

Pass Labs XA60.8 Power amplifier(s)

Black on the outside, warm on the inside.

\$14,250/pair - black, \$1,000/pair additional
passlabs.com

Enjoying John Hiatt's *Leftover Feelings* album, the soundstage between the Team Fink Borg 2 speakers has opened dramatically, from the Pass XA200.8s that were in the system earlier. A lot more. On one level I'd swear I was listening to a First Watt amplifier or even a 300B tube amplifier, yet the Pass XA amps have so much more drive, and of course, bass control. All the usual audiophile cliches apply here: holographic, organic, musical, etc., etc. Yet these amplifiers, once they've had about 45-60 minutes to fully stabilize thermally are hypnotic the way they present spatial information. After listening to the XA200.8s for years now day in and day out, I've never had a complaint with my reference amplifiers, so this is pretty damn cool.

For years people have been pestering Pass Labs to make their components in black but they haven't done it since the Aleph series. However, their First Watt amplifiers do come in black.

About a year ago, during a visit to Pass Labs in California, a sole INT-250 was sitting on a bench. Kent English noticed it piqued my interest as he was showing me around the factory, and he said, "don't show any pictures of that, it's a one-off for a good customer."

Promise kept.





Lo and behold, they changed their minds, and we have black Pass gear. Unlike the brushed finish, the black XA60.8s have more of a bead blasted surface that looks different than their silver ones - but that's a personal thing. Sitting on top of the XA200.8 monos that have been the reference amplifiers here for some time now, the XA60.8s actually seem a bit small. They still weigh in at 88 pounds each so watch your back. Harrington reveals that their new black amplifiers are not anodized, but powder coated. If you've ever seen an amplifier after about six years old that has its anodizing change color (and considering how difficult it is to get anyone to do anything right these days) this makes tons of sense.

For those not familiar, the "A" in the XA designation means that these amplifiers are fully class-A to rated power. That means they run warm. Not warm enough to heat your office warm (the XS300s did this) but they do use a fair amount of power consistently for those that are mega environmentally conscious. I walk 20 steps to work, so I offset the carbon footprint.

A fully balanced design, the XA60.8s have XLR connectors for input and RCA. When using the RCA jacks, leave the XLR jumper pin in place. Don't lose them! These monos each have 15A IEC sockets for you favorite power cords, and draw about 400 watts each, so a single 15A circuit should have no problem.

There is a main power switch on the rear panel that when on, puts the amplifiers in standby mode. The switch on the front powers them up all the way. Like every other amplifier from Pass we've reviewed, once on, they take about 45 minutes to fully stabilize thermally. You'll notice a slight bit of haze that lifts as they warm up, but they still sound good at initial turn on. Also, like other Pass power amplifiers, the XA60.8s sound great fresh out of the box but will open up even more over about 50-100 hours of play. When you get a pair, start your listening every day with the same track, preferably something acoustic, and you will hear the difference as they break in.

Different and exciting

Having used nearly every one of the Class – A amplifiers from Pass over the last 25 years, as well as owning a few of the famed Aleph amplifiers and even a Threshold 400A (where my Pass Journey started a little over 40 years ago) it's safe to say that Mr. Pass' designs all have a unique sonic signature. Where many amplifier designers create amplifiers that deliver more power and more resolution, while retaining a house sound, my experience with Pass is that each amplifier is a jewel in its own way. Granted they all sound slightly warmer, more saturated than being perfectly natural, their amplifiers never sound slow, sluggish, or colored. It's a fine distinction they've always held onto.

Bias admitted, I've always preferred the sound of a great class-A solid state amplifier than anything else for so many reasons. The main being *not* having to buy a pallet of tubes on regular occasion. I still love the warm, inviting sound of tubes, but it's an occasional treat. Pass is what I listen to every day.

Where the XS Monos are big and bold, with endless dynamics and power – sounding more like single ended tube amplifiers with control than any solid-state amplifier has a right to, and the XA200.8s manage to capture a lot of that sonic signature for half the price, the XA60.8s are more like the XA25, with a magic that is more dimensional and enveloping than anything I've yet heard since the Alephs, but with more power. A lot more power actually.

“FYI, the XA60.8s put out just over double their rated power into 8 ohms if allowed to slide into class-AB mode.) Even this dedicated metal head can't imagine playing music that loud anymore, so rest assured the XA60.8s have more than enough headroom for your music.”



