Sonic Farm Creamliner Stereo Signal Conditioner

"An amazing device," the Creamliner improves the sound of a digital mixing desk by adding a tube output stage.

I was smitten by Sonic Farm's Creamer+ mic pre when I reviewed it last year, so I was happy to have the opportunity to put the company's follow up–Creamliner–to the test over the last several months. Essentially a Creamer+ without the mic pre circuit, the Creamliner is a stereo line-level signal conditioner designed to improve an audio signal by adding harmonics and tube warmth. While intended primarily for the live sound market, the Creamliner will find itself equally at home in recording studios and mastering facilities.

Features

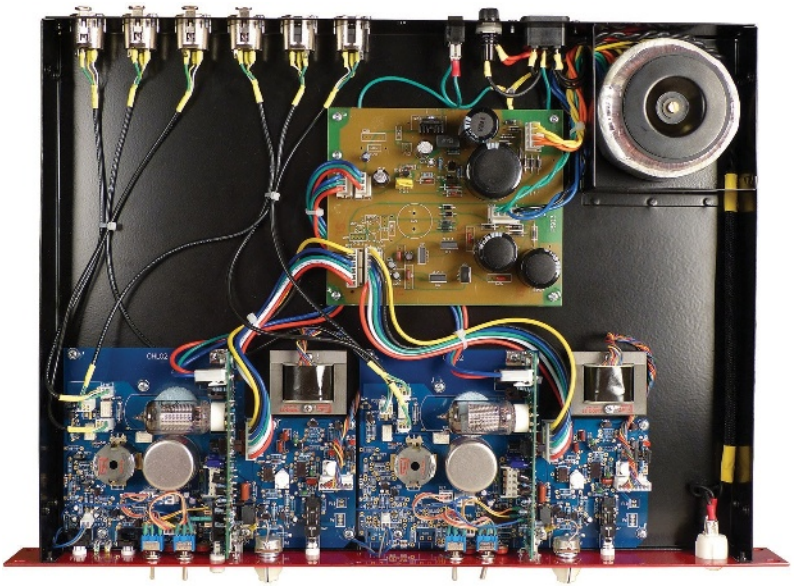
The attractive Class A Creamliner follows design elements of the Creamer, most notably, the red/black faceplate, chicken-head knobs and excellent build quality. The Creamer's gain stage incorporates an EF86 pentode tube designed to operate in either triode or pentode mode.

Sonic Farm explains the Creamliner's operation as:

"Bypassing cathode selectively using inductors and capacitors yields a subtle, but very musical tone control. This circuit exhibits a certain non-linearity (coloration); the harmonic distortion may exceed 1% before the actual clipping occurs. To preserve it, we purposely refrained from using transformer tap negative feedback, found in many circuits. Instead, a solid-state buffer and output level control follow the tube stage. Finally, a modern discrete transistor complementary buffer with extremely low distortion is used to drive the output transformer and the load."

The 1U device has a 10 Hz to 50 kHz +/- 3 dB frequency response, a maximum gain of 20 dB and a 22 dBu maximum output level with a minimum output load of 600 ohm. All Creamliner I/O is found on its rear panel: two pairs of female XLR connectors for Line 1 and Line 2 input and a pair of male XLR connectors for output, plus an IEC AC power input, mains fuse receptacle and ground lift switch.

As with the Creamer, all of the Creamliner's controls are located on the front panel. This includes power switch, a line select switch that selects between the two stereo line input pairs, and a bypass switch, providing true hardware bypass. LEDs illuminate to show which input is selected and whether Bypass mode is active. In sound reinforcement situations, the line select switch allows two consoles to be connected to the Creamliner. The Tube Mode switch toggles between Triode and Pentode mode operation, providing two different tube characters: Pentode provides more even-order harmonics than Triode.



A look inside the Creamliner

In addition to these global controls, each channel includes a pair of toggle switches and a push-button switch. The toggle switches include the three position FAT switch, which activates a low frequency shelving boost starting at either 400 Hz or 600 Hz; the three position AIR switch activates a high-frequency shelving boost starting at either 2.2

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kHz or 7 kHz. The SS/OT push-button switch switches between solid state and transformer outputs.

