

The Cost of Real

Boulder's 3050 Monoblocks

By Jeff Dorgay

What do you get for a whopping \$205,000 dollars? You get *real* music, provided you have speakers and ancillaries up to the task. Each of Boulder's massive 3050 monoblocks weigh 450 pounds and supply 1500 watts of Class-A power per channel, delivering an experience beyond anything I've ever heard. The price tag of awesome is rarely a small one.

Boulder



You also need a dedicated 220/240-volt line for *each* monoblock amplifier. My wimpy 20-amp dedicated lines are not enough for me to commandeer a pair of these for review, so I go to the mountains of Boulder, Colorado, home of Boulder Amplifiers. Forget the usual audiophile excuses about how a review can't be written without the product being in your own system, because in this case the Boulder listening room features a pair of Focal Grande Utopia EM speakers, a model I am very familiar with.

"We haven't sent these out for review because *no one* has enough AC power in their listening room to accommodate these," laughs Boulder's Rich Maez as we tour the factory. And I'm guessing that only a privileged few also have floors stout enough. For those with enough power on tap and hefty floors (and the wherewithal to afford a pair), the 3050s arrive with Colorado-mined black granite bases that perfectly match the asymmetrical shape of the amplifiers.

The Epitome of Craftsmanship

The visit begins in the machine shop, where the exquisitely machined parts that make up a Boulder amplifier come to life. Each 3050 heat sink is machined from a 115-pound solid billet of 6061-T1 aluminum alloy. Once through Boulder's various CNC machining centers, the amps undergo a series of final finishing operations, ending with bead-blasting and clear-anodizing processes. As impressive as the chassis and heat sinks are, perhaps the coolest part of each Boulder 3050 is the massive power switch, which features a highly polished paddle machined from stainless steel. It's actuation feels like the clunk of a Bentley door. (Click [HERE](#) to visit our website for more pictures of the Boulder factory.)

Shop foreman Ian Balmforth has been with Boulder for over 15 years, having inherited the job from his father, and he takes a tremendous level of pride in his work. The rest of the employees in the Boulder factory share the same level of enthusiasm for their work, often putting their efforts and expertise into different phases of component production and for different models. When orders are ready for a batch of 3000-series components, they work on nothing else until the run is complete. Whereas so many products are built in hours, the Boulder 3050 monoblocks take approximately four weeks each to complete, from the time the raw metal enters the dock until the finished, tested and safely crated amplifiers leave.

(continued)





Fully balanced, differential power amplifiers from start to finish, the 3050s offer only balanced inputs, and the driver stage consists of Boulder's latest discrete 99H modules. A giant metal tunnel runs through the center of the amplifier chassis, with four separate, potted transformers inside, which helps drop all mechanical and electrical noise to the theoretical minimum.

Power and Control

The Boulder 3050s have more power than anything else you can buy, but sheer watts are not the whole story. Boulder's president Jeff Nelson explains it as a "factor of control," telling me that the more power available and the more devices to distribute the load—there are 120 output transistors in *each* 3050—the easier and more precisely the amplifier can control the movement of the speakers' drivers and the EMF that the woofer cones generate.

Rich Maez begins my listening session of the 3050s with an introduction to the range. Everything is driven by Boulder's 2010 pre-amplifier and 1021 network disc player. The 1008 phonostage we reviewed back in issue 27 sits on another rack with a SOTA turntable. AC/DC's "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution" plays through the 800-series monoblocks (also reviewed in issue 20) with good results. Everything Boulder is famous for is here in spades with this \$12,000 pair of amplifiers: Bass weight and control, lightning-fast dynamics and a big soundstage—impressive and duly noted.

Switching the cables to the 1050 monos and then to the 2050 monos clearly illustrates the progression. Tonality remains the same, but each pair of amplifiers reveals more music than the models before. Going up the range brings a lower noise floor, more weight and more dynamic jump. And the 2050, which has been Boulder's flagship for years, is indeed impressive, with the Grande Utopias turning in a truly grand performance.



For those not familiar with the Focal Grande Utopia EMs, they are one of the world's finest loudspeaker systems, but their stunning level of resolution can disappoint if the rest of the system doesn't deliver the goods, and I have heard this speaker turn in more than one lackluster performance over the years with mediocre systems. (That's my polite way of telling those of you who don't like the Grande Utopias to shut your pie holes...insert smiley face.) They excel here.

