



Positive Feedback Online Interviews Jim White of Aesthetix

by Dave Clark



Dave Clark: What is the history behind Aesthetix?

Jim White: In 1994 I had an Oracle Delphi MkII and Koetsu Rosewood Signature. I needed a phono stage because of the very low output level of that cartridge, and wanted one that was all tube. At that time, none existed in the market, so I wasn't able to purchase one. I thought and thought about it, coming up with a circuit that I thought might work well. The original was all on one chassis and had terrible hum and noise problems. I took it to my friend, Jay Nakamura, to listen. He said that I had to build it, that it was too good not to make available to other people. He promised he would buy one. That was the very beginning.

Ironically, while prototyping I made a change to the circuit and accidentally connected a heater supply to the input tube's grid. I didn't thoroughly test it, and hooked it up to my Koetsu to listen to the change. It immediately blew the coil of the Koetsu, making my need for the phono stage moot. That was the lowest point, I nearly gave up. I was heartbroken because the cartridge had been given to me by a good friend. I needed a new cartridge and had no money. Jay told me to call his friend Garth, the US distributor for Benz cartridges. I called Garth and told him I had no money and needed the cheapest low output coil he had because I was developing an all-tube high-gain phono stage. He still tells that story to this day, he thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. An all out phono stage designed with the cheapest cartridge? Ha! He ended up distributing Aesthetix!

DC: Is there an Aesthetix sound? That is, what is your idea of what a component should sound like (flavor), or for that matter not sound like? I ask this because the unit does not sound like a tube unit in the classic sense.

JW: I would say Aesthetix has definite definable sonic characteristics. It tends to be rich, full but

without the traditional "tubby" quality of bloated, uncontrolled bass. It is extended and airy, but not analytical or bright. However, I mostly try to stay away from audiophile terms, finding that for me I start listening to the sound instead of the music. Ultimately, I strive to design products that draw the listener into the music long term. Anything else is a failure.

DC: Gee, that sounds like the perfect amplifier—regardless of being a tube or solid-state design. Yet it has tubes. Why tubes? Why so many?

JW: I have always found tube products more satisfying, despite various sonic shortcomings. The first preamp I owned, an ARC SP-8, was wonderful in the midrange. One could spend a lot more on solid state equipment and not achieve near the same enjoyment, although it would certainly have better bass and more extended highs. When I began designing preamplifiers, tubes were the natural choice. I never even really considered solid state, although I use a lot of solid state devices in the power supplies, even the tube-regulated Jupiter series.

In terms of the number of tubes, with the Rhea it is just a matter of the required number of tubes to achieve that level of gain and noise performance. The circuitry of the Rhea is identical to the Io in topology, however I do use a number of solid state devices in the Rhea for ancillary functions that utilize tubes in the Io.

One strong influence I had technically that biased me towards tubes was the old tube-based Tektronix oscilloscopes. I own quite a few of them, and I am constantly amazed at the quality and reliability they achieved despite the fact that there are roughly 50 tubes in some of them. My favorite is the 585. I still use that scope almost every day, mostly because it has the cleanest trace of any scope I've ever seen. If you talk to a Tektronix employee from that era, one for one they will tell you that scope will never be equaled in terms of trace quality. I learned a lot from those products. At the time I designed the Io, more and more tube products were going more and more toward solid-state, using tubes for only a few functions. I learned that if properly designed, tube equipment can and will last a lifetime, and that one should not shy away from using tubes if performance gains can be had.

In those early days of designing, I rarely studied tube audio circuits. There were quite a few available to me, but they didn't make a lot of sense to me in terms of the best sonic approach. So I focused my studies on higher performance circuits that could get more gain with lower noise, without sacrificing sonics. I found that many of the "accepted" circuits were not musically satisfying to me, despite supposed technical advantages.

DC: What is your choice in music? That is, do you have a reference that you use in designing your products? Rock, jazz, classical?

