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ANDY STEWART
finds good reason
to examine a classic
in the making.

The Crane Song STC-8 is six years old. There, I've said it. Six years old. If this were a digital device it would be like reviewing the Titanic and raving on about what makes it unsinkable. But this stereo, Class-A analogue compressor limiter exists amongst a rare breed of outboard gear that has grown in stature with age, and although it's not yet in the hall of fame, it's certainly vying for nomination. This alone makes it worthy of review, even after so much time has passed since it hit the market.

If you think you know all there is to know about compressors and how they work, the STC-8 may refute your claim somewhat. What I was initially shocked to discover when I first used the unit was the fact that it is, in part, a preset compressor. Thankfully there's a variable 'V' setting, which activates the attack, release, and shape controls, allowing the compressor to be used manually.

The STC-8 has a set of controls that are very 'organic'. They behave interactively with one another, affecting one another's outcomes. For example, the unit has two controls

limiting, to hard knee, total control. Significantly, however, this wide range of dynamic control is all achieved within the same colour palette. There is no aggressive 'crunching' or 'slamming' taking place — at least from a sonic perspective. Stereo image, tonal balance and fidelity are all left quite unscathed, even at high gain reduction levels.

The STC-8 also has a separate Peak Limiter with an attack time of 1µs, which is fast enough to truly limit the output even to a digital recorder, but which, curiously, is placed after the output gain amps. This means that unless the limiter is off, adding makeup gain only drives the limiter harder and harder. The peak limiter on this box is more effective and unobtrusive than many I've used. There's also no input level control, so care must be taken not to overdrive the unit with excessive input levels.

Preset Presentation

The most unusual controls on the front panel are the 'Preset' knobs (one for each channel). The control is a 16-



CRANE SONG STC-8

STEREO COMPRESSOR/LIMITER

(left and right) called 'Shape' and the more shape you wind into the signal path the harder the 'knee' becomes. This slight increase in the gain reduction curve also has an affect on the attack and release features, both in terms of their speed and intensity.

In the absence of a ratio control, the threshold, peak-threshold and shape controls of the STC-8 combine to serve as a kind of 'de-facto' ratio knob. The dance between these three controls is subtle — and yet forgiving — providing everything from light compression with a hint of

position rotary switch that divides the presets into four groups of four preset quadrants. Becoming familiar with this control is vital if you're going to learn to drive this box properly as there is some potential for confusion.

Each control quadrant of four presets is a repeat of the core four presets but with different control attributes. In one set of four the presets exist in their basic forms; in the next set they possess an attack modulation feature and program-dependent release (A-Mod' shortens the compressor's attack time when the peak threshold is exceeded); in the next set

THE REVIEWER

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the presets have only auto release; and in the next set A-Mod is back, with a manual release.

The four basic presets are designed for specific tasks: 'A' is designed for vocal compression; 'B' is designed for Bass (but is great for making any sound punchier and more extended in the bottom end); 'C' is for stereo program control and is lighter in the bottom-end, and 'V' (as mentioned earlier) is the manual control setting. This last preset activates the three attack, release, and shape controls that are otherwise sitting idle on the front panel. Unless you're in 'V' mode, twiddling these three controls will achieve absolutely nothing.

If all this isn't enough to absorb, there's also a two-way mode switch at the centre of the unit, below the stereo-link and left/right bypass switches. The two modes, 'KI' and 'HARA', control the harmonic distortion generated by the compressor. The 'KI' mode adds second order harmonics to the signal via some side chain trickery, which in effect makes the processed sound softer and less detailed in the top-end than the more clinical and transparent sounding 'HARA' mode.

The compressor's greatest strength seems to lie in its role as a levelling amplifier. Most compressors, when used as mix bus program levellers, can become quite distorted and 'artefact' once they are driven hard. When a compressor starts doing

this to your mix bus in the chorus, it's either time to back off the threshold and ratio (which will negate the benefits provided by the compressor in the verses), remove the bus compression altogether, or frankly, replace it with an STC-8. The STC-8 is genuinely capable of levelling out a signal with virtually no distortion: your song is transparently controlled without sounding grainy and stressed.

The compressor's capacity to achieve this is best revealed in a mastering environment where an A/B test can quickly and simply reveal the improved dynamic control. In itself, the compressor sounds like it's doing very little, but when compared against the source signal, the quiet sections of the song sound louder and clearer than before, and the loudest sections are relatively quieter. Compressors that can achieve this control without becoming distorted, dull, or thin are rare indeed — despite the fact that virtually every compressor on the market claims to be capable of it. This alone is reason enough for any serious professional studio environment to justify one of these green-knobbed wonders.

Conclusion

No one likes their assets being washed out to sea all the time, and unfortunately all of us who are obliged to work in the digital domain suffer this

fate at one time or another... However, there's still some high quality analogue gear on the market that sits above audio's 'high tide mark'. The Crane Song STC-8 is good enough and timeless enough to resist the tidal changes. It's a formidable compressor of the highest quality. □

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INFORMATION

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