In Use: Studio

Dozens of plug-ins have been designed with the purpose of emulating the sound of tubes within the digital realm—with varying results, I must note. While some are convincing, none perform like real tubes; this is partially why the Creamliner is so valuable. Its tubes create pleasing even-order harmonics while its transformers smooth out the often brittle-digital peaks. Together, the two create a warm and musical sound.

Since receiving the Creamliner several months ago, I've utilized the box on dozens of mixes, enjoying result in every instance. The unit is highly-adaptable; it's easy to vary the sonic color from slight to drastic, and the FAT and AIR shelving EQ options provide even more sonic flexibility.

I've primarily used the box strapped across the stereo bus in Pro Tools sessions; the pentode and triode modes have identical output levels, making it easy to compare between modes and select which one is preferred. I found myself choosing the pentode mode most of the time but always found that both modes were an improvement over no Creamliner. Further, the noise floor of the box is so low, it adds no noticeable noise to the processed signal.

While I wouldn't recommend purchasing the Creamliner solely for recording (as the Creamer+ is designed for this), I did find that it worked well in the signal path while recording, in several instances. I thought I'd like it on drums but after multiple efforts, it never seemed to improve the sound enough to record through it. Alternatively, it works wonders on piano, acoustic guitar and vocals; I used it on these sound sources with several mic/pre combinations with positive results in every instance.

I also found the box to work extremely well as a parallel processor by sending my entire mix—sometimes with some tracks omitted—to a second bus where the Creamliner was inserted and then mixing the processed bus with the unprocessed bus. This technique often resulted in more creative results, as I was able push the Creamliner far beyond what I would do on the stereo bus without letting my final sound become too extreme.

Russ Long with the Creamliner in his Nashville studio.

In Use: Live

As great as the Creamliner is in the studio, its strength still lies in the sound reinforcement realm. I had the opportunity to discuss the Creamliner with ace FOH engineer Chris Rabold; he is currently using the Creamliner mixing FOH for Kenny Chesney's massive 2013 tour.

Chris described his Creamliner conversion as follows:

"I started using digital desks live in 2005. From the very start, I always wanted that last little bit of life that I felt was missing with digital consoles in comparison to their analog brethren. I started employing plug-ins and hardware-based units with the specific purpose of adding color. I mainly used tape saturation emulators, and I would often run the signal through a compressor that had a certain sonic characteristic that I liked—not just for gain reduction but for the character it imparts. The only downside to most tape saturation emulators—and other all around 'vibe-it-up' processors—is that at the point I'd hear the positive effects that they would produce, I'd also hear a load of unappealing side effects; nine times out of ten this was in the form of gunked-up low-mids, darkened highs or nasally/harsh high-mids. I can't say that I ever wanted more 'warmth' with my digital consoles, but rather more strength, muscle and character. Attitude, even."

When Chris was in Vancouver on tour with Lady Gaga, he had a chance encounter with Sonic Farm's Boris Drazic who persuaded him to give the Creamliner a try. Chris continues:

"The Creamliner gave me exactly what I was looking for. With the Creamliner, I could get that 'glue thing' happening and with it, a very musical, produced sound but with zero unwanted artifacts. It doesn't do warm by reducing highs or smearing transients like so many others; it just makes things better! My favorite live console is the DiGiCo SD7. It has all of the problem-solving bells and whistles you'd ever want and what you put in is exactly what you get out. Because of its complete lack of color, however, I always pair it with some outboard devices to give the overall mix some cohesiveness and life. The Creamliner across the stereo bus of the DiGiCo has given me exactly—and I mean that literally—what I've always wanted in that regard."

"I stick with the solid state preset and triode settings," explains Chris on his approach to using the Creamliner. *"Pentode does something really cool as far as tightening the lows goes, but the high-mid bite was sometimes a bit too aggressive at higher SPLs. The transformer setting is cool, too. However, it*

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Mackie DLM

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FX parameters were especially useful. I selected Chorus+Verb for an overall effect and the artist was more than pleased; the DL2 mixer allows separate effects levels per input channel, and I was able to show the artist how to adjust these parameters in a minute or two.

