

want a nice manual when I buy software. I just bought an update for Quark Express, the program I use to lay out this magazine, and all I got for my several hundred dollars was a CD in a brown cardboard mailer, which feels like a gyp. Copy protection relies on CD and serial-number verification, and installation is allowed on multiple machines but requires occasional verification with the CD. It's not iLok, but it's much better than copy protection schemes that require multiple trips to the company's website to verify one copy on one hard drive. The Arturia plug-ins are a joy to play and use, and they're a great value. (*Minimoog V* \$199 MSRP, *Modular V* \$329; www.arturia.com) -JB

RTZ Audio

9762 Dual-Combo Mic Preamp

One of the joys of doing this mag is checking out recording gear from small companies that are just starting out... and doing so before anyone else! Bob Starr is connected with our friends at Zero Return Studio in Atlanta, and he's building some hot new equipment, with much brainstorming with renowned designer/engineer Rick Chinn. One result is the 9762 two-channel solid-state mic preamp. The Neve 1073-inspired circuitry provides up to 75 dB of gain. Lundahl transformers are on the mic inputs with Sowter transformers on the outputs. Muting logic ensures quiet switching, and mu-metal shielding (not cheap) isolates the audio circuitry from the power supply. There's the usual front-panel DI input, polarity, phantom power, LED output metering, two input impedances and output termination (flatter response in, "air" out), along with the stepped gain stage and output attenuation controls. Does this preamp rock? Yes. Putting the 9762 through the paces on a number of album sessions, I gave it the chore of recording kick and snare on many basic tracks. The transient attack was dead on—to my ear faster than some of my other solid-state preamps and able to deliver full, robust tones on these crucial tracks. The snare retained the crispness and attack that some preamps smear on a bit—a very good sign as far as over-design and headroom. On vocals, the sound was once again very clear, with the forward and present feel that a great solid-state preamp can have. On electric guitar, the preamp really showed off the positive characteristics of different dynamic, ribbon and condenser mics. This preamp has a lot of headroom (and gain); we'd push it really hard at times, the meters would be lit up all the way, and there'd be no audible distortion. In fact, the output voltage of this unit will go hotter than anything following it in the chain can deal with. It's a quality box, and you can tell Bob spent some time auditioning parts and making changes to the circuitry in order to get it sounding as good as possible. I'm sure his affiliation with Zero Return helped give the unit some real solid tests during the design process. The bottom line: after using it for weeks on many sessions, I do not want to send it back, despite the fact that I already have plenty of great preamps! Damn. (\$1400 intro price through Atlanta Pro Audio, www.rtzaudio.com) -LC

Seven Woods Audio Ursa Major Space Station SST-206

Over the years there have been many devices that have claimed to recreate room ambiances artificially, which is not entirely untrue. Yet it is to be noted that most of these devices have more pages to go through than an encyclopedia, and by the time you have dialed your parameters in, you have forgotten what instrument you were putting it on. But there was always one unit that has stood out as sounding great yet making it terribly easy for the end user to just plug and play. And the unit I speak of is the classic, never replicated *Ursa Major Space Station*—well, never replicated until now. Mr. Christopher Moore, the original designer, has come up with a faithful, yet more compact version of the *UMSS*. While the original occupied many spaces in your racks, the new one takes up the space of two packs of cigarettes, yet it still has all of the same controls and parameters as the original and looks more like a mini LARC. There are only two major differences between old and new. First is that processing power as we all know has gotten faster and also more compact—this concept applies to the new *UMSS*. Just think how big computers were in 1978, and just think of how much smaller and faster they are now, so don't let size fool you in this matter. Secondly, this unit has AES/EBU interfacing so you must furnish your own converters if you are using it in analog operation, which should not be that hard to do these days, while 25 years ago that was a little more of a challenge. But let's get right down to it. I A/B'd the new *UMSS* with my original, and in all actuality, the ability to tune in the parameters a little more finely and being able to hear the nuances a lot better with newer converters makes the new one a better unit off the bat.

