

SONIC FARM CREAMLINER II

SIGNAL PROCESSING HARDWARE

Simon Allen test drives the Canadian company's new creation, which it calls a 'stereo line signal conditioner'.

Here we have an updated version of a unit that perhaps not everyone has heard about. Is it an EQ, dynamics or effect processor, you're wondering? Well no, not really. The Sonic Farm Creamliner II is a unit for making the digital world sound 'betterer' apparently. You could call it an enhancer, or as the firm describes it, a stereo line signal conditioner.

While digital audio is designed to be clear and accurate, assuming the resolution is high enough of course, there's a certain 'analogue' vibe which we still strive for. Can this vibe be added with one simple device? If there isn't a notable effect to speak of, then why go to the trouble and the expense of using a Creamliner II?

OVERVIEW

It's as if the Creamliner II offers a unique notion for analogue hardware's role in modern pro-audio. With digital audio being so advanced these days, we seem to have a plug-in for nearly any task. For example, it's quite possible and acceptable to produce content entirely in the digital domain, but can these 'plug-ins' really offer that true analogue vibe? Sonic Farm is almost suggesting that although we may no longer need hardware for processing reasons, we do need the vibe, which can be applied with just this single piece of outboard.

At its heart, the Creamliner II is a pentode-based hardware unit with input and output transformers. Besides some subtle features, the overall concept is to simply pass your audio through the unit for 'that sound'. The output transformer can be switched to a solid state balanced driver, providing a different sonic result.

The Creamliner II offers a surprising amount of user control, considering it is only for adding some of that analogue loveliness. There's the usual bypass switch and output level control, but not an input level control. The unit is designed to be driven by any proceeding equipment in your signal chain, and can be driven almost as hard as you like depending on the sound you're after. This was done on purpose, so that the only gain stage was the pentode itself. The output attenuation follows the tube so you can choose how hard you're hitting the output stage, whether that be the transformer or balanced solid state driver.

There's also a select switch to run the tube in pentode or triode mode. The pentode mode is designed to have as much coloration as possible from the EF86 tube, adding as many even-order harmonics as possible, with as much as 1% harmonic distortion.

The unit also features a variation of EQ-style settings, adding to the enhancement. This isn't strictly an EQ though, coming in the form of AIR and FAT three-way switches. These add low and high shelving boosts in the tube's gain stage, rather than a separate stage of the signal processing. I like to think of these two settings as side-chain filters. The low shelving operates from 400Hz or 600Hz, and the high shelving from 2.2kHz or 7kHz. At 6dB/octave these can only be attenuated with a screwdriver on the front panel.

With this new version of the Creamliner, there are a couple of changes and one very important addition. Firstly, the output stage and bypass switches have been moved over to the right channel. I don't think it's the clearest layout and would prefer settings that apply to both channels to be located together elsewhere, but this has, however, allowed the left channel to host the input selection and a new input attenuation feature for both

channels. The input attenuation switch lowers each tube's drive by 6dB, and simultaneously raises the output. This simple but clever feature retains the same loudness, but hopefully a cleaner signal path is achieved.

FOR MASTERING

I spent some time running varied mix files through the Creamliner II, trying to use it on as many genres as possible and mixes that were either done in the box or with analogue equipment. The results were immediately more colored than expected.

For heavier tracks with rich content, the Creamliner II was quite open at being driven relatively hot on the way in. However, I found the saturation that occurred to be very smooth and rounded, with some tracks benefiting from additional clipping-style saturation.

I particularly like the AIR and FAT controls, which sound like a gentle Baxandall-style shelving EQ. I felt that the Creamliner II was best placed near the end of the processing chain, adding that final 'glue' and polish, but perhaps enabled before I applied any EQ. The unit also added to softer material, including classical tracks. It equally manages to cater for a more clinical sound with the new input attenuation feature, while still offering the slight EQ and transformer output that's available.

FOR LIVE SOUND

For me, it was all about headroom. I only used the Creamliner II on two shows in the period that I had the unit, but interestingly one was a relatively small PA, and the other much larger. On the smaller system it was less noticeable as I wasn't sure how much the system itself was adding 'color'.

On the larger system, which was being driven by an older digital console, I left the Creamliner II in bypass during the soundcheck. Once live, it highlighted



Key Features

- Pentode and triode tube modes
- Output mode: Transformer or solid state balanced driver
- Frequency response: 10Hz-50kHz +/-3dB
- Maximum gain: 20dB
- Available with Ni-Fe alloy or pure steel output transformers

RRP: \$2,350 (CAD)

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exactly what we miss with some digital mixers today. I wouldn't change digital mixing in the live world, unless it was for a particular show, because of the many benefits it brings. However, what the Creamliner II presented so well was the effect on dynamics. I don't mean compression because in that respect it's beautifully transparent, but it softens those spiky edges that can occur when summing digitally.

CONCLUSION

This unit might seem to offer a simple concept of adding true analogue color, but there's much more on offer here. In fact, the longer I spend with it, the more I seem to discover. This is a brilliant tool for adding vibe and depth to your mixes, complementing the typical workflows of today. The addition of the -6dB input attenuation delivers another tone, which also multiplies the possible preset combinations available from this unit.

The Reviewer

Simon Allen is a freelance internationally recognised engineer/producer and pro audio professional with over a decade of experience. Working mostly in music, his reputation as a mix engineer continues to reach new heights.