JW: I listen to a wide variety of music. However, this question assumes that I am the one making all of the design decisions about how Aesthetix' products sound. Actually, I am only one member of a group of disparate listeners, with radically different systems and tastes, that all have input into the final outcome. If I make a change to a product of any sonic consequence, I ask this group to evaluate it. If, one for one, they all say it is an improvement, then I am confident it is the right thing. If one of them says it is not, I do not make the change. I do not consider myself an extraordinarily skilled listener. In fact, several of my friends are far better than me. I am good at listening to them, however, and value their opinions highly.

DC: This thing is very big and heavy, way bigger and heavier than one would think, what's the deal?

JW: Power supply, power supply, power supply. I'm a big believer. It's expensive, difficult and heavy, but worth it. The three preamplifiers in the Saturn Series, the Rhea, Calypso and Janus, all use the same power supply. It consists of two separate transformers, one for high voltages / low currents, and the other for heaters which are low voltage / high current. This makes it bigger and heavier, but the performance gains are dramatic. The main high voltage supply is choke input, also adding weight and size, but again the performance gains cannot be ignored. All of Aesthetix' products are choke input filtered, with active regulation.

DC: What is the overall circuit design? Class A, single-ended, fully balanced?

JW: The Rhea runs fully class A. The first gain stage is single-ended, and it is fully balanced from

the second gain stage through the output. The Calypso is fully class A, balanced input to output.

DC: Does this matter for the product under consideration—phono stage versus line stage?

JW: It doesn't change my design philosophy.

DC: Simple design versus elaborate? Since your products tend to be rather large, may I offer that you lean towards the elaborate? Why so when there are so many out there choosing the KISS approach to design? Or is it a matter of "This is what it takes to do it right?" or that of overbuilding?

JW: I probably have a larger parts count than competing products, and more elaborate power supplies. My designs are balanced, which tends to add parts. However, the actual signal path is very simple. In the case of the Calypso, it is volume control, gain stage, output buffer. The Rhea is more complex just because of the large amount of gain, and I wanted it to be all tube. But it is really quite simple regardless.

I have always had strong beliefs about volume controls, and am strongly on the side of switched resistor networks. These have dramatically higher parts counts, but the sonic improvement is easily worth the cost. Few companies are doing this, most chose an IC based volume control, or mechanical resistive element, such as conductive plastic.

DC: When you design, where do you start? Power supply, output stage, etc.? Or is it all one happy "balancing" act?

JW: I start with the signal path circuitry, from input to output, and work out from there. It's difficult to design a power supply unless one knows what it is supplying.

DC: Do you consider a price point or is it more of a "now what can I reasonably sell this thing for" approach?

JW: I always think I can make a product for half of what it actually ends up costing. However, Aesthetix tends to have high value products, even though they are expensive. I feel that if you put your heart into it, and it has the right combination of sound quality, build quality and features, then the price becomes secondary. We also tend to be a low overhead operation, which again improves the value. One friend of mine is irritated with me for the low (relative) price of the Saturn Series!

DC: How does a product come about? Can you trace its beginnings from just a twinkle in your eye to that ready to be sold?

JW: Yes, all of the products start as a twinkle and then, a very few of them end up being actual products. Bringing a product to market is a difficult task. There are so many things that have to come together, in just the right combination, to be successful. Usually, friends contribute bright ideas that help define the product. For example, the original design of the Rhea had only one input. The idea for three inputs came from Garth Leerer of Musical Surroundings, my distributor. My job is to put all these great ideas together into a cohesive, working product with outstanding sound quality.

DC: You have some key "audiophile" parts in the unit, how do you balance the idea of "circuit and parts" to that of "parts are just parts and the circuit is all that matters" approach?

JW: I think everything matters. I don't worry about using an "audiophile" resistor in a control circuit, but I certainly worry about the noise that control circuit may be emitting. On the other hand, I have found some audiophile parts that are overpriced and not any better than, and sometimes worse than, standard parts. The key for me is balancing *importances*. I never put in audiophile parts just so I can say I use them, but I do use those that definitely improve the sound.

