

Ivor Drawmer

The man who puts his name to the Drawmer brand talks valves, digital and improving on classics.

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Born and raised on the Channel island of Guernsey, the young Ivor Drawmer had a deep curiosity and unique aptitude for electronics engineering and honed his skills at a test equipment company on Sark. He also played keyboards in a number of bands and saw a future as a rock star and moved to England in the 1960s.

Many years later he designed the world's first frequency-conscious noise gate as a result of sitting in on a recording session and witnessing the shortcomings of existing gate designs. That design ultimately became the Drawmer DS201, which still sells today. He met up with musician and sound engineer Ken Giles who had moved into pro audio distribution and consequently dedicated himself to promoting and distributing Drawmer's innovative designs.

While he has collected a small research and development team around him, every Drawmer product is ultimately designed by Ivor himself and even the software is coded by him. 'I try to come up with a different angle on things,' says Ivor. 'For example, when I heard people complaining that any time they compressed a track with a lot of low end, the high end ducked out. It took some doing, but I engineered a solution. The DL251 was every bit as musical and functional as an ordinary compressor, but by treating different frequency bands separately, it worked elegantly around that problem.'

In the early 1980s, studios were rediscovering the sounds of old Pultec and Fairchild outboard equipment and Drawmer saw the value in that sound and realised that more stable designs were possible. The result was the 1960 pre/compressor. To mark the company's 25th anniversary Drawmer launched the Signature Series with the first product being the S3 3-band Tube Compressor.

'The strength of Drawmer has always been and will always be the innovations,' says Ken Giles. 'Those innovations have had a significant impact on recording and live sound; many have influenced the production techniques which have evolved and the way the industry makes music. The whole suite of gating tricks that every engineer worth his or her salt knows goes back to Drawmer. The "direct in" style of minimal chain length recording goes back to Drawmer. And so many of Drawmer's innovations have shown up in the products of other manufacturers, although I would add with inferior implementation! So Drawmer designs have influenced and shaped the competition and in doing so, the world of pro audio.'

What is special about Drawmer products?

Passion. We've always had a desire to create something special, whether it is a simple tool like a gate or compressor, or something more complicated like mastering software. It might be an extra control to add a new feature, or a bit of circuit (or software) which either sounds good or solves a problem, or even a new sonic tool if we happen to think of one. Reliability and customer backup are also important. In fact one of our distributors remarked that they had not even opened their spares kit.

You have designed a number of units that have classic status; could they be improved on and would users accept them?

Some people believe that products must go through an automatic upgrade every couple of years and that anything older than two years is obsolete, but I disagree with that unless there is a clear case for improvement. If you feel you have got it right, why fix it if it isn't broke? The only changes to the DS201 Gate in 27 years, was the addition of balanced outputs 24 years ago. Apart from that the basic design has remained the same. It's a similar story for the DL241 and the 1960. I also believe that customers feel a certain confidence buying a unit which has served so many people so well over the years. So it might be possible to make some technical improvements, but there are always people who will say 'I preferred the old one'. The DS501 could be called an improved gate, because it has tuneable peak punch, but for mainstream use, the DS201 gets you there quickly — job done. Customers also suspect (often wrongly) that a new version is basically the old one, made cheaper and therefore not as good.

How do you balance your design approach across analogue, valves and digital?

I started out as an analogue designer and was dragged kicking and screaming into the digital domain in the mid 80s. But having got to grips with digital hardware and software, I find it helpful in analogue design, to the point that I sometimes write software to test the principles of an analogue design before I even switch on the soldering iron. Conversely, I use analogue knowledge in certain aspects of digital design. My software work is based on analogue thinking rather than maths, so the building blocks of a design remain the same. Starting with a block diagram, it doesn't matter whether the implementation of each block is solid state analogue, valve or digital. Of course, there are different design considerations in each case.

How do you feel about the copying and mimicry in look, presentation and circuitry of now obsolete gear in modern releases?

