



The Woo Audio WA-5

— Jeff Dorgay

Mr. Woo Does It Again!

If you read issue 8 of TONEAudio Magazine, you know that we were very excited about the WA 6 and WA3+ headphone amplifiers from Woo Audio. They are very well built, stylish and offer great value – not to mention they sound great too!

Considering what Woo offered in the \$500 range, I was really excited to see what they had up their sleeves in a cost no object model. Needless to say that I am not at all disappointed with the new WA-5, I have enjoyed listening to it more than any other headphone amplifier I have heard so far. Granted, this one isn't inexpensive at \$3000 dollars, but it's not a ton of money for a good 300B amplifier.

What's the secret? I didn't pop the chassis open, so I really can't comment on the parts lurking under the chassis, but I do think that a lot of the performance can be traced to the power supply, it's huge! As a matter of fact, this is a two chassis design with one of the identical sized chassis being strictly power supply. This is a serious headphone amplifier, so clear out some rack space for this baby! The power supply weighs 40 pounds and the amplifier weighs 35 pounds – very substantial indeed.



I'm a nut for the SET sound, so when I had a chance to listen to a custom built 300B amplifier at last years Head-Fi National meet, I wondered why this was not a more popular configuration. If you have been somewhat on the fence about headphone listening, thinking that perhaps it just wasn't musical enough, the WA-5 will spoil you for anything else. (Except maybe the \$15,000 Single Power amp!!)

Initial Set Up

Whatever you do, save the crates! The WA-5 comes in two massive crates that are extremely well built, so I would highly suggest that you save these in case you ever want to transport your WA-5 somewhere. (Like your local Head-Fi meet, where you can show it off to your buddies!!)

I used the WA-5 with my normal three reference phones: The Grado GS1000s, AKG K-701s and Sennheiser 650s. I also had a newcomer to the stable, a set of 701s rewired by Ken Ball of Audio Line Out. (www.aloaudio.com) This was a major treat, but more about that in an upcoming issue of Headphone Planet.

Those of you that are K-1000 owners are in for a treat, the WA-5 has an XLR jack on the front panel specifically for this phone! Unfortunately, I was not able to borrow a pair of K-1000s for the review, but I am sure that this would be a great match up.

For the duration of the test, I used the WA-5 with an Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference power cord and a Running Springs

Haley power conditioner. Source components were my iPod, a Squeezebox and the Meridian G08 CD player. I wanted to get a good cross section of what various headphone listeners might use for a source with this amplifier. Interconnects were various cables from ALO and Cardas.

There are four sets of RCA inputs on the back, switchable on the front panel, along with a volume control. The large knob on the power supply turns the WA-5 on.

The WA-5 Bonus

Once I gave the WA-5 about a week of break in, I was ready for serious listening. This was very easy to do, because in addition to being a killer headphone amplifier, there is a pair of speaker terminals on the back, so you can use it as an integrated amplifier as well.

If you ever wanted to get your hands on a great pair of high efficiency speakers and peek into the world of SET amplification, here's your chance because the WA-5 puts out a whopping 9 watts per channel!

During the break-in period, I had the WA-5 hooked up to a pair of somewhat inefficient B&W 805S speakers that we have in for review and they did a very good job at driving them to moderate levels in my living room. Thanks to that robust power supply, even in this situation, the WA-5 had very nice, tight, controlled bass with an airy presentation that only an SET can provide.

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So intrigued by what the WA-5 would do in this situation, I took it out to the studio and hooked it up to my 101db Rethm speakers. Woo hoo! This was a ton of fun indeed. The Rethms are highly revealing speakers that with a great amplifier are quite enjoyable. The WA-5 hit a home run here, if you would like to investigate this world, I assure you that you will be VERY happy with the WA-5 in this capacity too!

Let's Get Back Down to Earth

But this is a headphone amplifier after all, so we really want to investigate this aspect of the WA-5's performance. You have two choices; fantastic and out of this world. Straight from Woo Audio the WA-5 comes with a compliment of Chinese tubes and does an excellent job as configured, but I couldn't stand it, I had to do some tube rolling. A couple of NOS RCA 5U4GB tubes took over for the rectifiers, a pair of RCA 6SN7s for the drivers and I went ALL THE WAY and got my precious Western Electric 300Bs out of the cabinet for this one.

I know it's a little wacky, but if you go the extra mile to put better tubes in the WA-5, I guarantee that you will be blown away by the sound! It's so big and airy, with major bass extension and control, you just might forget you are even listening to headphones! *(continued)*

With so much power on tap, I advise caution because you could really make your ears bleed with this amp. But the great thing about SET amplifiers is that they have a ton of detail at low volume, so this one might even go a long way towards saving your hearing. It sounds so good, you won't really have to crank it up.

No matter what kind of music you enjoy, it will be a new experience on the WA-5. It just has such a smooth and musical (yet very detailed) presentation with no fatigue at all. I was able to listen for very long periods of time and not want to take the phones off.

Want to freak yourself out? Put on the **Johnny Cash American Recordings** disc on and give *Delia's Gone* a spin, it sounds like JC is standing about two feet in front of you – creepy!! Here's another one, throw on Pink Floyd's **Wish You Were Here** and go to *Welcome to the Machine*; that synthesized elevator thing is tons of fun.

Thanks to the grain free presentation of the WA-5, I guarantee that classical lovers will really enjoy this one! Real instruments take on another dimension with this setup. My favorite jazz CDs were also great. All of your favorite recordings will be a treat to listen to on the WA-5!

Again, those of you that have not had the SET experience will really enjoy the holographic presentation that you get with this amplifier. If you like to be surprised, put any of your favorite recordings on and listen closely for the minute details, I know you will hear things that you didn't before! While this is something that headphone listening offers, the WA-5 makes this a sublime experience.

With all that resolution and a huge dose of reserve power, you will easily be able to hear any other changes you make to your headphone rig, if you make the WA-5 the cornerstone.

Call Jack Right Now

I don't normally gush about a product this much, but the WA-5 is really a home run in all respects. Complaints or other nits to pick? NONE! I dare you to find a more musically satisfying experience for double the price anywhere. Granted, I have not tried it with every single headphone out there, but with the four I did use, I was blown away.

If you are at the Head-Fi National meet this week, don't leave without stopping by to see Woo Audio to give the WA-5 a listen. ●

MANUFACTURER

Woo Audio
www.woaudio.com
MSRP: \$3000

ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

Digital Sources: iPod with Red Wine Audio iMod, Squeezebox, Meridian G08

Interconnects: Audio Line Out and Cardas

Power Cord: Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Haley

Headphones: Grado GS1000, AKG K701 (Stock) AKG K701 with Audio Line Out recabling, Sennheiser HD 650 (w/Cardas cable)

Speakers: B&W 805S, Rethm 2nd Rethm

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