

Sylvia Massy: A World-Famous Engineer Unhinged! See Page 12

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JANUARY 2017
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0 09281 03050 8 01

VOL. THIRTY
NUMBER FOUR



REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.



Sonic Farm Beamer

Can't choose between two great tube preamps? Get both at once!

Sonic Farm is a company based in Vancouver, BC. It's run by lifelong friends Zoran Todorovic and Boris Drazic, who met in 1966 in their home country of Yugoslavia when they formed their first band. They started Sonic Farm in 2009 with a goal of crafting products that were not just clones of famous boxes of yesteryear. All Sonic Farm boxes offer multiple sound-shaping choices and handmade quality.

My first look at Sonic Farm came in our July 2013 issue with a look at the company's 2DI4 Pentode Direct Box, and then again in September 2014 with a look at the Silkworm solid-state 500 Series mic preamp. Both pieces were impressive, offering a wide selection of sounds, with the 2DI4 being one of the nicest bass DIs I have reviewed to date.

Sonic Farm's first offering was the Creamer 2-channel 19" rack preamp. The Creamer is Sonic Farm's own design, and offers a choice of Triode or Pentode input and transformer or transformerless output. A later version, the Creamer Plus, added more tone-shaping features, plus a transformer-balanced line-level input.

In 2014 Sonic Farm released the Berliner, also a 2-channel tube preamp. It was the company's first to take direct design inspiration from a famous 1950s German microphone preamp, the Telefunken V72. The V72 was EMI's console preamp of choice (before its own REDD.47 was designed), used on the Beatles' first album *Please Please Me* in 1963. Per Sonic Farm's "No Clones" motto, the V72 circuit was only a starting point and the company added its own twists.

This month we are taking a look at both units, or rather a single channel of each, in Sonic Farm's latest rack unit: The Beamer (Berliner + Creamer =

Beamer). It's housed in a 1U 19" enclosure with a beautiful red, black and white baked enamel finish with cream colored buttons and vintage style chickenhead knobs, similar to the rest of the Sonic Farm family. I/O on the Beamer is the same for each channel—XLR Mic In and XLR Line Out on the rear panel, switchable 1/4" Instrument Input on the front. (Transformed XLR Line inputs are available as a \$300 option.)

To dive under the hood, we have to look at each side separately...

The Berliner side

Side one of this dual-personality box is the V72-inspired Berliner. The Berliner has buttons for 48V phantom power, phase, and 10 dB pad, and a Mic/Instrument input button. Next are a pair of the aforementioned chickenhead knobs for Input Gain (up to 36.7 dB) and for Output Gain. In the manual it is pointed out that this output control is for final output attenuation only and does not affect tube gain or tube overload levels, though it does drive the output buffer and transformer. A 2-color LED lights green for signal and red for overload.

Next is a button marked SS/OT; SS (Solid State) engages a transformerless output stage and OT engages the Output Transformer. Note that the Berliner, Creamer+, and Beamer can all be purchased with a choice of output transformers—see Sonic Farm's website for details.

Beyond these standard mic preamp controls are the Berliner's tone controls. First there's a 3-position toggle switch marked Fat, followed by a second one marked Air. These are shelving boosts that add subtle levels of thickness and openness, respectively. These are in the tube stage; they can be finetuned via

set screw trimpots accessed from the top of the unit.

Next is another 3-position toggle switch for setting the mic input's impedance, with settings of Low, Med and Hi (900Ω, 2400 Ω, 10 kΩ). Next is a 3-position High Pass Filter (Off, 160 Hz, or 80 Hz at 6 dB/octave). Last is a final 3-position attenuation control that is post-tube and pre-output control with settings of 0/-6/-12 dB.

The Creamer side

The other side of the Beamer has the feature set of the Creamer Plus, which is quite similar to the Berliner's. It also has 48V, Pad, Mic/Inst, SS/OT, Fat, Air, Impedance, HPF, and Attenuator controls. So what's different?

First, while there's an Output knob (an attenuator that doesn't affect the tube gain/drive, like the Berliner's), there's no Input Gain knob. The next difference is a button labeled +6 dB, and of course it's not as simple as it sounds. This is not an input gain button (we'll get to that), but rather it steps up the input transformer and changes its impedance across the board by 2.5kΩ. This does not just boost level; it changes the sound, especially on passive dynamic and ribbon microphones.

Next there is a button labeled Tube Mode, which switches the tube from the smoother and cleaner Triode mode to the more aggressive Pentode mode. Each of these is further affected by the last control on the unit, a Gain Up control that boosts the tube stage by 5 dB in Triode and 9 dB in Pentode.

The Beamer in use

Compared to most vintage tube microphone preamps, the V72 included, the Beamer is chock full of choices for altering

the sound. So, when asking the question, "What does the Beamer sound like?", there's no simple answer.

I would call the Berliner vintage-toned, round, and easily drivable into a beautiful top-end overdrive. This preamp has a nice grit and growl as it is pushed.

Compared to the Creamer Plus, it is the more diffuse and laid-back of the two, and its overall progression in tone from clean to driven is very linear.

The Creamer Plus side is quite smooth as its name implies, but it is the tighter and punchier of the two channels. Pushed into Pentode mode, it gets aggressive with a nice vintage roughening of its sonic edges. This side offers a touch more variety in its sonic choices than the linear Berliner, thanks to the Triode/Pentode switching, the additional impedance bump, and the tube boost.

Both units are well-suited for use with any mic you can throw at them and they offer plenty of gain on condensers (most of mine needed the input pad), as well as dynamic mics and passive ribbons, which benefit nicely from the impedance choice. A Shure SM7 in high-impedance mode sounds quite nice indeed. On both models the SS output is cleaner,

more open, and has low end that extends down a touch more, while the OT transformer-coupled output is rounder and weightier in the low mids.

The Fat and Air switches on each are more subtle than I was expecting, but do their job well to add weight or a gentle top-end push. Pleasingly, they don't sound like an added EQ curve. Instead, they give a microphone's sound a change in perceived weight and openness.

[Zoran Todorovic responds: "They can get very intense, especially on the Berliner side (and somewhat intense on the Creamer side when in pentode mode) when the trim pots, accessed from the cover through small holes as previously mentioned by Paul, are cranked up clockwise. Boris has a tendency to ship them set very conservatively, but we encourage users to try playing with them to hear the depth and range of their effect."]

While each channel worked well on every source I threw at it, I did have some favorites. For example: on male rock vocals, the Berliner with both the Fat and Air on setting 1 and the gain pushed just to the point of breakup, gave a result that was positively huge. I liked the

Creamer Plus a lot on snare in Pentode mode, where it was nice and punchy.

However, my favorite use of both units was on electric guitar amps. Using both on one amp in a standard 2-mic setup, I liked the Berliner best on ribbon mics like the Royer R-121 or AEA N22, while the Creamer Plus paired well with a Shure SM57 and an Audix i5 pushed into a medium impedance, with the +6 button adding more weight to the upper mids. I also tried each channel with some DI bass; here, the Berliner was my favorite, as it offered a growl that was more easily tailored to suit the track.

Conclusions

I keep asking myself which channel is my favorite, and it keeps changing, I like the laid-back vintage tone of the Berliner just as much as the variable forward nature of the Creamer Plus. Fortunately, if you're OK with only one channel of each tone, then the Beamer gives you the best of both worlds in one elegant package. ➔

Price: CAN\$2450 (about US\$1825)

More from: Sonic Farm, www.sonicfarm.com