

Soulnote A-2 v2

Not for Japanese brand Soulnote a light revamp – its version 2 of the A-2 integrated looks identical to the original but, inside, it's all change. We compare and contrast...

Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

If you were to ask me what should be the heart of a practical yet flexible system, one that could grow if necessary, I would say 'a line-level integrated amplifier with at least a half-dozen inputs'. Few systems require more than the handling of six sources, while outboard DACs and phono stages are often superior to those built-in and may also offer better value. With this in mind, the new Soulnote A-2 v2 is an exemplar of the form.

It doesn't hurt that in this era of £25,000-plus integrated amps, the A-2 v2 comes in at what by today's standards is a realistic sum: £6900 for either silver or black. For context, especially for those who think £6900 is either excessive or obscene, it's the equivalent of about £400 in 1970 – what you would have paid for, say, a Crown (Amcron) DC300 amp and IC150 preamp back then. And trust me, this sounds a lot better than that combination.

TAKE YOUR PICK

Having now experienced a few Soulnote products [HFN Nov '23, Aug '24 & Jan '25], I am beginning to appreciate the clarity of the range. In ascending order of price, Series 1 and 2 each contain an integrated amp, a DAC and a phono stage. Series 3 features those components as well, plus a preamp, stereo power amp, two monoblock amps, an SACD player, outboard clock and network transport. You can, of course, mix-and-match the models, although there's a huge gap (which Soulnote might consider filling) between Series 2 and Series 3. The A-3 integrated – lower power but more features – sells for £18,900, so you can see the A-2 v2 represents real value within the catalogue.

Visually and functionally identical to the original A-2, the qualifications for the 'v2' suffix are explained in detail by PM [see boxout, p69], this amplifier retaining the

sort of minimalism which leaves no one dissatisfied unless they crave tone controls. The sculpted front panel is uncluttered, the only elements of activity being red LEDs over the power button, the source indication, and the volume display. Should you choose to dim the two-digit level display, the source and power LEDs remain lit, the former also flashing when mute is selected from the remote control [p71].

Before looking at the back, a word about the A-2 v2's lid. The chassis top-plate is pinned in place via just three fine Allen bolts – it 'rattles' when tapped, but the sonic reasons for this 'decoupling' are part and parcel of the company's design philosophy. This is discussed, if not entirely explained, in a handsome 24-page booklet/ user manual, and the holistic build of the

A-2 v2 illuminates Soulnote's approach and at least partially validates the cost of entry.

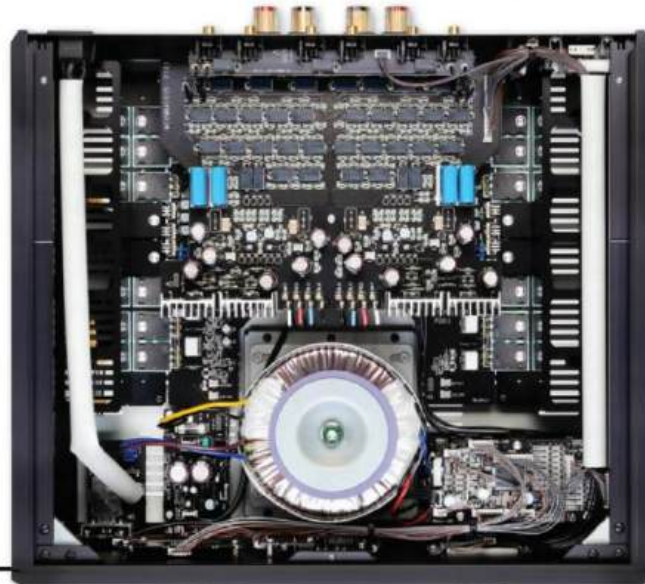
MONO MODE

So intuitive is the A-2 v2 that owners might be inclined to skip reading the manual, but

I would suggest having a quick study in order to appreciate the way Soulnote's unit can evolve with one's system. The six inputs initially speak for themselves, with numbers 1-3 being for the balanced XLRs and numbers 4-6 for the single-ended RCA connections. Small switches located on the rear panel allow the A-2 v2 to operate in stereo or mono modes, or as a standalone power amplifier. Like I said, this amp is flexible.

