

We were having trouble with the power in our home—the wall current, I mean, not the dynamics of our marriage—so I called the local utility. While the technician was here, he let me watch what he was doing. I had a chance to look inside our meter box, which is the junction between the utility's power lines and the circuit-breaker box in the cellar.

With the meter box open and the meter itself pried from its moorings, there wasn't much to see: two hot legs (sounds like a bad Rod Stewart record, doesn't it?) and one neutral, plus a braided ground lead. The hot and neutral legs are extremely thick multistrand cable, terminated with what appear to be cast-alloy O-lugs and fastened down with 3/8" nuts.

The cables and lugs are no bigger than the ones I've seen used as speaker connectors on more than a few contemporary high-end amplifiers—forget AC power; the fastening nuts are actually a lot *smaller* than I'm used to seeing as audio hookup hardware. And, again, that's just for hooking up loudspeakers to amplifiers—which is to say, that's for conducting AC of a relatively small number of amps and volts compared to what an audio amplifier's power supply draws from the wall outlet.

And what *about* that wall current? I won't go so far as to tell you that Niagara-Mohawk's incoming lines are dwarfed by the ones I've seen used as high-end accessory AC cords'n'plugs, a relatively new field of research and development (as in, "Let's research what these guys have in their wallets and develop new ways of taking it"), but I will say that I've seen bigger, more robust, more rugged, and altogether more *serious* cables and connectors in high-end audio than I have in this two-year-old meter box on a two-year-old house in a five-year-old housing development.

"There it is," as my friend Lars Sorensen used to say: Why would anyone spend money on an AC cord that's bigger or in any imaginable way *better* than the inarguably greater lengths of cable that bring the wall current from the meter box to the circuit breakers, or from the circuit breakers to your home's electrical outlets? What possible good could such a thing do?

I've wondered that myself. God knows I've tried, but until recently I found it impossible to hear significant, repeatable differences between various accessory power cords and the ones supplied as standard with my audio components. I say that without one iota of harsh feeling toward any of the people I know in the audio cable industry, some of whom are nice. But I don't even blame the nasty ones for making and selling high-priced AC cables. If I owned a bakery, and if I saw customers waving \$50 bills at my competitors and begging for magic cookies, there's no question in my mind what I would do. (Hint: It involves dough, cookie cutters, and pixie dust.)

I'm about to tell you about the last time I did an informal AC cable comparison, but first I'll fill you in on how us bigwig audio reviewers acquire most of our audio cables. If my experience is typical, borrowing *just* a pair of speaker cables or *just* a pair of interconnects for review purposes is impossible. Cable manufacturers, who also tend not to wait for us to pick up the phone and call them, are interested in having reviewers try as many of their products as UPS is willing to deliver. Not just interconnects, but interconnects and speaker cables and digital cables and AC power cords and you name it. Not just one cable model, but a variety of models from their line, at different prices. (A commonly heard suggestion: "Start with our budget line—which is better than anybody else's cable, anyway—and then work your way up to our more expensive stuff.")

Cartons from cable companies tend to be big, and if most cable manufacturers had their way, we reviewers would spend several weeks out of every year doing nothing but playing around with their products and theirs alone. Can't blame 'em, I guess.

By the time I last felt motivated to compare AC cords, which was maybe six months ago, I had a selection of five different ones in my basement: two from one manufacturer, three from another. I brought them all upstairs, cleaned off the plugs, and got to work. I began by comparing the five to the stock AC cord that came with my Fi 2A3 amplifier, my reasoning being that amplifiers, because they generally use more electricity than any other components in a home audio system, will make the greatest demands on an AC cord, and thus expose its strengths or weaknesses in a clear and straightforward manner. Not necessarily flawless reasoning, but a place to begin.

I could hear no improvements at all when using any of the accessory cords. Of course, I looked at it the other way around: I was delighted to hear how well my stock AC cord acquitted itself in the face of such expensive competition. I was so impressed that I half-considered shining it up with a little Armor All (can I still mention that stuff in these pages?) and selling it for hundreds of dollars on eBay, perhaps under the name Art's Black Beauty, or The Midnight Connection from Dudley International Products/World Audio Designs, aka DIPWAD.