On the other end of the self-mixing gigging spectrum, I configured the full system—DLM12 mains, DLM8 monitors/sidefills, and dual DLM12S subwoofers—for a wedding reception job featuring an classic R&B band and pre-recorded contemporary dance music during set breaks. A DLM system would be great for a mobile DJ/KJ; the audience gets authentic club sound and vibe in up to medium-sized rooms with comparatively little lugging involved. Best of all, I fit this entire PA plus a standard-sized, road-cased 4-piece drumkit with hardware in the back of a Nissan Xterra.

Sonically, the DLM Series monitors offer powerful, full-frequency performance, with notably vocal-friendly midrange and crisp, smooth highs. They're no wimps; even the small guy will punch you squarely in the face.

Also notable is Mackie's TruSource concentric speaker technology, which really throws the sound—a great feature, indeed. However, in one case, I simply switched out a band's normal center stage wedge with a DLM8; the guys to both stage left and right complained that they couldn't hear the monitor mix as they usually do, though the main vocalist and I—center-stage musician and drummer, respectively—stood in the DLM8's direct line of fire and had no problems monitoring the vocal mix. For this reason, I'd keep in mind that the DLM's 90 degree cylindrical coverage pattern is tight; while 90 degree horizontal dispersion is common on traditional stage wedges, the shape of the pattern and off-axis performance of the DLM8 may yield different results in the same application.

Summary

Even if the DLM Series didn't sound quite as good as it does, or offer the superb DL2 digital mixer and DLP effects, I'd still enthusiastically recommend it for its power, efficiency, and portability. It's user-friendly in every way; most users won't even need a manual.

For self-mixing musicians and bands, especially those with limited space both on stage and in transit, a DLM rig is ideal. With set-ups ranging from a full DLM dual-sub system to a single DLM8 box, nearly the gamut of semi-pro, club circuit gig requirements are easily covered.

Working engineers, DJ/KJs and other live sound providers will find the DLM Series to be among the most innovative lines introduced to the market in some time. Between DLM and their DL1608 iPad-based digital live mixer (reviewed by Lynn Fuston in this issue of *PAR*), we have proof that Mackie is, once again, thinking outside of the box.

Prices: $879.99, $1,179.99 and $1,249.99 list (DLM8, DLM12 and DLM12S, respectively)
Contact: Mackie | mackie.com

Propellerhead

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which allows the program to trigger external synths and drum machines, etc., with its built-in sequencer. Route that to, for example, a vintage Roland Alpha Juno-1 (or even an iPad app), patched back in to Reason, and next thing you know you're simultaneously automating a growling lead and building a REX sample library. It's a welcome marriage of 1993 and 2013, just in time for dance music to take advantage of the 20-year nostalgia cycle.

The last major workflow tweak comes in the ability to set up multiple output busses and instantly create dry parallel channels on the mixer, opening up subgrouping and thickening by establishing mirrored, phase coherent stems for carving/filtering with one click. Complementing this is real-time signal feedback from a new spectrum analyzer overlay that accompanies the console's 4-band parametric EQ. Reason 7 also throws in a Rack Extension, the Audiomatic Retro Transformer, which offers 16 presets that apply filters for varying degrees of distressed tonality.

Summary

With Reason 7, Propellerhead Software allows you to do more without leaving the confines of the program by allowing more within its fences. It turns all available screen real estate into a friendly rig, progressively becoming less about programming and more about producing.

Price: $449
Contact: Propellerhead | http://www.propellerheads.se

Creamliner

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rounds off the highs a bit more than I like for a live setting. Solid State and Triode do just enough to firm up the mix, unlike any other processor I know of. I should point out that I always mix into the Creamliner; I never add it after the fact. I don't normally use the Creamliner's EQ section, but I have engaged the controls and it has a wonderful sound all its own. With Kenny Chesney, I'm on a Midas Pro9 desk—a fantastic console in its own right. It's not as clean and pristine as the DiGiCo and actually has something of a sonic footprint of its own; adding the Creamliner gives it that extra something to help set my mix apart from others. It's a game changer through and through. For me, it doesn't matter the genre or style of music, I have to do my thing and play my game to make it work. Great sound is great sound and this thing helps me give my clients just that."

Summary

The Creamliner is the device for adding true analog color and tone to a digital mix. Anyone mixing in the digital realm—live or in the studio—owes it to themselves to give it an audition.

Price: $2,150
Contact: Sonic Farm Pro Audio | sonicfarm.com