

# american pie



## DRAWMER 1969 DUAL-CHANNEL VALVE PREAMP/PROCESSOR

Photos: Mark Ewing

**D**rawmer have been associated with dynamics processing for almost as long as I can remember, and they have a legacy which ranges from simple analogue gates to the most sophisticated all-digital mastering processors. The current flagship of their high-end analogue line is the highly successful 1960 valve preamp and compressor. However, one of Drawmer's distributors in the United States, Mercenary Audio, suggested to Ivor Drawmer that a similar product, tuned for a more 'American' sound, could also do rather well. Drawmer took heed of this advice and collaborated with Mercenary Audio to come up with the 1969 'Mercenary Edition' which is the subject of this review.

This new machine is intended to appeal specifically to American customers — where the 1960 provides a raunchy 'British' sound, the 1969 has been designed to produce a much cleaner, harder and brighter sound. It has been loosely based on the 1960, but the circuitry has been completely revised throughout. For a start, not only have the valve stages been modified to add more warmth and clarity, but a quieter new mic amplifier has also been installed. What's more, the new instrument preamp section has its own dual-triode valve stage as well, which can be used to produce a variety of different overdrive effects.

### The Hit List

The 1969 is a hybrid of dual-mono and stereo designs: though the preamp stages are independent, they are complemented by a stereo-linkable valve compressor. The unit is contained in a 2U rackmounting box measuring 250mm in depth and weighing 6kg. The front-panel presentation will be familiar to anyone who has used any of the other Drawmer analogue processors: black knobs and silver switches on a

black background with yellow-and-white legending. Drawmer's 1969 model, developed with US pro audio dealer Mercenary Audio, seeks to offer the facilities of their acclaimed 1960 valve-based processor, but with a more American sound.

**Hugh Robjohns** checks it out.

black background with yellow-and-white legending.

The first couple of inches at the left-hand extreme of the front panel are occupied by the controls and socket for the single Auxiliary Input — it is this which is designed for direct feeds from instruments, especially guitars. Next are the controls associated with the two main signal paths, which are arranged in two identical horizontal rows, Channel 1 above Channel 2. To the far right are the power switch and three-position stereo-link switch, each with their own blue status LED.

The Auxiliary Input presents a 2M $\Omega$  input impedance through the front-panel quarter-inch jack socket. The gain stage mimics a typical guitar amplifier and incorporates passive Bass and Treble controls, a Bright switch and a Low/High level switch which introduces 10dB of gain. A dedicated Gain control allows the 12AX7 (ECC83) dual-triode valve preamp to be overdriven, producing a wide range of distortions — everything from 'warm and clean' to rich 'soft clipping'. This can be good for enhancing the sounds of electric guitars, bass, electric piano, and even other keyboards as well. The preamp's output can be routed to one or both main processing channels.

The microphone preamps incorporate Burr-Brown op amps, in the pursuit of what Drawmer describe as a 'silkier' sound, as well as another triode valve stage in the signal path. The switched Gain control covers the range between

### DRAWMER 1969

#### pros

- Quiet and clean mic preamps.
- Flexible instrument input.
- Bright, clean valve sound.
- Powerful, punchy compressor.
- Enhances virtually everything.

#### cons

- Quality costs.

#### summary

A high-quality dual mic preamp and valve compressor with a dedicated instrument input and a sound quality definitely tailored for the American ear. Simply oozes quality and the kind of valve warmth that almost everything can benefit from.

**SOUND ON SOUND**

**DRAWMER 1969**

► 0dB and 66dB in 6dB steps, while a Source rotary switch selects the signal to be passed through to the compressor. There are four options available here: Aux, Line, Mic, and Mic with 48V phantom power — a red LED warns when phantom power is engaged. The two following switches allow polarity reversal and high-pass filtering of the selected signal as necessary. The Rev switch has an associated status LED and the Cut switch has three settings: off, and on with a turnover frequency of either 50Hz or 100Hz.

The compressor section employs a JFET as the level controller in order to make it sound a little smoother than a typical integrated VCA package. It is also capable of operating a lot faster than an opto-attenuator. The valve amplification stage has also been completely redesigned from the 1960 circuit for a 'warmer, richer and fatter tone'.