Music's New Definition

Wonderful as the 2050s are, the 3050s are a quantum leap in every aspect of performance. Revisiting the AC/DC track is a stunning experience. The Grande Utopias simply liquefy in the room now that the 3050s are powering them; there seem to be no speakers whatsoever, just music. *(continued)*

Tonality remains the same, but soundstage width and depth jumps to another level with the 3050s. The Grandes become even more coherent, fading further into nothingness. I've been listening to *Back in Black* since the day it was released in 1980, and I've never heard it like this. The drums now have the force to convince you that you're listening to the real thing, along with the right texture and tonality of the various drumheads.

Miles Davis' "Freddie Freeloader" stretches out between the speakers, with natural-sounding cymbals and endless texture present in the recording; it feels as if you can hear all the way inside his horn. This speaker-amp combo delivers a similar effect with the piano, which just floats directly out in front of the left speaker and is rendered to perfect scale, as a drumstick cracks down on the rim of the snare and Miles' trumpet glides in so gently you don't even notice it until the sound is there in full force.

These amplifiers deliver unbelievably tight pace and texture in the low-frequency register, regardless of volume level, again giving a feeling of being in the performance instead of just listening to it. Acoustic bass is fleshed out perfectly, with just the right amount of resonance and texture, while electric bass growls as it should.

Unlimited Dynamics

Revvng up the tempo with a dose of hard bop, Rich goes for some Freddie Hubbard, whose horn on "Philly Mignon" blows me back in the listening chair—Maxell-man style.

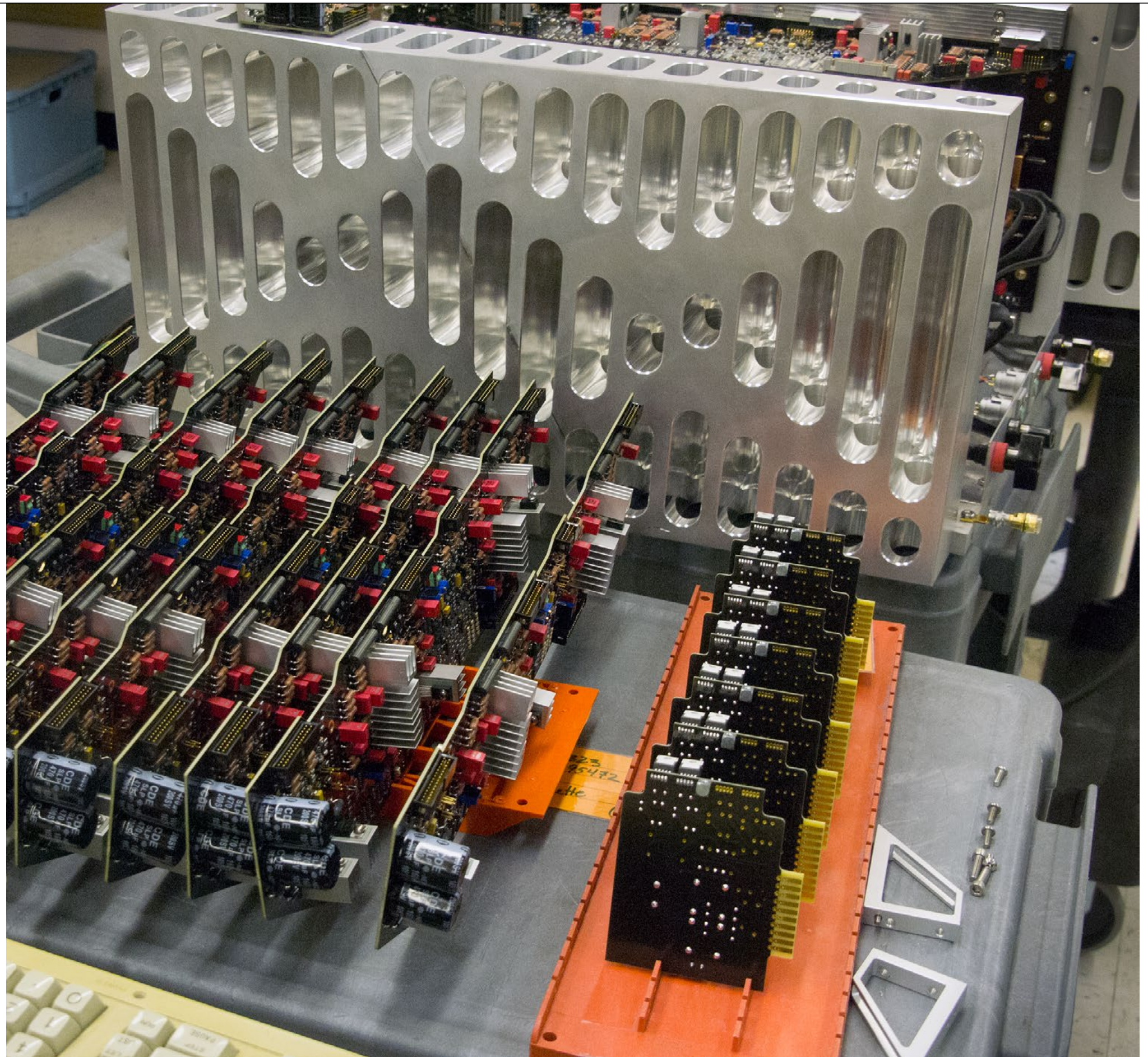
The complete lack of clipping or compression continues to amaze me as the hours roll by. The opening bit to Pink Floyd's "Welcome to the Machine" feels as if you are in an elevator 6 feet under the floor, moving up through solid matter to listening level and then up another three stories.

