

# Music First Audio Baby Reference V2 passive preamplifier

by Jason Kennedy

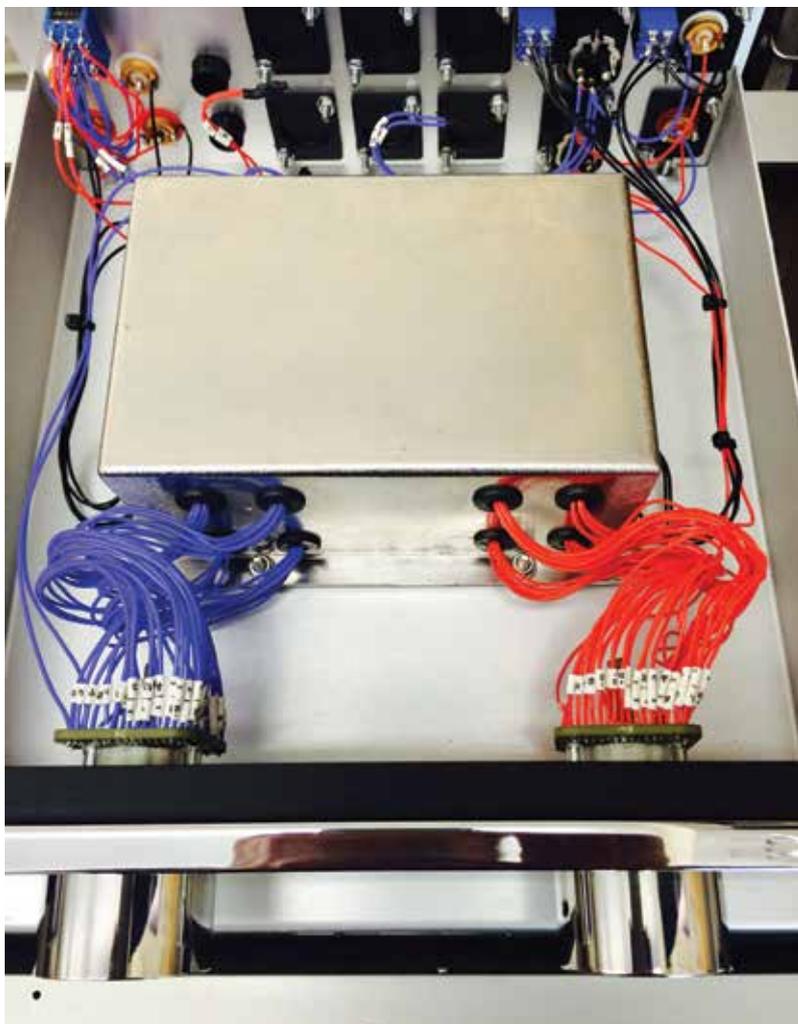
**T**he Music First Audio transformer-based passive preamplifiers seem to receive universal praise, and well-respected reviewers around the globe have declared them to be among the very best. And yet, when I have tried them in the past they have not had the same effect on me. They were always very clean, open and devoid of the grunge that powered preamps have so much difficulty suppressing, but still... close, but no cigar. That is until now. There may only be two letters in the suffix to this latest model, but it has turned the Baby Reference into a fully-fledged giant slayer in my system.

Music First Audio is, basically, Jonathan Billington, whose father and his partner Christopher Stevens started Stevens & Billington Transformers in 1963. Jonathan started making TVCs (transformer volume controls) in the early 2000s, after a certain Thorsten Loesch (now of AMR and iFi) started buying transformers to use instead of passive pots. Nowadays, MFA makes a small

range of compact preamplifiers in a workshop in Hastings, East Sussex.

Until the arrival of this preamp, the Baby Reference was second from top dog in MFA's catalogue, but the V2 version has put its best full-length design out to pasture. V2 differs in two significant ways from the standard Baby Reference. First, it is essentially custom made; the features and finish are down to the end user. You can choose how many in- and outputs it has and whether they are RCA phono or XLR connections, you can have remote control and one or two volume controls, and you can have any finish that ▶





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the Hastings fishing fleet's registration letters and that significant founding year.

All of which should mean that the V2 is a more expensive beast than the Baby Reference, which continues with standard TX102 Mk4 transformers, but that's only just the case. If you limit things to two inputs and one output (or vice versa) the Baby Reference V2 can be had for £6,120, rather than the £5,900 asked for a six input Baby Reference. Optional extras include six inputs for £720 and remote control for £600; there's even a headphone amplifier available for £420. Delivery times are also similar for both preamps at three weeks, unless you opt for a volume pot with more positions than the '30+mute' models that MFA keeps in stock. The steps on this pot are 2dB wide (which might be too big for some systems/ears) and if you have particularly inefficient speakers or listen to unusually low level source material at high levels, it's possible to add a switch that increases output by 6dB.

Internally, the V2 is replete with PTFE insulated, silver plated copper wiring, the quantity thereof relating to the fact that every volume position has its own connection. Also notable is the single rectangular casing for the transformers rather than separate cylindrical ones found in a TX102. This provides the air-gap that's a key to the performance. The RCA connections are very high quality as is build overall. So, I don't like separate volume knobs but I do like chrome plating.