That also applies to the sleek new remote control, especially should you stay

'This is really a "new" amp with a freshly minted remote'



RIGHT: Substantial PSU [bottom] feeds the A-2 v2's main power amp, with three pairs of high current Toshiba transistors per channel [far left and right]. Switched attenuator network [top] is placed close to the rear input panel



'The chassis top-plate is pinned in place via just three fine Allen bolts – it "rattles" when tapped'



with Soulnote products. As is the norm with 'full system' remotes within most brands, the A-2 v2's also commands Soulnote's DACs and transports. It's a classy handheld, almost B&O-esque in its elegance.

Setup was an absolutely painless affair. I used the A-2 v2 with single-ended and balanced sources, typically preferring the latter when an XLR output option was available. I'll not labour the point, as XLR balanced operation has been a feature of audio hardware for at least four decades, but I advise those of you who have resisted it to give it a shot, if and when your components allow. There's always the debate about the potential advantage in noise and distortion versus the added (circuit) complexity of balanced operation, but I simply think it sounds better.

Warm-up was not an issue either, the A-2 v2 sounding fine from cold. Also supplied are tiny spikes to fit into the unit's feet which, as with the semi-detached lid,

are all part of Soulnote's regimen about managing micro-vibrations.

SOUL BY NAME...

With due deference to the brand's name, and as I have been on a Doors jag of late, I addressed the single-ended inputs – via my

EAT E-Glo phono preamp – with the group's remarkable eponymous debut, now available as a sublime 180g vinyl pressing on Rhino's High Fidelity imprint [RHF1 74007]. It set the tone – literally – for a couple of intense six-hour sessions,

especially the weight, the air, the stage depth and the textures of the bass. But that's getting ahead of myself.

Ray Manzarek's keyboards, opening 'Soul Kitchen', had precisely the familiar, cheesy sounds of the assorted models he used – notably a Vox but with bass via Fender Rhodes so rich and melodic that I thought I was listening to a vintage valve amp. The bottom octaves were deliriously plump,

'The scale of Kenton's orchestra was truly massive'

WHEN VERSION 2 IS 'NEW'

Soulnote's 'version 2' of its heavyweight A-2 integrated [HFN Jan '25] is no mere dusting over of a few choice capacitors. Yes, it still employs a relay-switched R-2R volume control and adopts the brand's 'non-NFB' thinking in its output stage but, otherwise, it's really a 'new' amplifier with a freshly minted remote control [p71]. For example, where the A-2 employed four pairs of richly biased Sanken output transistors in a 100W-rated circuit, the v2 has three pairs of the Toshiba devices used in Soulnote's bigger A-3 amp, but down-rated here to 80W/8ohm. The entire circuit runs cooler, including the all-new voltage stage, even though overall gain remains +31dB, the A-wtd S/N ratio is largely unchanged at 85dB (re. 0dBW), and the response still has that very slightly shelved bass (–0.1dB/20Hz).

Soulnote uses more of its relatively fine internal cabling to connect the A-2 v2's main PCB to its 4mm terminals, so output impedance has doubled from ~0.07ohm to ~0.14ohm here, reducing damping and increasing its sensitivity to swings in speaker load impedance. But there's no loss of 'drive' as the v2 has the same ~14A maximum current delivery (re. 10msec/1ohm at <1% THD), making it relatively more load tolerant than the A-2. That said, Soulnote is more cautious in its protection of the v2, for where the A-2 maintained full power output up to 20kHz, the A-2 v2 shuts off at 12kHz for any power above 60W/8ohm [red trace, Graph 2; Lab Report p71]. But might its sound have improved? Of course... PM

ABOVE: Available in matt black or silver, the A-2 v2 retains the A-2's faceted alloy fascia, deep-set two-digit display, input selector (with LEDs) and volume rotary governing an R-2R attenuator

and when the percussion came in, it was accompanied by a whoosh of air which had me thinking that this is the most dazzling I've ever heard this album.

