it is the same thing. I am saying that in my rig, preference is chiefly a day-to-day matter irrespective of software and listening volumes (the Mahis on the contrary are always good but though irresistible with popular music, outperformed by the Nagra's in low-level listening to competently recorded classical material).

For specifics, the F5 was driven single-ended both by the Nagra CDC player's passive preamp and then by the three-tube 10dB gain PLL preamp using an all van den Hul carbon loom and Eupen (unconditioned) power cables. Discs used for comparison included among others Emmylou Harry's *Wrecking Ball* and Jordi Savall's *Don Quijote*. In the case of Nagra's own VPAs which are driven out of fully balanced outputs, the onboard passive pre gives a cooler presentation while the PLL adds some tonal density with a minute loss, to my ears, of transparency. Horses for courses.



By the same token with the F5, the addition of a tube pre rounds out the picture but does not otherwise correct the lower frequencies. In this configuration the F5 has better bass control (in my room) but the Nagras maintain a different though equally subtle tonal nuance. F5 midranges are all the way exceptional, bringing back fond memories of John Curl's original class A designs - back in the day that was. Different as they are, the Swiss and American amplifiers are equally satisfying. The F5's soundstage in particular is comparable to the Nagras' exemplary one while its 3D capability is in a class I have never associated with transistors up to now. What would be the result with a monoblock version of Nelson's amp one can only wonder. As remarked by Srajan, low-level listening is outstanding to the point of deception, in-room volume seeming to be much higher than it actually is. Warm-up finally is imperative and, again as noted, apparently somewhat long, i.e. over an hour. Endless and pointless tweaking is always achievable by cable switching.



Additional info: fit and finish are perfect, far from what would be expected in a limited production semi-custom built item (actually preferable, in my austere view, to the somewhat visible Pass Labs models). Service by Mark Sammut of FirstWatt and communication with Pass himself were on a par with those supplied by Eveanna Manley, which is to say with the best I have ever experienced. Oh, and the amp arrived from California to my Roman doorstep in something like fifty hours. At times you really get to eat the hifi bear it seems.

PS: The only conceivable drawback to the FirstWatt amp is its relatively low power output. Let me go on record as saying that speakers which are unsuitable to the F5's power ratings are badly designed, period.

Michele Surdi



FirstWatt [website](#)



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