If it is presented as the real thing when it really isn't, then I would call that dishonest. The same applies where designs have been blatantly ripped off (saving R&D costs) and sold in competition with the original. This is like stealing someone's hit single. But I see nothing wrong with the phoenix philosophy, resurrecting a product from the past, as long as certain protocols are observed. Let's

say I wanted to bring back an old product from another manufacturer and I had the right to do so, I believe it would be OK, as long as I explain in the literature that it is a modern day equivalent of the obsolete product. Otherwise, I would have to use the exact same components as the original, which would be very difficult, especially where valves and transformers are concerned.

Are modern valve designs done properly, in your opinion, or only done for effect?

In most cases, the circuit design is probably fine. The question is whether the physical presence of a valve in the circuit constitutes a valve product and in my opinion it does. The valve will impart something to the sound in the form of low order distortion and transient handling. We have the 1968 which uses one valve in each channel, the 1960 which uses two valves per channel and the S3 which uses five valves per channel. Yes, the S3 is more valvey but it's bigger, heavier and more costly.

Your digital outboard — while technically superb — surely can't be as much fun to create as your analogue stuff?

Actually, I enjoy writing and testing software just as much as analogue design. What I am working for is a good sounding result and I'm chuffed to bits when I get it. I've written software versions of quite a few of our analogue products, in some cases just for the hell of it. You don't burn your fingers and you don't get 200 volts up your arm writing software. But I have to say that when I've done an analogue product, I feel as though I've designed something real, where the sound is actually passing through the circuit. This is especially true with valves. There's something about that glass and the red glow from the heaters. It's the vintage car syndrome I suppose.

What has changed from a technological standpoint in your 25 years in how you are able to design, the components you can use and the way the equipment can be built?

Sold state analogue design hasn't changed a lot, because the principles are the same. There are better choices of transistors, ICs and most modern passive components.

On the digital side, a great deal. Much better convertors, DSPs, displays, just about everything. With valves it's the opposite. They are no longer widely used in mainstream electronics, so there is less of a choice of both valves and associated components. I would only use common types, like the ECC82 and ECC83, simply because of supply, price and quality issues.

Surface mounted components enable a lot of circuit to be packed into a small space. It's less traditional and more of a problem to service, mainly because you need better eyes and a very steady hand.

How has your end-user changed in that time?

Our product range is more diverse now and our customer base reflects that. Computer-based systems are now widely used for convenience, but due to customer demand, they now allow the insertion of outboard effects, like tube EQs and compressors. Studios want to be individual, like the artist and the producer are. They don't want to be the same as everybody else, so a few classy bits of analogue gear can make all the difference to the perception of the studio. For that reason, our end user is still there, but he buys different stuff. New customers are often studios who are upgrading. They started with cheap, disposable gear and as one customer put it, 'I'm now ready for some proper stuff'.

meet your maker



How does a premier manufacturer of physical outboard with some plug-in products feel about outboard's role in an increasingly plug-in world?

Sometimes in the rush for progress, we forget what we've left behind. That is why the trend in audio has shifted from valves (because that's all there was), to transistors, to ICs, digital, then back to valves again. We are analogue creatures, our ears are analogue, so are microphones and speakers. We prefer twiddling knobs even though we can use a mouse. There are also significant numbers of people who prefer real gear, just as there are people who like older cars. For that reason, I think quality outboard gear still has a future.

Do you believe that sonic quality has been sacrificed in the search for features?

Some material requires the ultimate fidelity, where features are not required at all, just good mics, good mic technique, minimal signal path, passive EQ, maybe no EQ at all. On the other hand, features can make a huge difference, especially when the source material is less than ideal and needs a little something to bring it to life. Too many features can be a problem though, because there is more to get wrong or overuse. It's all about striking a balance between making a product with enough variability to be creative, without being over complicated, thereby giving the engineer a headache getting to grips with it. ■