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VICE MEDIA CANADA
Hafler HA15 & HA75 Headphone Amplifiers

By Adam Gallant

The Hafler name has been servicing the hi-fi community since the 1950s. In 2014, Port Coquitlam, BC's Radial Engineering purchased the Hafler brand and has since injected new life into the product line.

When the folks at Canadian Musician asked me to review a pair of headphone amps, my first thought was that I am, by no means, a traditional audiophile. In my spare time, I mostly stream music on nice bookshelf speakers via Bluetooth. Only recently have I taken to regularly listening to vinyl, so consider this review to be from the perspective of a working recording engineer/producer and studio owner and less from the audiophile's perspective.

Out of the Box
The first thing that caught my attention about the HA15 solid-state and HA75 tube amps was their weight. They are encased and shielded with 14-gauge steel, and the HA75 Tube Head has a perforated top to allow for airflow. Their weight combined with sturdy rubber feet ensure these units will stay put on your desk. Both units also have hefty power supplies. The HA75's power is connected via a rugged five-pin XLR-type cable connector.

Connectivity
With XLR and RCA inputs, I enjoyed putting these boxes to use via my RME interface as well as in my home system for vinyl listening. The Tube Head features two switchable RCA inputs, as well as Tube Thru and Out options. This additional Thru routing can be used to colour any line level signal with the tube input stage. I routed signal from my turntable to the Tube Head then my system's power amp and enjoyed adjusting the feedback knob, allowing the tube's saturation to colour the sound. Both units also have two 1/4-in. TRS headphone outputs—great for sharing mixes with a client or assistant.

Performance
I tested both units with a pair of Shure SRH840s, Sennheiser HD280s, and a standard set of Apple ear buds. The HA15 was clean, balanced, and powerful while the HA75 had all the cleanliness with added harmonic content and bass controls via the Feedback knob and Vox switch. The Feedback knob controls the amount of negative feedback that is being introduced back into the circuit and provides a colorful amount of gain from the 12AX7 input tube. The Vox switch has a bass boost on the A setting and the B setting engages a classic Fletcher-Munson loudness curve. Both options are volume dependant with a very pleasing bass increase as you attenuate the volume.

Another thing to note about the Tube Head is the lack of ear fatigue I felt while mixing through it. I would normally reference my headphones for stereo imaging and remove them after a brief check but the sound of the HA75 had me wearing my HD280s for far longer than I normally would. Also, the HD280s are considered thin sounding by most people's standards but the Tube Head had enough control to create a listening experience with as much or as little low end as I desired.

Both the tube and solid-state models are equipped with a very useful knob labeled as "Focus" on the front panel. This feature is designed to simulate listening on loudspeakers in a room. The units do this by blending the left channel into the right and vice versa. I found this to be very helpful while working on a mix, especially in determining the true power of any centre channel content.

For enjoying music at home, I'm a bit too much of a purist to want this type of coloration; though it's great for the studio and there's certainly no loss in quality or phasey artifacts from this processing.

We're told as engineers to avoid mixing in headphones. I've read on many forums that headphone mixes don't translate, are too flattering, and will accelerate ear fatigue. Years of exposure to this mindset have led me to avoid mixing in headphones.

The truth is music lovers are listening via headphones more than ever before. Gaining the headphone perspective as a mix engineer is crucial. One producer/engineer that works out of our Studio A room references and mixes on ear buds very regularly. His mixes tend to have low-end consistency and more full spectrum representation than anyone else's working out of this room. I believe this practice of referencing and actively mixing with ear buds is a big part of his success. The Hafler amps are great tools for this particular approach. Using the Focus knob as an added check via headphones when setting vocals, kicks, or snares is also very satisfying.

Summary
The folks at Hafler are helping break down the long-held convention that mixing with headphones is bad with the HA15 and HA75 Tube Head headphone amplifiers. The Focus knob and the warmth of these units had me checking my mixes more critically than ever before. It's great to have Radial, a Canadian company, furthering the legacy of such a high quality-product.

Adam Gallant has worked in all facets of digital audio production, from music composition to location and post audio for television and film. He currently owns and operates The Hill Sound Studio in Charlottetown, PE.