Kudos to Rhino, then, but the A-2 v2 ensured the sound wasn't sullied with any edginess or rasp, as still seem to define the difference between solid-state and tube electronics. Moreover, its sheen was so close to that of open-reel tape I started to believe there's hope yet for all other formats. Jim Morrison's voice was convincingly real and 'present,' and treated with such reverence that it alone was enough to challenge the dynamics when he shouted or screamed – and the amp never failed. The tail end of 'Light My Fire' thus proved (ironically) chilling.

STATUS SYMBOL

This 'analogueness' held true with digital sources, my PS Audio PerfectWave transport/DAC Mk2 combination [HFN Jun '23] allowing me to compare single-ended with balanced operation. As mentioned before, the latter was preferred, but even raucous affairs like Status Quo's 'Mean Girl' [The Early Years Vol 2; HNE Recordings HNE5BOX240] had a touchy-feely, tactile quality, while sounding slightly warmer via the balanced feed. Francis Rossi's nasal vocals, the power chord excess, the urge to crank it up to 11 – as refined as the A-2 v2 was proving to be, it had no qualms about delivering head-banging force.

Power was never proving to be an issue, whether through 15ohm LS3/5As or Wilson Audio's '4ohm' The WATT/Puppy [HFN Sep '24]. Despite the A-2 v2 having a lower 8ohm power rating than the original A-2 (80W versus 100W), I never noticed any instances when the A-2 v2 showed any power- or dynamics-related limitations [see PM's Lab Report, p71]. It neither ☞



ABOVE: Three balanced (XLR) and three single-ended (RCA) line-level inputs may be reconfigured to operate the A-2 v2 in bridged/BTL mono mode and in 'power amp direct' mode. The single sets of 4mm speaker terminals serve all modes

compromised slam nor ran out of breath when I cranked up the levels – indeed, it's mooted that the sweet spot for amplifiers is the 35W-75W range, the A-2 v2 being a mere 5W above that into 8ohm.

TAPE MEASURE

What further kept me glued to Soulnote's amp was my continued nose-diving down the reel-to-reel rabbit hole. Armed with the balanced-output-only Otari MX5050 and with a brace of recently acquired (via eBay) pre-recorded 2-track 7.5ips tapes from the 1950s, I tested my own conviction that the A-2 v2 was a transistor amplifier designed to sound like it might harbour tubes. Regardless of the source or the material, the A-2 v2 always sounded, well, sweet. Which is not to say that its performance was wimpy, nor saccharine.

Stan Kenton's *Rendezvous With Kenton* from 1957 [Capitol ZC-43] is the kind of release which has you wondering what have we learned in the past 69 years. It challenges every so-called 'audiophile' album I can recall, and this was just your over-the-counter commercial release, though I suspect none heard it of its best back in '57.

Here the A-2 v2 reaffirmed my belief that it is both devoid of graininess and unrestrained when crafting a musical soundstage. The scale

of Kenton's orchestra was nothing short of massive, repeated with a similar performance from the Henry Busse Orchestra's *A Tribute To Henry Busse* [Stereotape 13], also from 1957. With both, the Soulnote integrated delivered punchy brass whether from Kenton's 18-piece assembly with five trumpets, five trombones and five saxophones, or Busse's trumpet-led ensemble.

BELIEVE ME

In both cases, it was what many write off as 'easy listening', the sort of 'musical wallpaper' that tarred early hi-fi enthusiasts finding the sound more important than the content. But so vivid was the sound that even the most anti-loungecore listener would be gripped by Kenton's sassy take on Jerome Kern's 'They Didn't Believe Me' or the Busse Orchestra's 'Walkin' My Baby Back Home'. The latter, by the way, was recorded on an Ampex 350-2, about as legendary as tape decks can be.