DC: Wire and AC cords? Care to offer a "why they matter or not" position?

JW: I don't know why they all sound different but I do know that they matter.

DC: I would agree, I have yet to come to terms with a why either, and yes they do matter! What

about component' resonances. Do you approach this as a concern in your designs? Why or why not?

JW: In terms of mechanical resonances, I definitely work toward a rigid, damped chassis. It is again important to work toward a balance. I have overdamped products during R&D and found they sound totally "dead", so I try to stay away from that end too.

DC: What is your position on feedback? You use tubes, so do you go for zero or add some to flavor the sound?

JW: I do not use any global feedback in my preamps. I believe it is detrimental overall, despite being a test bench panacea. Because there is no feedback, we have to spend much more time matching tubes and other components.

DC: What about "tweaking?" There are some really tweaky things you can find in various products, or do you go for the straight and narrow? That is do you tweak?

JW: I'm not a real tweaky person. I do a little, but as a designer I tend to feel I can make much bigger changes with different circuits, power supply, etc. But I certainly do tweak once I get the design that I want, to get the most out of it. Sometimes those small, incremental changes amount to a lot in the end.

When I get home at night, I rarely tweak. I'm usually too tired to mess with my system, I just want to put a record on and enjoy it.

DC: What do you see as something that separates Aesthetix from the rest of the companies out there?

JW: I think our approach to sound quality is unique, the idea of a group of extremely skilled listeners having input. That takes away a lot of the designers preconceived ideas and biases, and the faults of a "reference system" that they all have.

We have a different business model, with few personnel and low overhead, that keeps us quick and not mired down in administration. I am completely open-minded technically. I'm not afraid to try anything, and willing to do whatever it takes to solve a problem or achieve a goal. However, with that said, I think there are many quality high-end audio companies. I'm honored to be a part of this industry, it is my childhood dream come true.

DC: Is there any product or company out there that makes you think, "Gee now that is a really cool idea – wish I had thought of that?"

JW: I think Ayre Acoustics makes unique, well made, good sounding products. I thought the D-1 was a landmark product. The similarities between the K-1 and Callisto are frightening, and they were designed about the same time, even though neither of us knew of the other. Their new CD player is fantastic, a product I wanted to make years ago when I was with another company.

I saw the new Tenor hybrid amplifier last year and thought it is absolutely gorgeous, the prettiest amplifier I've ever seen.

DC: I ask as you seem rather humble and quite "human," whereas many designers see themselves as a cut above the rest of us mere mortals. I have spoken to too many who find nothing and no one equal to their designs and products.

JW: There are many designers that are a lot smarter than me. I have really good suppliers and smart friends, and I don't feel the need to re-invent the wheel, just make it turn more smoothly. I once thought I had come up with a new, unique circuit that had never been thought of before. I was so proud! Then, eight months later, I was looking in my 1960s Radiotron Designer's Handbook and saw a small, 1 inch section describing the circuit. Quite humbling.

DC: What is next in line for Aesthetix?

JW: I'm very excited about our plans for power amps.

DC: Where do you see the future of high-end audio being in the next, 10 to 20 years? Will our children be after the same things we are today?

JW: I do not think much will change. Not much has changed, in my opinion, since the 50s. Why should we expect it to change in the next 50 years? I believe the goals of high quality audio are clearly defined, that enough people value, and will continue to value, those goals. I know that pundits conjecture that more distractions, such as PCs, gaming, etc, take young people away from audio. I disagree. Listening to music is an altogether unique experience that cannot be replaced, and enough of them will become interested in high quality audio to maintain a healthy industry.

50 years ago, one could only use a vacuum tube preamp. Nothing else existed. Today, I only want to use a vacuum tube preamp, nothing else is better.

DC: How true. It seems that the more things are supposed to be advancing technically, that the things from the past still prove themselves to be good today. Thanks!

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[BACK TO TOP](#)