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Above Western Electric 91E integrated valve amp with black finish

Absolute Sounds Goes West

Western Electric, America's oldest audio company, arrives on these shores courtesy of Absolute Sounds, the UK's foremost high-end distributor, with the new 91E valve amp taking centre stage

London, England – No audio brand still operating stretches back in time further than Western Electric. Founded in 1869, seven years before Edison set up his laboratory, the venerable American company was a leader in the development of audio technology for telephones, cinemas and more. For much of its history it was a subsidiary of AT&T (American Telephone & Telegraph); it was acquired by entrepreneur Charles G. Whitener in 1995 and remains in his hands to this day.

Western Electric played a major role in developing high-fidelity sound in the pre-solid-state era. It made amplifiers that were considered cutting-edge in their day, such as the 91A, a remarkable single-ended triode (SET) design launched in 1936 and originally used in movie theatres. It also created the 300B audio valve – a groundbreaking triode introduced in 1938 to amplify telephone signals – and continues to make the definitive version to this day, having resumed 300B production in 2020.

It makes perfect sense, then, that Western Electric's latest creation is the 91E integrated valve amplifier, developed from the legacy of the 91A and incorporating the famous Western Electric 300B.

Lovingly made in Rossville, Georgia, the 91E evokes the golden age of American manufacturing with its unique design and exemplary build quality. The amp is visually arresting, with its colour display and pair of matched 300B valves housed in glass cylinders protruding from the top. Available in a choice of champagne gold, nickel and black, its finish is immaculate, and its controls impeccably engineered.

The 91E combines the experience gained from many decades of SET amp development with new techniques and technologies, including Western Electric's patented, fully linear SCCS (Steered Constant Current Source) circuitry. This enhanced parallel feed is controlled exclusively by the valve's output voltage and increases the power available from the 300B output valves to around double the seven or eight watts of traditional 300B-based SET amp designs, whilst eliminating the need for large output transformers and associated hysteresis.

When the amp powers up, the LCD display shows Western Electric's classic 'Spirit of Communication' logo of 1914, then switches to a pair of vertical power meters. Volume level is displayed, alongside input selection: there are the four line-level RCA inputs, an MM/MC phono input, and Bluetooth for those wishing to pair their digital devices wirelessly. Clever technical implementations are evident throughout, such as the microprocessor-controlled valve warm-up and auto-bias regimes, the optical-encoder volume control that addresses a relay-switched resistor network, and the switching of filament polarity each time the amp is turned on to enhance the 300Bs' lifespan.



Left The plug-in-plug-out transformer block is flanked by two ECC81 valves, with the 300Bs behind

The 91E's complement of valves includes a pair of ECC81s in addition to the matched pair of 300Bs. While the amp's power output is inevitably lower than that of solid-state designs – it is a SET amp after all – the additional power generated by its innovative design opens up a wider range of partnering speakers whilst elevating the amp's sonic qualities. Flexibility is further enhanced by plug-in-plug-out 4-, 8- and 16-ohm transformer blocks, interchangeable to match the speakers used by its owner.

All the attributes beloved of SET devotees are abundantly present – the sense of space and air, natural tonality and flow – enhanced by less commonly associated qualities such as extension and definition at the frequency extremes. This is a 300B-based SET amp for the 21st century, made by the company that invented the 300B – of all the integrated amplifiers incorporating this revered valve, this is the ultimate.

The Western Electric 91E integrated amplifier is available now from a select group of high-end audio retailers, at an RRP of £16,998 in black or champagne gold, or £18,500 in the premium nickel finish. Alongside the amp, Absolute Sounds is also importing Western Electric's 300B valves – the finest 300Bs in the world.



Left Western Electric's matched pair of 300B valves come in a gorgeous presentation box



Absolute Sounds is the UK's leading importer and distributor of high-end audio equipment. The company was formed in 1978 by Ricardo Franassovici, who left a successful career in the music industry to become one of the world's foremost hi-fi entrepreneurs. Ricardo's burning desire has always been to give UK-based music fans the opportunity to experience audio at the highest level, cherry-picking the very best components from around the globe to create a 'hi-fi boutique' overflowing with highly covetable, high-performance products. Like the finest watches and most prestigious motorcars, these brands deliver finely tuned, supremely engineered products that simply ooze desirability. If you are seeking the world's best audio equipment, Absolute Sounds is your first port of call.

In 2020, Absolute Sounds launched Ten – a curated collection of extraordinary sonic creations from audio artisans around the world. Personally selected by Ricardo Franassovici, this collection is distinct from the main Absolute Sounds portfolio.

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| BRAND LIST – ABSOLUTE SOUNDS MAIN PORTFOLIO & TEN COLLECTION | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| MAIN PORTFOLIO | | TEN COLLECTION |
| Artesania Audio | KL Audio | DeVore Fidelity |
| Audio Research | Koetsu | Dohmann Audio |
| Constellation Audio | Krell | HSE |
| Continuum Audio Labs | Magico | Metaxas & Sins |
| Copland | PrimaLuna | Robert Koda |
| Dan D'Agostino | Reed | Trafomatic |
| darTZeel | ReQuest Audio | |
| dCS | TechDAS | |
| EAT | Transparent Audio | |
| Franco Serblin | Western Electric | |
| Jadis | Wilson Audio | |



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