

# Yarland FV-34B (£499)

Looks Italian, but it's made in China and tweaked in the UK – is the defies-belief Yarland FV-34B line-level integrated valve amp the best £499 you'll ever spend?

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

**W**hen I first visited China in the early-mid 1990s, before the handover of Hong Kong and the complete opening of the floodgates, Chinese-made hardware was dirt cheap but worrisome. I'd seen too many self-immolate and cut my fingers on too many faceplate edges. But it was blatantly, abundantly, obvious that the parallel with Japan of the 1950s was wholly justified. And like the Japanese start-ups of the post-war years, the Chinese have taken a similar amount of time – under two decades – to attain Western levels of quality. The Yarland FV-34B is one of a host of products that illustrate this.

Where the Yarland stands out from the crowd of new-wave Chinese manufacturers, however, is price. Sure, there may be amplifiers – hell, I *know* there are amplifiers – available for even less, but I find it hard not to shake my head in amazement at what they are offering for £499, including VAT and shipping, anywhere in the UK. Let's not be coy about this: an entire profit margin is eliminated because the Yarland is sold directly to the consumer; if this unit were offered through retailers, it would have to sell for £899 or more.

## LOOKS FAMILIAR?

Established in the Zhejiang province WenChau in 1996, Yarland is old by Chinese audio manufacturer standards. With 15 years' experience, it is able to produce a comprehensive range of models in two quaintly-named series: Dreamwork and Yourmate. The FV-34B is part of the Yourmate range, which also features such desirable bargains as a line-level preamp for £399.

If the unit looks familiar, that's because it has been – unashamedly – styled in the manner of a Unison

Research. You'd have to be blind or in denial not to see the aesthetic lift. This is nothing new for Chinese manufacturers, although many have developed their own aesthetics with no debt whatsoever to plagiarism.

This topic has been covered by commentators in fields ranging from the automotive to the horological, and nothing I can say will make any difference. As far as I'm concerned, it's simply a fact of modern life: intellectual property is not a concept universally grasped by Chinese industry, any more than westerners are capable of planning for four or more generations ahead.

Equally, the layout is reminiscent of PrimaLuna and other modern integrated valve amps, the format comprising a shallow control panel below an array of valves, with the transformer housing forming a block behind the tubes. Considering that, back in the First Valve Era, integrated amplifiers were boxes with knobs on the front – think Rogers Cadet, Fisher X-100A, etc – and

indistinguishable from the later solid-state offerings, this stepped layout is still a refreshing break from the 430mm-wide-fascia brigade.

## POWER PLAY

The Yarland (17kg) is compact but convincing. Across the front, in that sculpted wood section *à la* Unison, are the source selector for three inputs, an on/off toggle and a rotary volume control. The back contains multi-way binding posts for 4 and 8ohm speakers, phono inputs for the line sources and a socket for an IEC mains cable. On the sides are the bias points. While an autobias system would make life easier, it would also add to the cost.

Finished overall in a semi-crackle black finish, the Yarland adorns the horizontal valve platform with an ovoid metal plate, through which you can see decent ceramic bases. The power output valves consist of a quartet of matched Electron Tube EL34Bs, driven by a pair of Beijing



**RIGHT:** Top view shows the hand-matched tubes in their numbered bases. Four holes in the corners of the FV-34B valve plate will accept an optional wire cage



6N3s with a Full Music 12AX7 voltage tube. The unit operates in push-pull, Class A mode, and the power rating is 40W/ch – which is ample for a wide array of loudspeakers.

To this end, I fed the Yarland – with a Quad CDP 99 II and an iPod nano in a Pure i-10 dock as my sources – into Tannoy Autograph Minis, Spendor 11ohm LS3/5As and PMC DB1+s. All cost a lot more than the Yarland, but all worked stupefyingly well with it, so this amp *can* punch above its weight. For those to whom it appeals on cost grounds, who would like it to serve as the heart of a sub-£1000 package, the market is awash with £200-per-pair speakers, Pro-ject can sell you a turntable for £150 and NAD has a phono stage for around £50. And you can still throw in CD for as little as £29...

