



TAPE OP

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[\( \) MIC PREAMPS \(/REVIEWS/CATEGORY/MIC-PREAMPS\)](#)

ISSUE #97

# TB12 Tone Beast mic preamp

BY WARM AUDIO ([HTTP://WWW.WARMAUDIO.COM/](http://www.warmaudio.com/)) | REVIEWED BY ALAN TUBBS (</REVIEWS/BY/ALAN-TUBBS>)[.p://tape](#)BROWSE  
ISSUE

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The same day the *TB12 Tone Beast* arrived, I received a long email from Bryce Young, the mother and father of the Warm Audio WA12 mic preamp [*Tape Op* #91], explaining his new baby. I was busy and only glanced at the email, but when I opened the box and saw that the honking orange, 1RU-height *TB12* is festooned with more knobs and buttons than you could shake a snake at, I went back to the email to figure out what I had on hand. The *TB12* is basically a WA12 "Plus" - and the WA12 is Bryce's take on the classic API 312. But a lot goes into making the *TB12* a whole new *Beast*.

The left half of the unit's front panel looks pretty much like the WA12's, with the addition of a front mic input and buttons to choose between mic, instrument, and line inputs, as well as a new high-pass filter. Like the WA12, the *Tone Beast* retains the instrument input on the front panel, and mic and line inputs in back. Also up front is the indented gain knob of the WA12 and the infamous *Tone* button. But the rest of the front panel is all new stuff.

First, there's a two-position knob for your choice of op-amps: Melcor 1731, same as in the WA12; or the "cleaner" Jensen-style 918. Bryce had tried other op-amps in his prototypes and ultimately settled on these two. But wait - as they say on late-night TV - there's more. These op-amps are standard 6-pins, so you can switch one out for a 2520 or any other op-amp that shares a 6-pin configuration - no soldering necessary.

Second, a Capacitors button switches between electrolytic caps or the same tantalum caps that are used in the WA12. The API 312 didn't use tantalum caps, but Neve did, according to Bryce. He liked their sound and put them in the WA12.

Next in line is another two-position knob, this one to choose between output transformers: the same, custom-wound, steel CineMag found in the WA12; or a new, half-nickel CineMag. The latter provides an extended frequency range, both on top and bottom. And if this isn't enough, how about no transformer? A bypass button removes both transformers from the output, accompanied by a -8 dB drop in signal.

Following the stepped gain knob is the continuous output knob, here called Saturation, and a 6-LED meter, which ranges from power-on at the bottom to a skull-and-crossbones at top to signify overdrive (which I surmised from use).

This first *TB12* I received was actually a preproduction unit that Bryce was using to test op-amps, but right before the deadline for this review, Bryce sent me a production unit, which I was able to use to double-check all of my impressions. More on that later.

There are plenty of knobs and buttons, but how does the *Tone Beast* sound? Well, with a \$100 ribbon mic I was also testing, the electric guitar signal through the *TB12* sounded like... an electric guitar. Even though the

guitar amp was in a small, well-damped room, the guitar sounded very much alive in the recordings. In fact, it sounded outstanding, with no apology needed for the cheap mic. The two guitar tracks that were recorded slid like finished product into a slow, heavy version of "This Is Love" by PJ Harvey. The WA12 is perfect for such guitars, and the *Tone Beast* matched the sound of the WA12 I have at home.

At The Kitchen Studios in Dallas, I ran a series of more "scientific" tests. Studio head John Painter played while we went through the *Tone Beast's* buttons and knobs sequentially. First, a tame DI'd bass. Huh? We couldn't hear much difference between any of the settings. Something was different when switching output transformers, but we were tilting our heads, bird-like, trying to convince ourselves. Then we switched to acoustic guitar and discovered that driving the unit hard makes it easier to hear the different circuit choices. Duh. When we cranked up both Gain and Saturation, we got distortion - nice analog distortion. Backing off the knobs gave us more guitar and variable saturation instead of distortion. Now the transformer choices were clear. The Nickel setting provided extended range as advertised, while the Steel felt... smoother. We could also hear the tantalum capacitors working when switched in. When we moved on to a classic electric guitar setup - a Shure SM57 on a Marshall - these variables became even more pronounced. The more complex the input, the easier it was to hear the transformer and capacitor variances. However, we still couldn't hear any real difference between the op-amps. Bryce wrote back that my preproduction unit had a 2520 op-amp, not the 918, which explained why he decided on using the 918 in production models. Even with the 2520, the clean setting sans tantalum caps and output transformer gives a more "modern" sound than the WA12 does.

Once I received the production *TB12*, the 918 sounded even cleaner, working well with acoustic guitar and brighter material, adding one more variable to the equation.

That being said, there isn't a night and day difference between all of these settings. John and I were listening in a tuned room to big ADAMs cranked up. Still, I could hear the same thing at home in a less ideal environment; so however subtle, it is real. Such sonic texturing helps separate out tracks when mixing and results in a song with more depth to it, like varnish bringing out the fine grain in good wood.

The *Tone Beast* also did an admirable job warming up mono soft synths, where the gain structure and circuitry options of the *TB12* let me fine tune the saturation, providing an analog patina. It's equally as powerful as a mix bus processor; and the balanced, dual-line outputs, as well as inserts, mean you can hook up a mean channel strip or two, with or without a patchbay.