But I didn't. And that was that.

**JPS Labs The Digital AC**

As I write this, my family and I are preparing to move. That means I've finally had to get off my duff and ship several dozen cable samples back to the manufacturers, who, understandably, would rather I kept them.

<p>After I shipped most of them out, I found a stray in our basement: Mixed in with some of my own cables was a long, black power cord from JPS Labs, labeled The Digital AC (footnote 1). The cable itself is no thicker than average, although it's encased in the sort of braided jacket that makes it look big and somewhat reptilian. Both the plug end and the IEC end <i>are</i> larger than average, however, and the info sheet on the JPS <a href="#">website</a> says that's because they contain filters—one for RF, the other for digital noise. The website goes on to suggest that The Digital AC's 2m length has been carefully chosen to prevent the cord from acting as an antenna for the frequency ranges that would prove most harmful.</p> <p>"What the heck," I said to myself. "Let's see what this baby can do." Onto my Sony SCD-777ES SACD player the JPS power cord went.</p> <p>This time, I heard a difference. In fact, I heard a fairly remarkable difference, seeing as how I'd changed "only" a power cord.</p> <p>On "Manzanita (1st Variation)," from Tony Rice's <i>Unit of Measure</i> (Rounder 11661-0405-2), the JPS cord really opened up the sound, which before the swap was a bit shut-in and dark. Before making this comparison, I would simply have told you that this is a fine sounding CD—and, like almost all of Rice's stuff, it is. But from the first arpeggiated chord, The Digital AC endowed the music with a better sense of flow and a smoother, more "liquid" presentation. I also found it easier to concentrate on musical details, noticing, for example, that the subtle mandolin chords are on the upbeat in the A part—unusual in bluegrass—before they switch to a more traditional downbeat "chop" for the B part. Cool.</p>	<p>On the SACD of Bruno Walter's recording of Beethoven's Symphony 6 (Sony SS 6012) I heard more of the same: The sound was more open—this time a bit bigger, too—with an easier, more natural sense of movement from note to note. As a bonus—and forgive me, please, while I go back on what I wrote in this space last month about "audiophile" recordings—when I switched over to the JPS power cord, I was startled by the sound of someone's sheet music hitting the floor 34 seconds into the first movement.</p> <p>Beyond that, the sound of the music took on more body, more color, and more physical realism with the JPS Cable—not a bad thing when you're talking about Bruno Walter's stereo Beethoven recordings, which otherwise tend to sound thin and a little washed-out. The difference wasn't quite as big as that between the sounds of SACD and regular CD, but it was categorically the same, if you know what I mean.</p> <p>Gears meshed and wheels turned: The cord obviously made some kind of audible difference with digital sources. I looked around the room and my gaze fell, clumsily, on the Linn Lingo power supply I've been trying out with my Linn LP12 turntable. (A tedious comparison of the Lingo and the Naim Armageddon turntable power supply will appear in this space some day. While I don't want to tip my hand just yet, I suggest here that one of them sounds a lot better with 45rpm records.) The Lingo is said to contain digital circuitry: Could using the JPS power cord with it make any kind of difference?</p> <p>The answer is yes, albeit not to the same extent as with the Sony SACD player. But the music had a smoother, more natural sense of flow, and the sound was less grainy overall.</p>	<p>In Knappertsbusch's late recording of Wagner's overture to <i>Tannhäuser</i> (Westminster WST-17032, recently reissued by Speakers Corner), I focused on the bassoon in the introductory bars and heard how each note seemed better shaped—and a little more colorful and real—with the JPS cord feeding my Linn's Lingo. The performance as a whole also seemed more dramatic and, in some spots, downright louder. Thus encouraged, I put the stock power cords back on the Sony and the Linn, and reacclimated myself to the sound. Then I repeated a few selections, but this time with The Digital AC on my Fi amplifier. Gears meshed but wheels spun. I could hear no difference at all.</p> <p><b>Explanations</b></p> <p>I called Joe at JPS Labs, to get a few technical explanations. He told me a little more about The Digital AC and how it works.</p> <p>First, at the heart of this cord are three "very-high-purity" stranded copper conductors, insulated to a 300V rating for approval by UL and CSA. That insulation is also said to contain a special compound that absorbs and, to some extent, dissipates high-frequency energy. But its the energy absorption that is key: The idea is for The Digital AC to act like a sponge for electrical noise, instead of either reflecting noise the way ferrite rings do or allowing it to bang around all over the place the way nothing does.</p> <p>Then come those filters at the AC and IEC ends. Joe says these are specially tuned for the capacitance and inductance of The Digital AC's unvarying 2m length, in order for them to act as part of a complete and holistic filtration system. These pi networks are "mutual inductance to eliminate common-mode noise, as well as high-frequency capacitors to shunt higher frequencies and 'smooth' the AC as it enters the cord from the wall." The conductors are then encased in a nonreactive aluminum-Teflon shield.</p>
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The plug/socket contacts are plated with "high-purity" tin for maximum conductivity, and the cord and its networks are safely rated to operate anywhere in the world. (The Digital AC can be ordered with weird plugs to suit virtually any foreign country you can name, from sunny Mexico to darkest Crackistan.) Joe says that The Digital AC has been on the market since 1997, but given our continued reliance on more and more complex digital devices in our hi-fi systems, he says it's "even more effective today!"