## BUYING DIRECT

Chulan at AUDUSA explained that the Yarland components they import for sale in the UK are not to be confused with other versions available on-line. The UK edition of the FV-34B integrated amp is set for a European-specific 230V, which renders the unit hum-free, amongst other benefits, and the capacitors fitted are ClarityCap SA. AUDUSA cryogenically treats and matches all of the valves, which arrive specially packed in a nice box. Each tube is numbered for the correct socket. The only option is a wire cage to protect the valves. As far as peace-of-mind goes, the £499 (inc VAT) price includes free delivery within mainland UK. Best of all, AUDUSA addressed the one downside to mail-order shopping: the Yarland is sold with a 30-day trial period. If you don't like it, return it for a full refund. Which is the same as a home demo, is it not?



## NICELY DOES IT

I'm guessing the unit was run in before it reached me, because it sounded terrific straight out of the box, settling down after 20 minutes warm-up. A recent Elektra label compilation given away with a major rock magazine was the first disc to hand, and I can only marvel at the subtlety of an amplifier that has no right to be so refined! The distinctive, textured, often fragile voices of Fred Neil and Tim Buckley reached across the decades with breathtaking realism, caressed by small monitors designed for such tasks.

So natural were their vocals through the LS3/5As that I would have believed it if you told me someone had slipped in

*'The speed and quality of the transients was dazzlingly right'*

**ABOVE:** Minimalist controls for source selection, on/off and volume. The quartet of matched EL34s alone must be worth £100

a Radford STA25 when I wasn't looking. Warmth was there in abundance. I adore the sound of EL34s – if my spare KT77s were handy, I might have given them a whirl – and the ones supplied exhibited the two traits I cherish most about that workhorse. The warmth I just mentioned is the

primary quality that keeps me wedded to that tube. The other is an easy grace when not overrun. Here, with the valves asked to produce 20W each, they're within their safety range, so no clipping was heard – not even when playing live MC5 circa 1968.

Hard rock fazed the amp not at all. A burst of Rick Derringer's 'Rock'n'Roll Hoochie Koo' possessed all the might and muscle needed to deliver the sharp crunches, while the speed and quality of the transients was dazzling: tight, precise, controlled. With harder vocals than the folkier Neil or Buckley, the midband, too, yielded. This amplifier placed vocals in front of the speakers, accurately scaled, sibilants in check.

But I was wondering if perhaps the FV-34B amp was *too* nice? So quiet is ➔



## VALVE AMPLIFIER



**ABOVE:** RCA sockets for three line inputs are included alongside separate 8ohm and 4ohm loudspeaker taps in the form of chunky 4mm binding posts

its operation, so free is it of hum or other nasties that even the raunchier stuff – MC5 again – seemed less aggravating than perhaps it should. The MC5 did not exist to charm: they played to agitate. The Yarland cleaned up a raw, live sound, injecting space and air. Such are the more lovable traits of classic tube circuits and workhorses like the EL34.

### AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'

With the newly-remastered John Lennon catalogue, and the wilder moments of the Plastic Ono Band, replete with raw fuzz guitar, I was cured of my suspicions. The Yarland was emerging as more neutral and capable than I had imagined, and any thoughts that the amplifier was polishing the edges were replaced by a knowledge that the amp simply doesn't misbehave. With works of inimitable refinement – the recent Nat 'King' Cole SACDs from Acoustic Sounds – the Yarland proved adept at reproducing the silkiness of Capitol's 1950s crooner sessions.

Here, the confusion set in. How could something selling for so little deliver so much? Those of us who use vintage kit know that £500 will fill a boot at one of John Howes' vintage audio fairs, but the gamble is the age of the purchase. Here was £499 spent on something brand-spanking-new, but with the behaviour of an

amplifier from the golden age. I realise that raving about Chinese-made products is bad enough when they're available through regular channels – still one is made to feel like a traitor.

