



This Issue

Bryston Sp1.7 Processor **P.1**

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The following is a letter I received from Dave Holmes of Audio Emporium in Wisconsin regarding the Bryston SP1.7 preamp/processor. Dave is a difficult guy to please and I think his article gives a great perspective on where we have been and where we are at this point in processor development. Thanks Dave.

"Bryston's brand new SP 1.7 preamp/processor has just hit the shelves. We've been waiting for this guy with bated breath for several months now. Before telling you about this, let's address this bated breath issue.

The history of preamp/processors is storied. It's filled with potholes and detours. It's interesting because movies and surround sound have taken over the earth since the mid 80s. It's taken a dang long time to get to where we are today.

The first processors were add-on devices. You slapped them on to your preamplifier; sometimes they had Mickey Mouse amps built in for the center and rear. Early ones didn't address the center or sub at all. They just put a 3dB step in the rear and called it Dolby Surround Sound. I remember demos of the day being

greeted with, 'Are you sure they're on back there?'

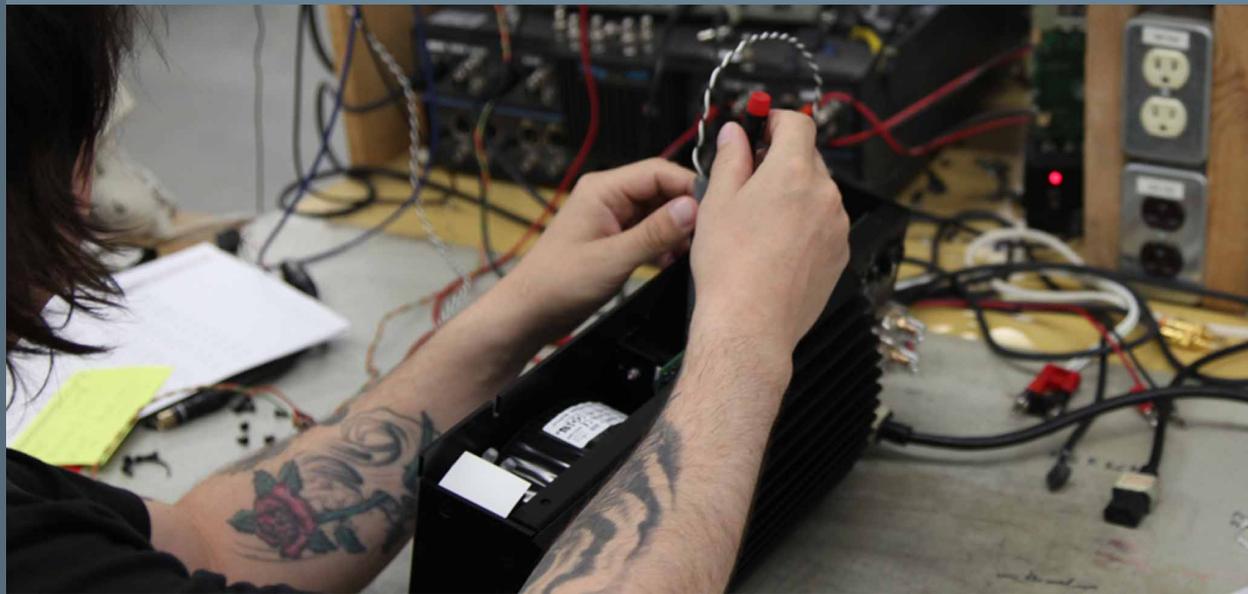
The market took a big step forward with Dolby Pro Logic. But, 24dB step and all, Pro Logic stank. The rear channels were mono, rolled off at 7k on top and 100 on the bottom. The center was too strong. The wave started with add-on devices, again proving to be frustrating. The refrain, 'Are the rear speakers on?'



Fosgate had a very interesting circuit called Pro Plus that it introduced in the early 90s. It did a phase/fiddle and created a stereo

appearance from the rear, running the tweets out to 20k. It was much superior to Pro Logic. It made surround sound interesting, at last! Fosgate made the add-on units and later some preamp/processors. They were the best of their time but, could not be confused with Bryston.

But anguish lingered on because Fosgate and the few other higher end folks trying to do something more interesting with surround didn't make their gear very well! The switching was noisy and poorly done. The mechanical integrity of the units was OK at best. While it was the best the market had to offer, it wasn't even



close to nice two channel gear. Clearly our customers wanted surround sound, but in the quality of good 2-channel stuff.

Enter Dolby Digital, DTS and DVDs in the mid 90s. Thank heaven! Where have you been all my life?! Even the mediocre preamp/processors and receivers were better than prior gear due to the new surround modes. But alas, Pioneer, Sony and the like don't make GREAT sonic products with the small power supplies and pile of chips in their gear. But as the years went on, we had some respectable products, though sometimes in pieces-like add on DTS and the like.

Basically what we felt is that the best preamp/processors of the day sounded like \$500 preamps, with all the surround stuff added in. That was OK. But, the \$350 Audire Legato stereo preamp of the early 80s sounded better!