Moreover, not only does the *Tone Beast* sound right, ergonomically everything about it *feels* right too. The metering might be basic, but the rest of the unit's controls will be appreciated by engineers. Instrument and mic inputs on the front for easy access; I/O for permanent routing on the back. Plenty of clearance between the knobs and buttons for even generously-wide fingers. Plus, it's easy as pie to switch out op-amps if you are into that.

About the only flaw I can find in the *TB12 Tone Beast* is the surfeit of choices; if you are into tone-shaping, it is way too easy to burn up time getting the sound just right. But I say that like it is a bad thing. (\$599.99 street; [www.warmaudio.com](http://www.warmaudio.com) (<http://www.warmaudio.com>))



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## **MP20 Two-Channel Mic Preamp W/ Stereo Bus ([/Reviews/Gear/35/Mp20- Two-Channel-Mic-Preamp-W-Stereo- Bus/](#))**

BY GARRETT HAINES ([/REVIEWS/BY/GARRETT-HAINES](#))

The PreSonus MP20 is a microphone and instrument preamp consisting of dual Class A discrete input buffers followed by a dual-servo gain stage. This

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BY CRAIG SCHUMACHER (/REVIEWS/BY/CRAIG-SCHUMACHER)

When one hears the name SSL, the first thing that comes to mind is a big bucks console. Now that there is some kind of rackmount version of every other large format console's mic pres or channel...

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BY DANA GUMBINER (/REVIEWS/BY/DANA-GUMBINER)

Digidesign's original Mbox was alternately praised for its portability, affordability, and sound quality and dismissed by some as an overpriced USB dongle.

The Mbox 2 is an updated, 24-bit, 48 kHz...

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BY ERIC TISCHLER (/REVIEWS/BY/ERIC-TISCHLER)

When I caught wind that Speck was working on a single-channel mic preamp, I was excited. I'm a big fan of Speck's reasonably-priced ASC parametric EQ.

So I extrapolated and figured a Speck mic pre...

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BY SCOTT CRAGGS (/REVIEWS/BY/SCOTT-CRAGGS)

The M-3 is an 8-channel mixer clearly aimed at DAW users as a tube front/back end for those cold, hard computers. Many people seem to have issues with digital mix busses, and the M-3 is one of several...

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## **PEQ1R New Revision ?A? (/Reviews/Gear/49/Peq1r-New- Revision-A/)**

BY GARRETT HAINES (/REVIEWS/BY/GARRETT-HAINES)

I wrote a pretty positive review of the Wunder Audio PEQ1 preamp/EQ in Tape Op #41. At that time, the unit was available as either a replacement module for some vintage consoles or in a custom rack...

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## **PEQ1 Preamp/EQ Module (/Reviews/Gear/41/Peq1-Preampeq- Module/)**

BY GARRETT HAINES (/REVIEWS/BY/GARRETT-HAINES)

The PEQ1 is a Class-A, discrete mic-preamp and equalizer that can be used as a replacement module in vintage Neve 80-series consoles. For those who

don't have an 80-series, a 19" rackmount version  
of...

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## **VMP-2 Two Channel Mic Preamp (/Reviews/Gear/29/Vmp-2-Two- Channel-Mic-Preamp/)**

BY IAN SWANKE (/REVIEWS/BY/IAN-SWANKE)

Unlike many microphone preamplifiers in this price range (around \$700), the VMP-2 uses Jensen input transformers and 12AX7 tubes to get the job done, as opposed to a solid state chip using a starved...

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BY DAVID HUBER (/REVIEWS/BY/DAVID-HUBER)

Bucking the trend towards expensive, high-end mic-preamps, the folks at M-Audio have recently released two affordable models that caught my eye. DMP3 Mic Pre First off, the DMP3 dual mic pre (\$249...

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# **BEHIND THE GEAR**

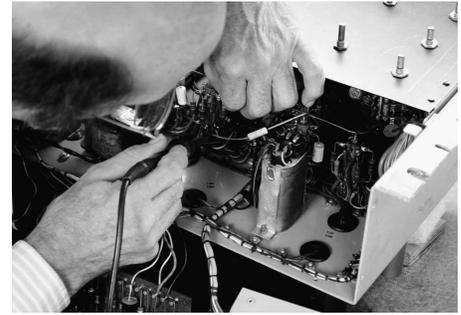
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BY

Vintage King co-founder Michael Nehra shares some of his love, knowledge, and practical advice for diving into the world of vintage audio gear, and then takes us behind the scenes for a walk through...



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BY MIKE JASPER (/ARTICLES/BY/MIKE-JASPER)

Jim Williams has spent much of his 56 years working with some of the biggest names in the music business, including Frank Zappa, John McLaughlin and Stevie Wonder. He's the owner of Audio Upgrades,...

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BY JOHN BACCIGALUPPI (/ARTICLES/BY/JOHN-BACCIGALUPPI),  
LARRY CRANE (/ARTICLES/BY/LARRY-CRANE)

Bill Cheney and Jim Romney are the men responsible for keeping the amazing legacy of Spectra Sonics, a legendary, if criminally unheralded, pro-audio company alive.



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## Rich Williams: Behind The Gear With Burl Audio (/Interviews/Btg/105/Rich-Williams/)

BY LARRY CRANE (/ARTICLES/BY/LARRY-CRANE)



Burl Audio, under the direction of owner/designer Rich Williams, has developed some of the best new recording equipment over the last eight years. Their mic preamps, summing amps, and control room...



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