But sold directly? I have never hidden my love for PrimaLuna amps, and was recently charmed to my toes by Eastern Electric and Consonance models, and they're retailed in the manner of regular components regardless of national origin. It's harsh, but the world is changing. Digital cameras decimated film, but the camera companies adapted. Amazon has all-but-buried the bookstore, while Kindle may kill the book itself. It may be tough on UK retailers, but the Yarland FV-34B is a gift to the music lover. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Both the Editor and I had this pegged as a far costlier unit – at least a grand in the light of its build and performance. We were blissfully, deliriously wrong. The unit sells for so little not just because it's Chinese, but because you buy it direct. The net result is an amazingly quiet, stable, punchy and *musical* amplifier for the price of a decent bottle of Masseto. As an entry to the world of valves, it's perfect.

Sound Quality: 82%

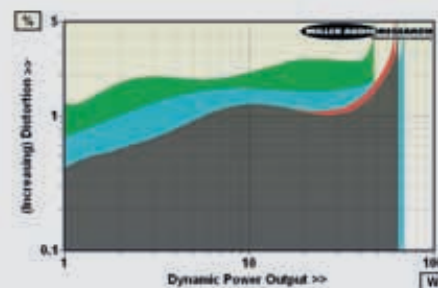


## LAB REPORT

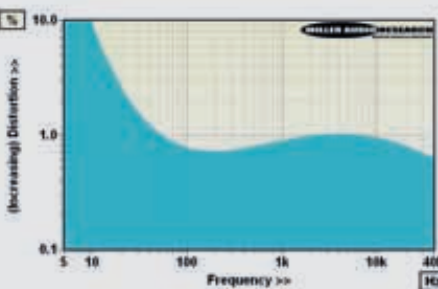
### YARLAND FV-34B (£499)

I have previously bemoaned some Chinese-sourced valve amplifiers for their poor tube matching, the left and right channels often behaving like different amplifiers. In this instance the reverse is true. Each of the EL34 output pentodes and 6N3 driver triodes is factory-matched to its socket and the L/R gain (+37.4dB). THD characteristics and power output are almost identical as a result. In practice, Yarland shows how it should be done with a full 2x45W output achieved into 8/4ohm loads (via 8/4ohm taps) at up to its specified 5% harmonic distortion (2x40W at 2.5% THD). The dynamic output profiles [see Graph 1, below] suggest that distortion is typically at or below 1% from 1W to 30W with 50W achieved under dynamic conditions at ~1.5% THD. This even-handed characteristic also holds true with frequency from 100Hz right up to 20kHz even if distortion rises quickly below 30Hz or so to reach ~3% at 20Hz and 60% at a subsonic 5Hz (all re. 5W/8ohm). The A-wtd S/N ratio is good at 86.5dB (re. 0dBW) and also well matched between channels.

The FV34B's output transformers are tuned to deliver the flattest and most extended response into a non-reactive 8ohm load, reaching +0.1dB/20kHz and peaking at +2.3dB/60kHz. The 8ohm tap driving a 4ohm load produces a more pronounced roll-off of -1.6dB/20kHz and -14dB/80kHz but it's the high 5ohm source impedance that will cause the biggest response variations in practice, mirroring the peaks and dips in impedance of the partnering speaker. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Yarland FV-34B valve amplifier by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus extended frequency (5W/8ohm, 5Hz-40kHz). Transformer core saturation causes distortion to climb quickly at very low freqs.

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<3% THD, 8/4ohm)	40W / 40W
Dynamic power (<3% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	63W / 61W / 67W / 45W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	4.80-5.10ohm (8ohm tap)
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.1 to -8.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/40W)	38mV / 285mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/40W)	86.5dB / 102.5dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz)	2.8-0.90%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	125W / 278W
Dimensions (WHD)	214x530x518mm