The price is \$349—only slightly more than I was going to charge for Art's Black Beauty.

#### Summing up

In the mid-1970s I worked part-time at a little hi-fi shop in upstate New York. The owner was a conservative, no-nonsense, *specs über alles* kind of guy (this in spite of some striking weirdnesses in other areas of his life). The in-house repair technician, a good friend who now designs and builds medical imaging equipment for a living, was also an audio skeptic, albeit an infinitely smarter and more open-minded one than his boss. (A side note: We farmed all our tape-deck repairs out to a fellow named Ted Saito, who went on to dual fame as a designer of CD players at McIntosh Labs and an occasional character in Sam Tellig's column.)

This little side trip down Memory Lane has a destination, and it is this: Even back then, and even at a shop that was more Sweeney than Nightingale, we knew from experience that the position and length of an AC cord could affect the sound. Again, that mostly had to do with keeping a power cord from behaving like an RF antenna. While that may seem a less than exotic concern, one must admit that it, too, flies in the face of the attitude that questions whether changing a single 3' length of wire can make a difference in a system where many more feet of conductors remain the same.

What's going on here? My guess is that The Digital AC works not by protecting my delicate hothouse flower of a CD player from contaminants forced upon it by an uncaring power utility, but by preventing my stupid CD player from pissing into its own bathwater, if you'll pardon the expression. Digital audio components can add as much noise to a domestic power spur as certain household appliances; blocking that noise allows a hi-fi system—including, of course, the digital audio components themselves—to perform at its best.

Whether or not that's *how* it works, I'm satisfied that it *does* work. And at \$349—which is equal to or less than the amount some enthusiasts, myself included, will spend on a special isolation rack or stand for their CD players—I believe that The Digital AC is fairly priced, both in terms of the sonic and musical improvements it wreaks and its apparent manufacturing cost. Considered in the context of other accessory cables I've seen, The Digital AC is actually something of a bargain.

By the time you read this, I'll have mailed JPS Labs a check for this one, for use with my Sony SACD player. Since its effectiveness was not quite so pronounced with the Linn Lingo, and since I don't actually own a Linn Lingo, I'm holding off for now on buying a second Digital AC.

But The Digital AC's greatest value may be as a lesson to a know-it-all reviewer: My job is to try everything that comes my way with an open mind—even things that strike me as unreasonable or unworkable. This doesn't mean I can't have a point of view. I'm still free to make fun of things I think are stupid, as long as I'm also willing to make fun of myself when I'm wrong.

Most of all, it means I mustn't get lazy. I'm sure that somewhere in the Betty Crocker organization is a tester who thinks au gratin potatoes aren't worth the bother, yet she must keep searching for that one recipe that will knock her senseless. So it goes.

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JPS Labs LLC  
New York, USA  
Tel- 716-656-0810  
<http://www.JPS-Labs.com>

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Art's Black Beauty (left), and The Digital AC