The bongos in Bob Dylan's "Everything is Broken" take on a life of their own, sounding much larger than life. While I've often dismissed Dylan's *Oh Mercy* album as flat and uninvolved at the standard 16-bit/44-kHz resolution, it comes alive in all three dimensions in this system. I don't even want to listen to vinyl!

More time goes by as I investigate countless tracks that I've heard time and time again on many systems. I'm continually amazed by the new experiences these amps deliver—from the Beatles to Metallica. As Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong run through "Isn't this a Lovely Day," I feel as if the room's walls are missing and the performers are walking around me as they sing.

Playing music through the Boulder 3050 monoblocks is hallucinogenic. Continually stunned by everything I choose, I don't want to leave the listening chair, but by now it has become dark and everyone but Maez and Nelson have long gone home for the day, so it's time to call it a night.

Boulder achieves the ultimate with the 3050s: They resolve more detail than anything I've ever experienced, yet they are never harsh or off-putting in any dimension. *(continued)*



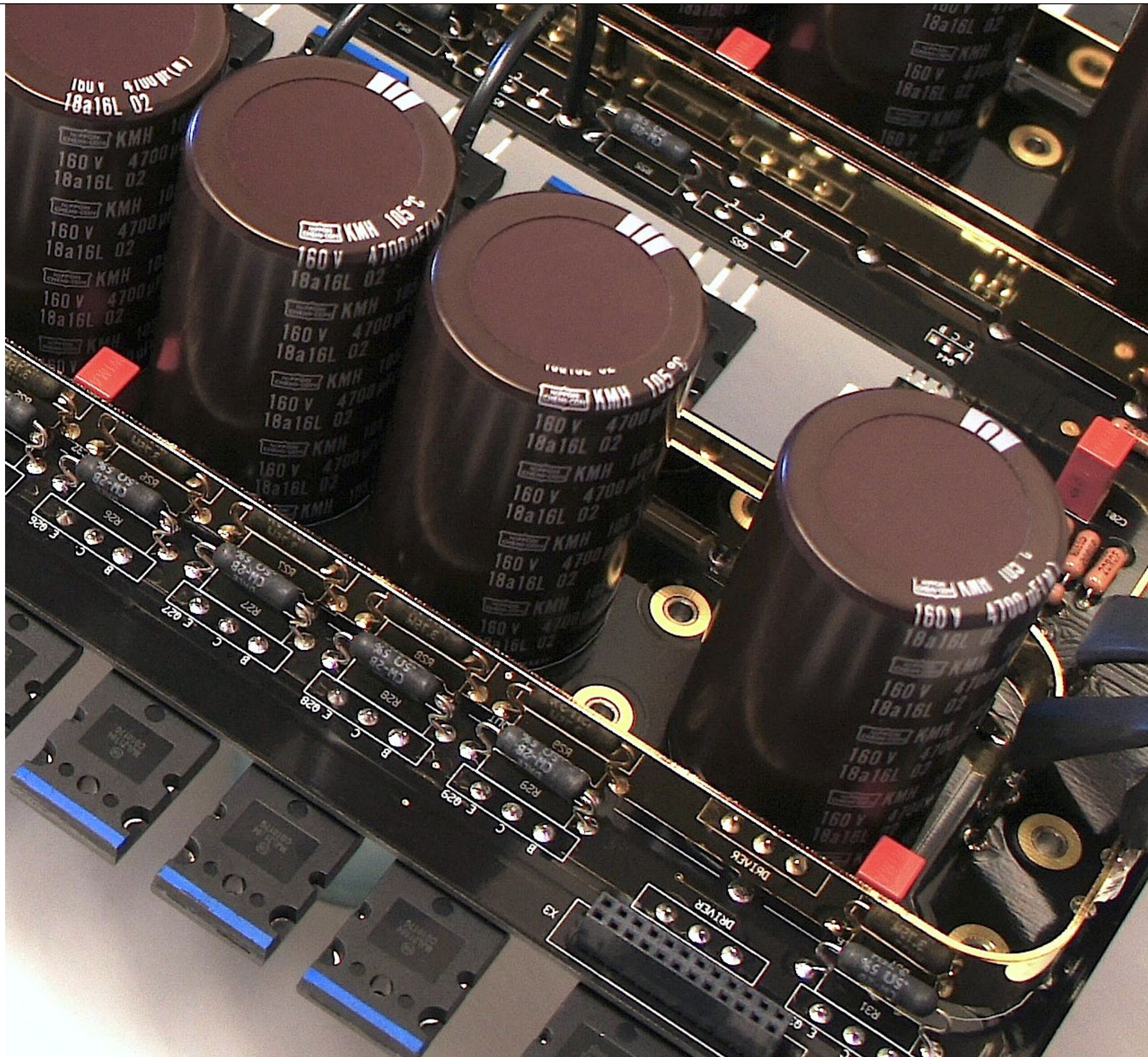
As I listen to quite a few albums I am infinitely familiar with (some of which are *not* known for their sound quality) the music comes alive through the Boulder/Grande Utopia combination in a spectacular manner. I'll go on record to say that this is the most musically lifelike system, coming the closest to the real thing I've ever had the pleasure of listening to.

Meeting the Goal

Boulder president Jeff Nelson claims his company's ultimate goal is to produce an amplifier devoid of sonic signature, one that lets the music come through as it may. For this reviewer, Boulder has succeeded fantastically. In the early 1990s, in his review of Boulder's original 500AE power amplifiers, *Stereophile* editor at the time, J. Gordon Holt, said that the amplifiers "are just not there." Though incredible progress has been made in 22 years, this still remains the essence of the 3050s. They truly disappear, becoming a conduit of music unlike anything I have experienced.

