

Hafler

PH60 Solid State Moving Coil (M/C) Phono Stage



There's an old adage about self-reliance that states: "Give a man a fish, and you'll feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he'll go bankrupt on the East coast."

Similar to commercial fishing, as a hobby, high-end audio can cause financial hardship and even bankruptcy. Trying to get better sound can quickly become an addiction that's like a drug: it puts a hook into you and, in very short order, every cent of your disposable income is being spent on chasing the sonic dragon.

Thankfully, there are still some audio products being made which deliver great sound at sensible prices. Hafler's new PH60 solid state Moving Coil (M/C) phono stage is one such product.

In 1954, David Hafler founded Dynaco with Ed Laurent. During the next three decades, the Dynaco brand name became synonymous with low priced / high quality tube gear and their Do-it-Yourself (D.I.Y.) home-build DynaKits.

Introduced in 1959, Dynaco's Stereo-70 [ST-70] EL-34 based vacuum tube power amplifier is still highly regarded for its excellent sound and low price. When production of the ST-70 stopped, Dynaco had sold more than 350,000 of them; which makes it the highest selling tube amplifier

in history.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, David Hafler's DH-101 pre-amplifier, matching DH-200 power amp, and the 225w/ch DH-500 stereo amp were all big sellers. These tube units were praised for their exceptional value and amazing sound quality by audio reviewers and enthusiasts alike. Sadly, Hafler died in May 2003.

In 2014, the Hafler brand name was bought by Vancouver-based Radial Engineering Limited. Radial had previously been the Canadian importer for Hafler's units. Following in Hafler's footsteps, today Radial continues to offer superb sounding audio products at real world prices.

DESIGN & FEATURES

Radial has recently released a new line of Hafler-branded solid state components. With chassis dimensions of 4½" x 1¾" x 6", the PH60 Moving Coil (M/C) phono amplifier is a compact unit. Priced at \$599 USD, it comes standard with a 3 year warranty.

Hafler also manufactures the PH50 Moving Magnet (M/M) phono stage and two phono step-up transformers. All of these units are assembled entirely in Canada.

Aiming to induce as little sonic "coloration" as possible, the PH60 is an active Moving

Coil (M/C) phono pre-amp that uses a Class 'A' output transformer-less (O.T.L.) head amp's circuit. It comes in one colour: matte black.

The PH60 offers cartridge loading options of 50 Ohms, 100 Ohms, and 200 Ohms. More exotic cartridge loads can also be handled by soldering resistors into the "custom" positions on the circuit board. My review unit was factory set to the 100 Ohm load level.

The front face has two buttons: one for power; and the other for a switchable "low cut" high-pass filter that's designed to cut low frequency rumble and excessive bass energy. The rear face offers a pair of RCA input jacks, a pair of RCA output jacks, a ground, and a 15 volt 400mA power supply plug. It's a breeze to set-up. So... how does it sound?

PERFORMANCE

I tested the PH60 with a half-dozen different turntable rigs, but primarily used my heavily-modified Rega P25, RB-600 tonearm, and a Sumiko Black Bird M/C cartridge set-up for listening sessions. This Rega rig seemed an appropriate 'table to mate with a phono stage in this price range.

For a solid state M/C phono stage, the PH60 produced a surprisingly warm and



dynamic midrange. The PH60's high frequency extension, detail, and timbral accuracy were all respectable. It offered a pleasantly musical and non-fatiguing sound.

The PH60's lower midrange and upper bass were considerably better than MM phono stages that are included in most integrated amplifiers and many entry-level standalone phono stages. The mid-bass and low bass timbral accuracy was also quite good. The PH60 delivered good extension with a natural tone and presence. Overall, my review unit produced decent PRaT, swing, and groove within the lower frequency registers. The PH60 was a pleasure to listen to because it brought a strong sense of rhythm and groove to the music.

During my weeks of testing, my strongest 'epiphany' moment with the PH60 occurred while listening to the Dire Straits' moody album *Brothers in Arms*.

Released in 1985, *Brothers in Arms* was firmly baptized in a dirty wash of atmospheric keyboards, sincere and painful guitar lines, and quiet—even reflective—vocals. Their songs tell stories of strange times, exotic places, and defiantly unique people.

Featuring the hauntingly atmospheric tracks "So Far Away", "Your Latest Trick", "Ride Across the River", "One World", and "The Man's Too Strong", quite strangely, *Brothers in Arms* also launched the multi-platinum hit single "Money For Nothing".

While listening to an original 1985-era 150 gram British pressing of *Brothers in Arms*, it

struck me like a bucket of ice cold water: the PH60 M/C phono stage reminded me—in a strikingly tactile way—of the sound of a Dynaco ST-70 I'd once owned way-back-when in the mid-1980s. That tube amp created a wonderfully warm and musical sound. So too does the PH60.

Dire Straits always brought an incredible amount of "feel" to the way they played their instruments. Most entry-level gear doesn't allow a listener to hear—let alone reach out and touch—the tactile subtlety of their music. The PH60 provided a fair insight into the atmosphere and texture of their music. And this is quite an accomplishment for an M/C phono stage positioned in the sub-\$1,000 dollar price bracket.

The Rival Sons' 2012 album *Head Down* showcases stellar sonics and epic tracks from a superb post-modern hard rock band. Any time I hear someone complain that "There aren't any good rock bands today," I always recommend that they listen to *Head Down*.

Their heavy-handed guitar, bass, and drums-driven sound features the songs "Keep On Swinging", "Wild Animal", "Until the Sun Comes", "Run From Revelation", and "Manifest Destiny Pt#1 + Pt#2".

The PH60 reproduced the unstoppable rhythm and groove of these tracks with a musicality and coherency that was a joy to listen to. The PH60 made my records sound like music, rather than recordings. Compared to solid state digital gear in this price range,

which usually delivers horribly fatiguing noise, this was a pleasant surprise.

A wise and perspicacious man once told me: "Good things are seldom cheap; and cheap things are seldom good." With a price of \$599 US, Hafler's PH60 is the rarest of audiophile gems in that it not only sounds good, but it's also affordable.

If David Hafler was alive today, he'd be proud to see—and hear—that his 'value for money' philosophy is still alive and kicking in current Hafler-branded audiophile gear. If I was starting over and looking for a sensibly priced solid state M/C phono stage, the PH60 is exactly what I'd buy.

If you own a sub-\$2K USD level turntable with an M/C cartridge and are using the phono stage in a low to mid-fi integrated amp, you should give the PH60 a serious listen. Anyone with an entry-level outboard phono stage priced under \$500 USD should also audition Hafler's beautiful sounding unit. ◻

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