Listening kicked off with the V2 between a Van den Hul Grail SB phono stage and an ATC P1 power amp driving PMC fact.8 speakers, a situation in which it proved to have easily enough gain. Almost immediately, it became clear that this is a very special

Jonathan can source, including chrome plating. Another nice touch is the option to choose input names, or limit the inputs to one and avoid a switch altogether. The review sample that MFA supplied had two inputs and a switch on the back plus two volume controls, which gives you balance adjustment, but is not something I would want to live with. But this bespoke unit was not made for me!

The real difference between this and a regular Baby Reference is to be found in the transformers that are used to attenuate the signal, the heart of the preamplifier in this case. These have been changed in several ways. There is now an air gap between the transformer and the shielding pot that surrounds it. This reduces the ability of the transformer to 'talk' to the pot and thus reduces leakage from one channel to the other. This gap is achieved with rubber pads top and bottom, that also have the effect of isolating the transformer from vibration. The transformers themselves also have a different winding structure; the symmetry has been changed and a network has been added to the output to reduce ringing. The final touch is thinner 0.2mm  $\mu$ -metal laminations in the transformer core. This new transformer is called 'RX63', which derives from

► preamplifier, but an example serves to reveal just how critical this part of the audio chain really is. I played some acoustic jazz and was struck by how well timed the double bass was – just off the beat and with loads of tonal depth in a clearly defined acoustic. The more I heard, the better it got; the key strength that this preamp has, which it does better than pretty well everything else I've heard in recent times, is speed. You can hear everything stop and start; there is no blurring of edges whatsoever, so the faster the attack and decay, the more obvious it is that most preamps cannot keep up. What this sounds like is incredibly natural and effortless playing whatever the music; the denser the music, the more rewarding is the absence of smear in this regard. This is very clear on drum kits, such as the one played by Rob Turner on Go Go Penguin's coincidentally named album *v2.0* [Gondwana]. He likes to work the snare, and the MFA lets you hear every strike where most blur them into a continuous series that's devoid of the tiny gaps that differentiate them.

Passive volume controllers are often accused of lacking dynamics, or of not being able to track variations in the level of notes or crescendos as well as active alternatives. What I found here is a preamp that is uncannily revealing of the compression used in recordings, this proved a bit too revealing with some albums but made for massive differences in character between them – in fact, differences great than I have previously encountered. With some material this can sound like limited dynamics whereas in fact it is plain transparency to dynamic limiting applied in the studio. Jeff Beck's recent *Live at Ronnie Scott's* [Eagle Records] has a stonking version of 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat/Brushing Away The Blues' on it that sounds so much better than the original seventies cut, the scale and dynamics are su-ruddy-perb. By contrast Jimi Hendrix's 'latest' live release, *Miami Pop Festival* [Experience Hendrix] is small scale and clearly compressed, a result of its origins, vintage and contemporary mastering mores. You get more intensity with Jimi because of who he was, but this degree of revelation will not suit all record collections or tastes.

Luckily vintage is no indicator of sound quality: ZZ Top's 'La Grange' [*Tres Hombres*, Warner Bros] sounds cracking. Billy Gibbons was at the top of his game back in the early 1970s, and his confidence is palpable when this track's finer details are rendered so comprehensively.

The Baby Reference V2 can also pull rabbits out of hats with some albums: Funkadelic's eponymous debut [*Westbound*] usually sounds like a fairly grungy recording, but this digs deeper and reveals the plethora of voices and instruments that combine to such terrific effect. In case you were wondering, "Soul is a ham hock in your cornflakes" among other things. It does the same on *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* by Joe Cocker [A&M], which makes one suspect a mid prominence but the highs and lows are clearly evident; it's as if a mask of electronic hash has been removed so that the music appears unobscured for the first time. On 'The Letter', the backing vocals are as incredible as ever but what really strikes is the quality of the rhythm section. The drumming of Jim Keltner and Carl Radle is nothing short of phenomenal; no wonder it's the best track on the album.

The more I listen to this preamp, the more convincing it sounds. The fact that there is no electronic amplification going on gives it a major advantage; no grunge in means no grunge out. I tried it with amplifiers from Linn, Gamut, ATC, and

the Class D examples fitted to PMC twotwo 6 active monitors. I tried both single-ended and XLR cables, including 5m examples of the latter for the PMCs. Nothing seems to phase the MFA, and everything seems to benefit from its grain free immediacy... not least being the listener himself.

As you might surmise I'm rather impressed with the Music First Baby Reference V2, it's one of those products that I dare not use too much because it'll make living without it unbearable. They say it's better to have loved and lost, but they obviously weren't anticipating the heartbreak that the departure of a truly great preamplifier can inflict. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Transformer passive preamplifier.

**Volume control:** 31 position switch, optional 46 position switch

**Analogue inputs:** One pair single ended (via RCA jacks) or one pair of balanced inputs (via XLR), option for up to six inputs of either type

**Analogue outputs:** One pair of balanced outputs (via XLR connectors), One pair of single-ended outputs (via RCA jacks)

**Headphone output:** optional

**Remote control:** optional

**Input impedance:** Not specified

**Output impedance:** Not specified

**Bandwidth:** Not specified

**Gain:** unity, optional 6dB

**Distortion:** Not specified

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** Not specified

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 97 x 250 x 275mm

**Weight:** 3kg

**Price:** £6,120

**Manufacturer:** Music First Audio

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