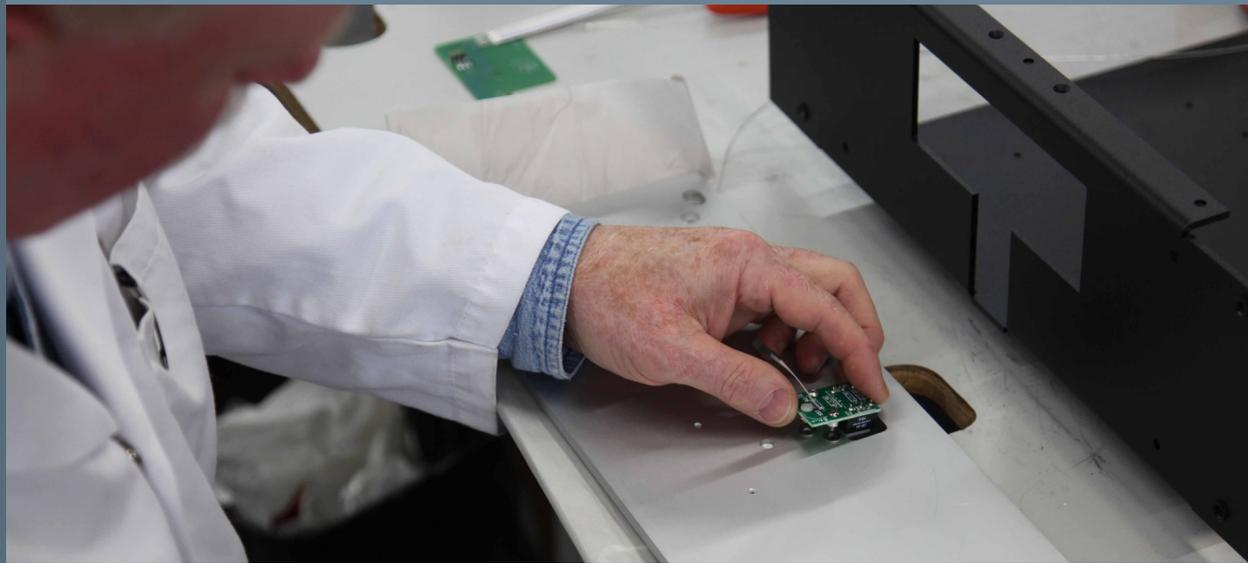
In the late 90s we had some nice advancement. Marantz came out with the AV-9000, a \$1900 unit with HDAM design. It was an excellent AV pre/pro for the day, at reasonable money. We sold many, happily. It too sounds more in the range of a \$500 preamp, but at least it was built like a tank, had a great remote and did all the switching a guy would want.

At long last - Bryston. Bryston introduced the SP-1 in about 2000. The SP-1 sounded fantastic BUTTTTT, it had a few "limitations." First of all, while Pro Logic II was starting to trickle out from the Orient, the SP-1 didn't have it. Ouch. To spend \$4k and NOT have this ... Pro Logic II sounds quite similar to the old Fosgate Pro Plus circuit, it's good for TV and video tape

because it presents a stereo type image in the rear with full frequency band. The SP-1 supported 5.1 but not 6.1 or 7.1. Now, my wife thinks 5.1 gives me PLENTY of speakers in the room. But, come on! So we never embraced the SP-1 - except for its sonics. Bryston did allow the SP-1 buyers to upgrade to 7.1 so they didn't leave you hanging.

SP 1.7 - Ta Da! With the 1.7 Bryston has made some very concrete choices. They have determined that you can't put all this video switching (generates RFI at high frequencies which raises the audio noise floor) on board without squelching the level of performance. So they DON'T! How tough is it to run your video wires to the TV and your audio wires to the preamplifier? So what if you have to push one more button?! You'll get over it. To achieve the best sound out there, this is a small price to pay. By the way, Bryston will soon offer the SPV-1 video switcher, an outboard unit that won't pollute your sound. The 1.7 doesn't have any digital power supplies on board either. They also generate RFI. The volume control has two parts to it, one analog and one digital so analog signal doesn't pass through any digital circuitry. Some processors say "bypass" but in fact use DAC's to raise and lower the volume level.

The 1.7 has Pro Logic II. DD, DTS, it supports 6.1 and 7.1. It comes with remote. But, what else is cool is, it has a real volume control! That is, you turn it, and the volume goes up in accordance with your turn. You don't have to turn it ten times to get where you want to go. It can operate just like the stereo preamplifiers you've grown to love! Can you believe all the pre/pros out there that don't even have a volume control on



them?! You have to operate them via remote (1.7 comes with remote too of course) and the steps take too long to get where you want to go. shorter, BETTER SOUNDING, path!"

Most importantly, 1.7 SOUNDS like the BP-25 stereo preamplifier with surround capabilities! James Tanner of Bryston explains one of the keys, in addition to great parts and large power supplies, is that the op amp Bryston uses after digital decoding is a high level DISCRETE design. Virtually everybody else uses a chip. And that chip is often part and parcel of the DD or DTS chip design. By separating the functions a la Bryston, great sonic benefits occur. Further, the 1.7 has a short cut analog bypass from your CD player's analog outs. The short cut bypasses the entire digital domain and fires over to the preamplifier outputs for the shortest possible, BP-25 like path.

The bottom line is that the SP-1.7 is the most serious surround preamp you can buy. At \$4300 it is real money, but, sounds better than anything else we've heard. Think about the \$8000 competition. Your signal comes in digitally and fights its way through fairly generic DD/DTS processing, then goes on through another chip section before going on to the fancy electronics provided by company X. Bryston gives you a

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Bryston Ltd.
677 Neal Drive
Peterborough, Ontario
CANADA
K9J 6X7
Phone: 705-742-5325 or 1-800-632-8217
Fax: 705-742-0882
Email: contact@bryston.com
Web: <http://www.bryston.com>

Editor: James Tanner, Vice President of Sales and Marketing
Email: jamestanner@bryston.com