The paradox of the Boulder 3050s is twofold: Hearing them will reset your bar in terms of what is possible in the world of reproduced sound, even if you only listen to average recordings. They will also spoil you for anything else. You don't really need that 401k, do you? You'll be too old to enjoy it anyway, right? For our readers fortunate enough to afford a pair of 3050s, I guarantee you will not be disappointed.

In addition to otherworldly sonic performance, Boulder amps come with a level of craftsmanship that



is also beyond anything else I've experienced. Most Boulder amplifiers produced over the company's history are still in use, and most are still owned by the original owners. Boulder doesn't do "mid-model updates," and a quick glimpse at eBay shows only a couple pieces for sale on the secondary market, and they command high prices. (Three of the six sellers say their reason for selling is that they bought the next piece up in the Boulder line.) I can't imagine where you would go after owning a pair of the 3050s.

Those a little less well heeled might consider the 900-watt-per-channel 3060 stereo amplifier, which sells for \$115,000. It will still require a single 30A 240-volt outlet, but Rich Maez assures me that it offers up a very enticing experience.

Having spent plenty of time with some of the world's top amplifiers, I can tell you that the Boulder 3050s deliver the goods. This is not a case of paying three times as much for a minuscule increase in performance; this is a mind bender. You'll never be the same. ●

Boulder 3050
Monoblock Amplifiers

MSRP: \$205,000 per pair
(including granite bases)

MANUFACTURER
Boulder Amplifiers

CONTACT
www.boulderamp.com