But as far as a faithful recreation, I have never seen such time and care taken in a reproduction of a digital unit; probably because nobody reissues hardware versions of great devices like this. The programs in this unit are exactly the same for all who have used the original and work the same old magic. But the one thing that I did want to go into on this unit is the new room program that everybody must try. I was just mixing a record and could not get a vocal 'verb that would work for me, and like the Holy Grail, the new room program came through for me. I have never heard such a great sounding room 'verb sound in a box in my life. I mean this is actually a great sounding space. The program provides everything you need without the wanton digital hash that most room programs give you. The other reason that this unit works and sounds great is that there are no menus or pages to go through; all of your reflection, decay, and mix times are on knobs right in front of you, so there is no time wasted in this process. To sum it all up, the *UMSS* was already a classic, but now it will become immortal because it is being given a new life for a new generation of engineers to enjoy. The reissue also allows the older generation to rediscover it all over again. (\$1395 MSRP; www.sevenwoodsaudio.com) -Mark Owen

Samson Audio C-Valve mic pre & C-Com opti compressor

Not too long ago, Samson Audio decided to enter the realm of low cost/good performance audio equipmer with the introduction of their line of C Class processor. Amongst these stackable, half rack sized units are the *C-Valve* mic pre and *C-Com-opti* compressor.

The *C-Valve* is a tube mic pre that provides all the commonly found mic pre gadgets and gizmos; mic/in level selection, phantom power, phase inverse. However Samson decided to put a little more thought into the unit than most others of this price point, and put in some added goodies as well: variable frequency low cut filter (from 18-300Hz), individual input and output gain controls, six segment input LED as well as a cool blue backlit VU for post gain control levels, pre-set limiter and vocal EQ buttons, a 'saturation' pot to add harmonic overtones, 1/4" send and receive signal inserts, and top it all off, an A-to-D S/PDIF output at 24-bit with selectable 48k/96k resolutions. Not bad for a hundred bucks! The *C-Valve's* cousin, the *C-Com opti*, is an optical compressor using a photo cell design to provide quality compression. It too brandishes Samson's cool blue backlit VU meter, which can be switched to display either signal output or gain reduction. Also onboard the *C-Com opti* is a push button "enhancer" circuit, which is used to restore high frequencies lost during heavy gain reduction.

So how do these doohickeys sound? Right off the bat tracking straight to ProTools via the *C-Valve* S/PDIF or you get some really nice clean tones with a decent bottom end. The key to this unit is playing with all the settings. Having a variable-frequency low-cut is a welcome addition to a pre in this price range, and helps a lot in tracking and isolating acoustic guitar and male vocals. It seemed the best application for the *C-Valve* was vocal tracking. The combinations of the EQ, limiter and saturation settings really let you dial in your vocals, and are equally as useful on bass and guitar tracks as well. The EQ is a push button only, and seems to lift vocals a bit, like a 2-4k booster seat, but without being too obvious about it. The limiter works well with vocals but I preferred tracking without it. If you use the limiter in conjunction with the saturation however, you can get some cool natural tube compression sounds, like when overdriving a high gain guitar amp. This can sound pretty cool for both vocal tracking and for using this unit as a DI for guitar. All in all, not a bad little mic pre. Versus other preamps on the market in this price range the *C-Valve* gives the competition a run for its money.

The *C-Com opti* sounded nice as well. It actually reminds me of those old C2 half-rack optical compressors that Joe Meek used to make a few years back. Using with some pre-recorded bass tracks as an outboard insert in ProTools, I found that dialing in a sound was pretty easy. Having recently picked up an old Korg EX-8000 re-synth module, I jumped at the chance to test it out with the *C-Com opti*. Running left out into the *C-Com opti*, a right out straight into Pro Tools, I decided to do some comparisons. Where as the uncompressed synth signal was very loud and overdriven sounding (admittedly

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