

PRO AUDIO REVIEW

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equipment
review

Crane Song Flamingo Microphone Preamp

by Dr. Frederick J. Bashour

The day before I was to leave for a classical hard disk location recording session in Cleveland, yet another box — sent by *PAR*'s clairvoyant editor — arrived on my doorstep. How did he know that I was, at that very moment, trying to figure out how to juggle my various tube microphone preamps around to cover the number of microphones I intended to use on that session? I was two channels short and immediately pressed the Crane Song Flamingo preamp into service, "sight unheard!"

I know, I know, it's a solid state unit, and I'm a tube kind of guy. The bottom line, however, is not only did it save my ass on that session, but it also proved to be the best-sounding preamp I had in my arsenal for my Manley C24 stereo microphone.

Examining the manual supplied with the unit, I noticed the Flamingo had switchable gain all the way down to +6 dB. This is approximately what I need for that Manley mic — which happens to be a custom-made product David Manley built for me almost 10 years ago using a pair of sweet AKG CK-12 capsules from my own C24, and David's four-tube circuit, which outputs practically line level — and unbalanced and transformerless signals to boot.

That custom mic was designed for use with two of Manley's 5x1 line level mixers, but I had other plans for those mixers



At a Glance

Applications:
Recording and project studios.

Key Features:
Discrete Class A solid-state stereo mic preamp; two switchable tonal coloration circuits: sound and iron

Price:
\$2,295

Contact:
Crane Song at 715-398-3627.

at this session. This seriously modified C24 couldn't feed most of my other preamps without overload, because its output was way too hot for most first stages, unless they were designed with a switchable gain circuit featuring plenty of range. Enter the Crane Song Flamingo.

I used that Manley C24 for the main choir pickup. Twelve decibels of gain was just perfect for bringing the sound up to a level suitable for driving the Amek RNCL 9098 compressor (*PAR*, September 1998, p. 75), which in turn drove channels three and four of my Apogee AD-8000. What a great combination!

I experimented with the two tone switches: sound and iron; but to my ears in the heat of setting up for the session, each one muddled up the pristine sound from

my transformerless C24 just enough to convince me to leave them off. Further experimentation a month later in the privacy of my own studio, however, led me to revise that initial opinion substantially.

Features

The Crane Song Flamingo is a high-quality, two-channel discrete Class-A microphone preamp in a single rackspace chassis with a platinum-colored faceplate and turquoise-colored knobs. The largest area is taken up by a two-channel 22-element LED meter that permits a VU-type scale with +4 dBm calibrated as 0 VU.

The gain of its input stage is selected by a stepped switch, for gain matching and repeatability. In the unit's circuitry, this is followed by a variable attenuator to provide gain trim. The gain is adjustable in 6 dB steps from 0 to 66 dB, while the variable pot allows attenuation all the way down to completely off. The inputs and outputs are transformerless and balanced.

The rear panel features only the requisite XLR I/O connectors, an IEC power jack, and a large heat sink. The unit can be run on five different line voltages between 100 and 240 VAC. The power switch is on the front panel. Other than two each of the gain switches and attenuation pots, the only other controls on the front panel are a big green power lamp, phase reverse and phantom power on/off switches for each chan-



Product Points

Crane Song Flamingo Mic Preamp

Plus

- Great sound
- Very flexible interface possibilities

Minus

- Runs very hot

The Score

A definite contender in the “best mic preamp at any price” category.

nel, and single sound and iron switches common to both channels.

These switches are unique in my experience. David Hill (who designed much of the vintage Summit vacuum tube equipment) has found ways, using solid-state circuitry, to emulate many of the sound characteristics of his earlier tube designs, equipment well-known for its “creamy and fat” sound.

The sound switch changes the amplifier type in the Flamingo; the alternative amplifier creates a different sound. In “fat” mode, the preamp has a much higher level of second and third harmonic distortion than in the nonfat setting. The main effect of this switch is to thicken or “warm up” the sound. The overall effect of the sound switch is to emulate tube distortion modes.

The circuitry behind the iron switch has a different distortion characteristic from that of the fat amplifier. In this circuit, low frequencies are distorted, but highs are not. In fact, the lower the frequency, the higher the distortion. The circuit is said to have little effect above 400 Hz.

