Sonic Farm Creamer Plus

'Oh no, not another preamp,' we hear the doubters sigh. But this is not just another preamp and it works in unusual ways as JON THORNTON discovers.

Vancouver-based Sonic Farm is completely upfront about its design intentions — it's not about creating vintage sound-a-likes or replicas of 'classic' outboard. Sonic Farm completely eschews the school of thinking that the best preamps are those that offer all the tonal variety of a straight-wire with gain. No, the mission here is about preamps being part of the creative process of designing with sound and colour, it seems, is very much on the menu.

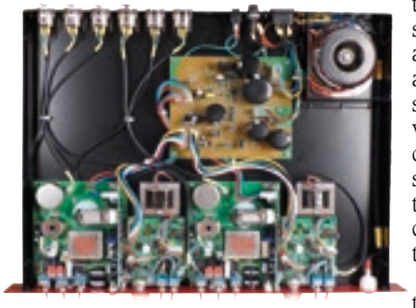
This approach was born not, as you might expect, in the back woods of British Columbia but on the Adriatic coast of former Yugoslavia. It was here that Sonic Farm founders Zoran Todorovic and Boris Drazic met as gigging musicians in 1966. After both studying electrical engineering they set up their own studio in the early 80s, featuring a home-grown recording console. Civil war drove them out of the country, ultimately leading to them separately relocating to America and Canada. Sonic Farm Pro Audio was born when they reunited in Vancouver in 2009.

The Creamer Plus is the flagship of the current product range and at face value is simply a 2-channel microphone preamplifier with additional line level and instrument inputs. Dig a little deeper and you realise that it's nowhere near as bland as that description. In part this is due to a healthy eclecticism regarding component choice and circuit design — there's clearly no dogmatic view about valves, transformers or solid state approaches. Instead it's very much about what works in terms of sound character and as result the Creamer Plus is something of a hybrid.

Transformers are obviously favoured at one level and oversized Cinemag transformers feature on the microphone and line inputs, which are located on the rear panel on XLR sockets. A ¼-inch jack on the front panel gives a high impedance instrument input that is presented directly to the main valve-based gain stage.

Each channel is built around an EF86 pentode valve although a front panel pushbutton can strap this to work in a triode arrangement that gives less gain but a subtly different tonal character. At this stage it's worth pointing out a slightly unusual approach with the Creamer's design. Although there's a front panel pot for each channel with a prominent vintage style pointer knob, this isn't the channel gain control in the usual sense. Instead this is effectively an attenuator between the valve gain stage and the output stage, and has no effect on the preamp's gain. Instead, the total gain is derived from a series of fixed stages in the signal path.

The input transformer (mic input) delivers the initial gain step of 20dB, and a pushbutton on the front panel can increase this by 6dB with a corresponding reduction in input impedance. The valve stage normally operates at a fixed gain of 24dB (triode mode) or 33dB (pentode mode). A 'Gain Up' button on the front panel modifies this by bypassing the cathode and adding just under 5dB (triode mode) or about 9dB (pentode mode) of additional gain. The decision to fix this, the only active gain stage, is in an effort to reduce the amount of negative feedback employed — again with the overall tonal effect in mind rather than something that measures empirically as 'good'.



The Creamer 'Plus' supplied for review here also allows that additional boost to be somewhat frequency selective by bypassing the cathode via inductors and capacitors — courtesy of two toggle switches labelled Fat and Air. These allow a degree of LF and HF shelving boost, with a choice of turnover frequency for each (400 or 600Hz for Fat, 2.2kHz or 7kHz for Air). By default, engaging these will apply shelving boost to the same degree as the flat Gain Up mode — although trim pots accessible through the top of the unit can be used to tame the boost amount for each if desired.

Each channel also has pushbuttons for the usual functions of phantom power, polarity reverse, input pad (-15dB pre-transformer) and line/mic input selection. There's also a three-position toggle switch for a high-pass filter (Off/160Hz/80Hz at 6dB/octave). Metering is served in a rudimentary but reasonably effective manner by a single bi-coloured LED, which lights green for signal present and red for signal clipping at the valve stage. And then there are two additional and slightly more unusual controls.

The first is a pushbutton that can select one of two possible output stages for that channel — options here are either solid state or transformer. If that wasn't choice enough, customers can also specify either a nickel/iron alloy or 100% iron-cored transformer. And in the (preproduction) model reviewed, another toggle switch allows the output transformer to deliver another 6dB of gain by changing taps — although in practice it seemed to deliver a lot more than this. Sonic Farm tells me that this will be changed in production versions and this switch will instead act as an additional attenuator (-6dB or -12dB) between the valve stage and the output level control pot — effectively giving better resolution to the action of this pot with very hot signals.

Even without the additional gain on the output transformer, the total gain available with all these stages is a healthy 68dB in pentode mode — so there's no sense that the Creamer will struggle even with low sensitivity mics. In use, it takes a little getting used to as you do have to think quite hard about all of those stages and keep track of gain structure carefully, but this approach does positively encourage experimentation. And there are a lot of permutations available.

First impressions with a C414 plugged into the mic input and set up on acoustic guitar are that it's never going to sound like a Millennia or similar design but there's no surprise there. What is surprising though is that, on the triode setting at least, it sounds very open indeed. Yes, there's a hint of low end colouration, particularly with the transformer output option selected but you wouldn't label it as dark. Slightly edgy sounding is the best description — it adds a subtle bite to strummed and picked guitar while never sounding too hard — and it actually complements the 414 nicely.

Switching tube modes to pentode, as well as delivering more gain, sounds a little more 'tube-like' — everything is driving that little bit harder with the resulting increase in harmonic distortion. Again though, the overall sound is one that is subtle and musical and doesn't sound like distortion for distortion's sake.

The same is true of the Fat and Air settings. Given the amount of boost they apply with the factory default trims, you might expect them to be somewhat overwhelming but they are actually quite subtle in their effect, and the Air switch on the highest setting really works well with male vocals. In fact, none of the individual options available to tweak the overall sound are extreme — in isolation they mostly result in very subtle tonal changes. The power here is in putting them together in different ways.

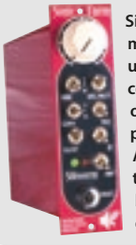
And in essence, that's what makes the Creamer so likeable despite its eccentricities. What Sonic Farm has produced isn't just another microphone preamp. Instead, it's like a constructor set for creating your own, personal chunk of gain to match any situation.

PROS Flexible, customisable sound with many permutations; very useable tone controls; sounds equally good with mic, line and instrument level sources.

CONS Fixed gain stages take a little getting used too; metering a little rudimentary; there may be too many options for some!

EXTRAS Sonic Farm's Creamliner is a stereo line signal conditioner, aimed at improving the sound

of digital stereo buses by running the signal through a pentode, and, if selected, also the output transformer. The result is said to be a warmer and 'glued' stereo image, with an improvement in high-end smoothness.



Silkworm is a 500-series solid state microphone and instrument preamp. It uses a fully discrete, low distortion servo controlled gain stage and a transformer on input and output. A full DC signal path ensures phase shift-free operation. Additionally, the output can be switched to a solid state balanced line driver, bypassing the transformer, for a more open sound.

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