This new design retains the proven soft-knee characteristic of the 1960, obviating the need for a ratio control — the harder it is driven, the higher the ratio and the stronger the compressive character. Threshold, Attack and Release controls are all present, however: Threshold ranges from -30dB to infinity (off) while the Attack and Release controls offer considerably more flexibility than the 1960. The six Attack settings are simply numbered, rather than showing the actual time constants, although the nominal times are 2, 8, 15, 25, 30, and 50mS. I say nominal because the true time is altered automatically depending on the selected release-time setting. The Release control is also marked from 1-6, the first three positions using fixed time constants of 100, 500 and 1000mS. However, the last three are programme-dependent, with increasing time ranges: 200mS to 2S; 500mS to 5S; and 1S to 10S. This all adds up to enormous flexibility, and finding something to suit any given source is remarkably easy. I found the automatic release settings worked very well in most cases and the ability to define the range of release times was an added bonus — position four was my preference with most stereo mix material, though position five was often good for solo instruments. The compressor section is followed by an output Gain control, which not only serves as the make-up gain, but also as the output level control for the entire channel, and as such covers a  $\pm 20$ dB range.

In addition to standard dual-mono operation, there are two stereo-linked modes. The conventional offering shares control voltages between the two channels and the controls of channel 1 determine the settings for channel 2 in the usual way, but only for Threshold, Attack and Release controls. It is a shame that there is no linking facility for the output Gain control when working in stereo, but this is only a minor criticism.

The second stereo option is a new 'Big' mode, which introduces a gentle roll-off below 100Hz in the compressor side-chain, desensitising the system to low frequencies. This is designed to reduce the tendency for bass-heavy material to dominate the compression of the main signal, producing pumping, and I found it to work

extremely well on most music. However, for the external EQ die-hards, the 1969 retains proper side-chain access sockets on the rear panel.

The VU meters can monitor either the level of gain reduction or the output level for each channel, as selected with switches to their right. Along with these are further three-way switches allowing the output to carry the processed signal (Norm), the input signal (Bypass), or a feed from the compressor's side-chain (S/C Listen) — the latter is very useful when trying to adjust an external equaliser inserted in the side-chain path.

The rear-panel line inputs and outputs operate at a nominal +4dBu, and both these and the mic inputs are on electronically balanced XLR sockets. The rear panel also provides three unbalanced insert points for each channel, on TRS quarter-inch sockets. The two labelled Audio Path offer



pre-compressor inserts into the main signal path for external effects, one each for both +4dBu and -10dBu operating levels. (The use of -10dBu inserts rather than the more usual -10dBV ones ought not to cause any problems — the level will only be around 2dB lower than expected.) The third insert is for the side-chain signal, permitting frequency-selective compression to be achieved.

**Distinctive Character**

The 1969 definitely has a distinctive sonic character which is apparent from the first moment — though unlike some vintage valve compressors, Drawmer's 1969 sounds clear, bright, and open. The specs claim a flat frequency response within 1dB from below 10Hz up to 22kHz and I have no reason to doubt them. Whether processing individual instruments or a complete stereo mix, the 1969 is a competent performer and can handle both subtle and extreme compression settings with equal aplomb. Whatever passes through it gains a slightly bright and hard, but also warm and punchy, sound quality — the degree being controllable through the gain and compression settings.

The 1969 sounds very different to its antecedent, but both are excellent machines in their own way — just intended for different markets. Having said that, although the 1969 is tailored for an 'American' sound, I'm sure it will appeal to many users on this side of the pond, offering an alternative to some of the classic but ageing American compressors which are still very popular all over the world. The 1969 will undoubtedly become as popular as the 1960. It works extremely well, is easy to use and has the capability to enhance almost any source in subtle (or not-so-subtle) ways. The shortlist of worthy valve compressors has just grown longer... **ES**

**“...unlike some vintage valve compressors, Drawmer's 1969 sounds clear, bright, and open.”**

The rear panel of the 1969 sports not only balanced line I/O and mic inputs, but also no less than three different unbalanced insert points per channel — two for the audio path and one for the compressor side-chain.

**information**

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