To prove I wasn't remembering the Alephs in the same way people of a certain age remember the length of the walk to school, two audiophile buddies lent me their Aleph 3 and 5 to do some serious comparison listening. Much as we all like to claim good audio memory, nothing beats a side by side comparison. Mr. Pass said in an interview somewhere that he was attempting to create a "more dynamic, powerful Aleph" with the 60.8, and after listening to them side by side, I'd agree.

Turning it up – way up

Even with the XA200.8s I rarely listen to music loud, yet with Mobile Fidelity's remaster of the original *Van Halen* album on SACD staring up at me, it had to be done. Listening to "Atomic Punk" so loud that my ears were ringing, the blue meter needles still don't leave their stationary middle resting zone, indicating that they never left class-A mode.

In a Hunter S. Thompson fit of madness, I borrowed my neighbor's 12 gauge and blew my copy of Nils Lofgren's *Night After Night* to bits after hearing the Van Halen record. That's one way to never have to hear "Keith Don't Go" again. Who's the Atomic Punk now? Do not try this at home.

Even with a heavy rock record like this, the amount of texture and depth was amazing. Part of this is due to the stellar job MoFi has done, but other records that are equally familiar, regardless of genre have a magical, dimensional, lifelike quality that you might have thought you could only get with single ended triodes. Solo vocals sound that much closer to reality, and acoustic instruments exhibit more nuance and spatial information that fools your brain into thinking it's reality.

Great as this is with fantastic recordings, it comes in even more handy with the lousy records in your collection. The XA60.8s actually do a better job than my reference XA200.8s (which are damn good in this department) at decoding and unwrapping densely packed, overly compressed recordings. My favorite Todd Rundgren records reveal so much more information, Rundgren now sounds like the wizard he's always claimed to be. Ditto for Elvis Costello's *My Aim is True*.



More reasonable listening

Turning to more acoustic and vocal tracks further reinforces the tube-like dimensionality of these amplifiers. One other subtlety noticed with the XA60.8s is the way they provide the benefits of monoblock power amplifiers (higher peak output without distortion, better bass grip, and better channel separation) without suffering slightly less total coherence that big monoblocks seem to have. This is very minor, yet clearly evident when swapping back from the XA200.8s, the big PS Audio 600BHKs and even the PrimaLuna EVO400 tube monos. In the end, fabulous.

Jaco Pastorius' self-titled album is full of some of the most textured and nuanced bass playing there is, and when the XA-60.8s are rolling, every bit of delicate finger movement across the strings as he plays the fretless bass is sublime. Equally engaging is Al DiMeola's famous *Friday Night In San Francisco*, for all the same reasons. Those three guitar masters deliver a historic performance that is full of nuance. Yet turning up the tempo to the electric performance on DiMeola's *Kiss My Axe* delivers every bit of blistering emotion on the vinyl. (Kudos to my reference Pass XP-27 phono stage...) Winding it up with the vintage MoFi UHQR pressing of Alan Parson's *I Robot* is enormous.

The Pass XA-60.8s are an incredible pair of solid-state amplifiers. If your taste leans more towards the just the facts sound of a Boulder or Solution, they will not be your cup of

If you still dream about finding an Aleph 3, 5, or monoblocks in mint condition, the XA60.8s are the way to roll. If you already have one of the aforementioned amplifiers, you might want to trade up, because these offer the sonic signature of the earlier Alephs, but with more power, control, and nuance.

Yet it's worth mentioning that if you choose to stay put with your Alephs, Pass can give them a tune up and bring them back to spec. Another value proposition when buying Pass.

Nelson Pass has often called his amplifiers "tube sound without the headaches." Considering what power tubes cost these days, I don't know if I'd ever bother with a tube power amplifier again, at least not as a daily driver. Or at least until they start selling KT 150s on pallets at Costco. Considering the three-dimensional performance these amplifiers deliver, along with that slight bit of tonal saturation that suggest tubes under the hood, I can't think of a pair of amplifiers I've enjoyed more. They are staying.

But sound is very personal indeed. If you can live with 60-ish watts of power per channel, (Stereophile's measurements suggest they deliver considerably more) these need to be heard before you put the Visa card down for anything else. In a world that all too often just assumes bigger is better, you might just find yourself redefining your priorities when you hear these. Don't say I didn't warn you. And get the black, they are so cool!