One cool way of tweaking the effects produced by these two switches is to boost the gain 6 dB higher than normal, and then attenuate the output by 6 dB. There is sufficient headroom in the amplifier design to allow such mild overdriving without clipping distortion, but sending the fat amplifier a higher signal level results in an increase in harmonics generated. A similar effect is noted with the iron circuit.

In use

Although I chose not to print the effects of either of these two switches to hard disk during my Cleveland sessions, the next time I used that Manley C24 microphone, however, I *did* choose to turn both switches on. That was when I continued a long-standing Bashour family tradition and recorded the children’s Christmas present-opening happiness.

At any rate, the iron switch made my own voice sound much more present, more “etched” as it were, while the fat switch

enhanced the overall pickup in a pleasing manner. In this case, I went for euphonic coloration in producing this happy home recording of my two little girls, rather than for my typical clean perfection. I consider it extremely helpful that I had such a wide range of sonic choices in this preamp.

My next tests were much more scientific. I employed my special prototype D.W. Fearn mic preamp attenuator unit: a little box designed to reduce line level sources down to microphone level, ostensibly to send them through the Fearn VT-2 preamp for warming up.

I find this little box an invaluable device for reviewing purposes. After listening to a preamp under test with my standard microphones I used the Fearn box to reduce the output of line level sources, allowing me to A/B the effect of the unit under test with sound of the source itself. Here are my results:

When I used the Flamingo preamp with both switches off, the sound was just as I would have expected from a high quality, solid-state unit: clear, quiet and — more unexpectedly — not at all “transistory.” That is to say, the unswitched Flamingo, while not sounding creamy like a tube unit, had none of that thin, edgy quality I usually attribute to poor solid-state design.

In fact, there was no edge whatsoever, and the sound was quite pleasing to listen to. The Flamingo’s sound reminded me of the Martech MSS-10, which is another wonderfully smooth solid-state unit.

Clicking the sound switch from normal to fat did just that — it thickened up the sound a bit. The subtlety of the effect is very program-dependent; on some material I just heard a slight dulling of the sound (as I did during setup at my Cleveland session, when I was just monitoring the single, super-clean Manley C24 mic). But on complex program material — such as the final mix of the first CD master made from that session’s material, the effect was quite pleasing; the thickening was euphonic, and quite noticeable. I noticed no dulling in this case. The Flamingo’s manual mentions that this effect is very useful on vocals, bass, drums and any other instruments which could benefit from a richer sound.

The sound of the iron switch was even more program-dependent. When there was little low-frequency content in the program material, I could hardly hear any effect at all. On the other hand, when bass instruments were present in the arrangement, the effect was quite noticeable and, again, pleasingly euphonic. It didn’t make them louder or deeper, but rather seemed to make bass instruments larger and more forward-sounding in the mix.

The creamy effect obtained by using both

switches together worked best on my own mediocre vocal warblings, and on low-frequency instruments like my vintage Hofner bass. It made the material sound remarkably similar to the thick tubey effect I get when I patch stuff through my trusty old Ampex MX-10 mixer — my most useful and colored analog effects unit. On the Flamingo, however, I found it generally preferable to use one switch or the other for most of my program material.

I should mention that this unit gets *hot!* I ended up buying a new portable case, just for the Amek 9098 RNCL and the Flamingo, and put the Crane Song unit above the Amek, with an empty rack space of breathing room above the Flamingo.

Summary

This preamp amplified my almost-line-level Manley C24 microphone better than anything else I’ve used, caused me to put it on my must-buy list. The results of my careful listening tests further convinced me that this is another contender in the best-mic-preamp-I’ve-ever-used category.

The added bonus of those two sound coloration switches simply pushed my enthusiasm over the top, since I’d already found uses for them with my own program material.

I’d recommend this unit to any studio desiring a versatile stereo mic preamp that can split its personality between seriously transparent and seriously colored. What more could one ask of a mic amplifier?

Dr. Fred Bashour is a contributor to Pro Audio Review — and, as long as he keeps using more and more mics on his classical recording sessions, will continue to need new mic preamps.