

Drawmer S3

Nothing captures the imagination quite so well as a 'statement' piece of gain reduction analogue hardware particularly against a backdrop of plug-in 'vintage' reissues. When a mainstream manufacturer gets involved then it's even more interesting and this is the case with Drawmer's first Signature Series box. **JON THORNTON** is smitten, really smitten.



FROM THE MOMENT you get it out of the box, even before you plug it in, you somehow know that Drawmer's new unit is very special, even if it's hard to put your finger on exactly why. Maybe it's the solid looking, high gloss finish of the face plate and the way it is attached to the chassis with six substantial bolts. Or the nicely damped, positive front panel knobs that look purposeful rather than self-consciously retro. Or the way in which the top of the unit slopes away so as to aid cooling for the ten (count 'em) valves clearly visible inside. It's certainly got a lot to do with the signature on the front panel, as this box is the first in the Ivor Drawmer 'Signature Series' of outboard processors. The company's stated aim was to use its very latest designs, and to build them with no technical compromise.

The S3 is a three-band stereo compressor featuring discrete valve-based electronics coupled with an optoelectronic gain reduction element, and is reassuringly analogue in every respect. While the rear panel is an exercise in minimalism (XLR input and output for each channel, both transformer balanced), the same can't be said for the front, which positively bristles with knobs and switches. Actually, it doesn't look anywhere near as busy as it might do, thanks to a well-considered layout and an impressively monochrome colour scheme.

Working from left to right across the front the first thing you come to are the controls for the frequency band splitting — two variable points set the two crossover frequencies that determine the three audio bands. Filters in the crossover section work at 6dB/octave, with the crossover frequencies ranging from 60Hz to 1.4kHz for the low split, and 1.4kHz to 14kHz for the high split. What's nice here is the fact that the ranges allow the unit to work quite happily as a 2-band compressor if desired and also that the resolution and scaling of the crossover controls makes it easy to really dig around in critical areas like vocals and bass.

Once split up, the audio passes through three near identical compressor stages. A threshold control is available for each, which effectively sets the amount of compression as there is no separate ratio control. Instead, the unit uses a very wide soft knee in its compression curve with effective ratio

increasing with the level of input over threshold. Overall gain reduction is indicated for each band by an LED bargraph.

Attack and release settings are provided on stepped rotary switches. Six attack times ranging from 0.2ms to 50ms are available, and three fixed release times of 0.08, 0.3 and 1 second. In addition, there are three programme-dependent adaptive release settings for fast, medium and slow programme material — and these work very transparently indeed on a variety of material. A gain make-up control, bypass and mute switch for each band complete the line-up, with the last of these proving very useful in helping to set up the band split points. The low and high bands each have an additional switch, labelled 'Big' and 'Air' respectively, and these pretty much do exactly what they say on the tin in terms of low and high frequency enhancement.

The three individual bands are summed back together to provide a stereo output, which has its own master gain make-up/reduction control, together with a stereo output balance control. Metering of both stereo input and output level is achieved with two extremely large VU meters — and when I say large I mean the size of meter you'd expect to find on a large-format analogue console — you really can read them comfortably from the other side of a big control room.

Size aside, metering is something that Drawmer has clearly thought hard about. The meters can be switched to show signal input or output, with the output level being post both the individual bands' gain make-up and the master stereo gain. Meter response is also switchable between average and peak VU, which works a little like a PPM meter with a faster fall time. Not content with that, and clearly aware that 0VU = +4dBu is a little too conservative for some people in this era of increasingly hot digital levels, a meter pad of 10 or 20dB is also on offer, which should save a few needles being bent.

All of which would come to nothing if the unit wasn't capable of driving those levels and I can testify that it most certainly can. All of that thermionic capability is clearly being put to good use on the output stage, as the S3 possesses quite astonishing amounts of headroom, and will quite happily put

out peaks approaching +30dBu all day long without sounding the least bit flustered.

There are other nice little quality touches — the relay switched bypass controls, the soft start sequence, and the front-panel LED that informs you that the valves are warmed up sufficiently. Build quality and component choice seems impeccable externally and internally (and the cooling required by all of those valves means that you can get a good view of the internals without having to lift the lid.

And in this day and age, when anybody with a DAW and a half decent set of plug-ins can insert any number of multibands in their session without blinking, that's got to be hard to justify, right?

Wrong. Dead wrong — and here's why. First, there's the sheer tactility of it — it's just so easy to feel like you're really grabbing hold of and moulding the sound, with huge leaps in terms of intuitive and speedy operation as a result. Second, there's the sound. Multiband dynamics processing is undoubtedly an incredibly powerful tool, but like many powerful tools, it's also more than capable of screwing up your audio in no time flat. And frankly, anyone can strap a multiband across a mix and make it sound loud by pumping up the bass and treble. But the S3, while just as capable in this respect, seems so much more forgiving, and also capable of subtly bringing out detail in each of the bands that's more about mix transparency than simply loudness.

Whether it's on complete mixes or individual tracks, it's worth its considerable weight in gold, and gives a lie to anybody who thinks that there's no room in the market anymore for gear like this. ■

PROS

Built like a tank; ease of use; terrific sound and astonishing headroom.

CONS

Not much although keeping it cool in a rack installation might be challenging.

Contact

DRAWMER, UK:
Website: www.drawmer.com
Tel: +44 1924 378669