

MARCH 2012 | VOLUME 18 | ISSUE 3

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A view inside Slate's foxy box.

Slate Pro Audio Fox Two-Channel Microphone Preamplifier

Two channels and four distinct sounds: The versatile Fox slyly delivers a wider range of premium tones that you would normally expect from a 1U boutique preamp.

By Rich Tozzoli

The reality of today's studio environment is that we often want a single piece of equipment to cover a lot of territory, yet retain a high standard of quality. That reality reflects exactly how Slate Pro Audio's Fox two-channel microphone preamplifier is designed; it's a versatile preamp with four distinct sounds that hopefully emulate a small rack of gear.

Selected Audio Clips: Slate Fox

Visit the link below to hear audioclips from Rich's Slate Fox evaluations, as noted in the review.

— Ed.

prosoundnetwork.com/slatefox

Features

The American-built, solid-state Fox is actually quite straightforward. On the rear panel of this 1U unit are XLR mic inputs and outputs as well as quarter-inch TRS outputs for each channel. On the front panel, each channel has a single quarter-inch Instrument input, a 12-position Grayhill mil-spec gold-plated rotary Gain switch with 5 dB steps (up to 60 dB) and an output control where the gain is at unity when fully counterclockwise. There's a Pad switch (-10 dB), an Instrument/Mic switch, a polarity switch, Phantom Power switch (+48v), Signal Indicator LED and single master power switch.

The preamp has two discrete, combinable circuits per channel selectable from Vintage/Modern or Normal/Combo. Vintage follows the "British Discrete Class-A" design and Modern is a "very precise, clean and detailed" sound; think Neve/API as Vintage and Grace/Millennia as Modern.

When selecting Combo mode, the input of one circuit is combined with the output of another. Therefore, Vintage/Combo send the input of the Vintage circuit to the output of the Modern one. Modern/Combo sends the input of the Modern circuit to the output of



The Fox handily features two instrument inputs on the front panel.

the Vintage one. With two simple switches, you essentially have four different sounds.

In Use

I took the Fox over to design engineer Vincent Miraglia's studio, where he opened

the top to check circuit topology. He noted the well-built linear power supply, which includes an AMGIS toroidal power transformer followed by solid-state rectification. He explained that toroids provide less audible hum, efficient operation and very low stray



Fox's hefty 1U chassis is packed with premium quality components to provide "Modern" and "Vintage" tonal options.

magnetic fields. He pointed out the Altran C-1408 input transformers and C-4000 gapped output transformers, which were being used with a 600-ohm secondary. He also noted that each channel used three Burr Brown OPA2604AP Dual FET-Input low-distortion operational amplifiers.

All that is fine, but we needed to put it to the test on a real session. Since Miraglia is also a drummer and fellow composer, we started with a single beyerdynamic M160 in front of his kit. Running through each mode and recording a short example, we both heard exactly the same qualities: the Vintage circuit, which uses both an input and output transformer, was warm, classic and deep; and the Modern circuit, which uses all op-amps, is cleaner with a crisper top end. Each sounded very nice in its own way. Normal and Combo add subtle varieties to each of the above basic flavors. Vintage/Combo uses an input transformer and a transformerless output. Flipping that, with Modern/Combo, it's a transformerless input with a transformer on the output.

Taking it home to my studio for additional overdubs, I first plugged in an Earthworks

QTC-1 to record a pass with a nice Guild D-66 acoustic guitar. Starting with Modern/Combo, I was amazed at the detail, clarity and depth; this mic and guitar pairing I've recorded literally hundreds of times, so I recognized that what I was hearing sounded really good (hear audioclip #1). Next, I switched over to Vintage/Normal and heard the change in character to a warmer, more "classic" sound (hear audioclip #2). Again, both were very pleasing.

Leaving it set to Vintage/Normal, I plugged in my '70 Precision Bass to the quarter-inch input. After hitting a few notes, I was struck by the depth of the bass sound. Like my acoustic, I've recorded this instrument hundreds of times through a huge variety of DIs, but this sound hit me immediately. Just to make sure I wasn't losing my mind, I plugged into two of my other preamps that I use for bass, and sure enough, the Fox was rounder and bigger. I then used an analyzer plug-in to look at the frequencies of each and it clearly had more presence in the 200-Hz area than my others; not the frequency I thought I heard differently.

I tracked the bass part and didn't add any EQ or compression; I wanted that big, dark John Paul Jones sound for this track. It was literally plug, play and mix (which I love for TV work). I also directly plugged in a Tele with P-90s to Vintage/Combo and was impressed with how warm the instrument sounded (and I hate DI sounds on a guitar). The overall feeling was that my instruments sounded so good, I was inspired to create with them. To me, that says it all.

Summary

The Fox is a good purchase for any home/commercial studio owner looking to get a variety of sounds out of a single preamp. With a street price of just under \$1,800, it's not an inexpensive piece of gear. Yet considering it's \$900 per channel for a high-quality preamp with four distinct sonic styles make it a good deal all around. The bottom line: This unit sounds damn good, no matter how you slice it.

Price: \$1,799 street

Contact: Slate Pro Audio | slateproaudio.com