Vocals remain my yardstick, so I had to sample the contrasting voices of Ian & Sylvia, a folkie duo whose *Early Morning Rain* [Vanguard VTC1703] featured Gordon Lightfoot's title track and his jaunty 'For Lovin' Me'. The sound lived up to the A-2 v2 maker's name. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Here's where you ask: why spend more? True, elsewhere there's added power, an onboard DAC or MM/MC phono, bragging rights, *ad infinitum*. But if judging the Soulnote A-2 v2 as a sane audiophile vexed by insane prices, the question answers itself. So if you have £7k for the core of a system to outlast you, this is an ideal foundation. Built like a tank, but sweet sounding, almost valve-like in demeanour, it has 'soul'.

Sound Quality: 86%



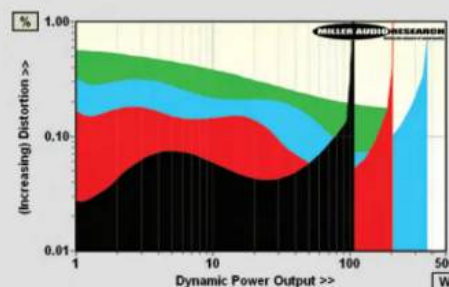
LEFT: Most of the buttons on Soulnote's new and super-slim 'full system' remote, excluding volume, mute, input selection and display (on/off), are unused by the A-2 v2

LAB REPORT

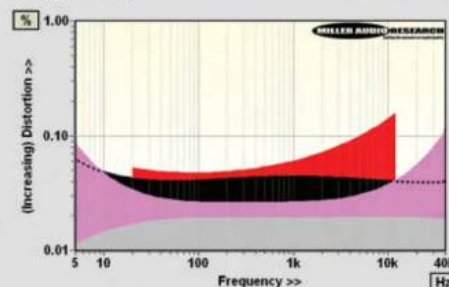
SOULNOTE A-2 V2

Rated at a reduced 2x80W/8ohm [see boxout, p69] this v2 iteration of Soulnote's A-2 amplifier [HFN Jan '25] still puts out a full 2x93W and 2x155W into 8 and 4ohm at 1kHz, respectively, and possesses sufficient headroom to support 107W, 205W and 370W under dynamic conditions into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads. The 14A current limit reins this back to 199W/1ohm [see Graph 1], but the original A-2 had no more juice. Soulnote's familiar 'no NFB' claim is supported by the v2's trending *decrease* in distortion with output level – from 0.07% at 1W to 0.03% at 30W (re. 1kHz/8ohm) – and also in the *increase* with frequency from 0.026-0.056% (re. 20Hz-20kHz/10W). These various trends are illustrated in Graph 2 [below] but we can also see differences between steady-state and dynamic behaviour [Graph 1] – again, this is typical of low feedback strategies.

The move away from traditional feedback as a means of reducing distortion, rather than managing gain and bandwidth, is also mirrored in amplifiers using feedforward techniques, including from Hegel [p48] and Simaudio/MOON [HFN Oct '26], although these solutions typically exhibit far lower levels of harmonic distortion. That said, the A-2 v2's sub-0.1% THD, principally 2nd/3rd harmonic in nature, is still lower than that achieved by most loudspeakers [see p42 and p72], so context is everything! Otherwise, Soulnote has set the A-2 v2's overall gain at a very sensible +31dB, requiring 720mV to raise the rated 80W at full volume, while the A-wtd S/N ratio is about 'average' at 84.7dB (re. 0dBW). The response now shows less variation with volume position, rather than output level, rolling very gently away from -0.13dB/20kHz to -1.8dB/100kHz. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 14.1A



ABOVE: Distortion vs. frequency vs. power output (0.1W/8ohm, grey; 1W, black; 10W, pink; 60W, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	93W / 155W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	107W / 205W / 370W / 199W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	0.128-0.135ohm / 0.165ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.06dB to -0.13dB / -1.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/80W)	79mV / 715mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/80W)	84.8dB / 103.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.026-0.056%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	75W / 325W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	430x160x423mm / 20kg