

Emmylou Harris: In The Studio With A Legendary Songwriter!

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VOL. TWENTY FIVE
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REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.



Slate Pro Audio Fox Mic Preamp — Mix and match your flavors...

Whether you are a plug-in junkie or a hardware addict, the name Steven Slate should be familiar to you. In December 2011 we featured Slate Digital's Virtual Console Collection in our 2011 Holiday Gift Guide, and in our August 2011 issue we introduced you to Slate Pro Audio's first hardware endeavour, the versatile and innovative Dragon compressor.

This month we look at Slate's second hardware excursion, the Fox microphone preamp. The Fox is a 2-channel microphone preamp housed in a single-rack-space chassis; along with its storybook-inspired moniker, the Fox shares the Dragon's black-on-black styling, right down to its gloss-coated tribal graphic, which on the Fox looks like fur. It also makes use of the same Grayhill gold contact switches, ultra-smooth high-quality pots and high-end internal audio components.

Varied species of Fox

Looking back to the Dragon for a second, one of its major features was the ability to alter its tone through the use of a Vintage control as well as with a collection of Character switches. While the Character switches were essentially eq filters, the Vintage control actually engaged an additional output circuit for a more saturated and harmonically rich tone akin to classic compressors of yesteryear. It's the latter idea that the Fox builds on, and what you get are actually two completely different and independent circuit topologies inside of each of its channels.

The first topology, again labeled Vintage, is built upon a Class A signal path with both input and output transformers designed to be reminiscent of late '60s and early '70s British console preamps. The second path, labeled Modern, is a completely transformerless op-amp-based servo design. Think clean and open, or what has become known in the industry as "straight wire with gain". In true Slate fashion, the Fox does not stop there; you have the choice to mix and match the inputs and outputs, i.e. transformerless input with transformerless out and vice-versa, giving you four complete circuit chains per channel.

I/O, layout, and controls

On the rear of the unit you find a pair XLR inputs and outputs and a standard 3-prong AC socket for the internal power supply. On the front of the Fox, each channel has a 1/4" instrument input.

The Fox is a two-stage microphone pre with a 12-stage stepped input switch (5 dB steps for a maximum of 60 dB of gain) as well as a variable output knob. According to the manual, when the output knob is fully clockwise it equals unity gain, recommended for optimum use; however, the beauty of this style of mic preamp is that you can "push" the input into the output and lower its level to increase harmonic content. Although there is no traditional metering on the Fox, there is a green variable LED to let you know when signal is present.

Each channel has its own toggle switches for a 10 dB pad, an instrument/microphone input selector, +48V Phantom power, and a phase switch. Switching between the various circuits is handled by two additional toggle switches labeled Vintage-Modern and Normal-Combo. Pairing Vintage or Modern with Normal gives you the full transformerless or transformerless signal path, while switching to Combo allows you to mix and match as described above.

Quiet and well rounded

With an EIN noise level of -128 dB, the Fox is a quiet beast. Couple this with its 60 dB of possible gain and you get a preamp that does not play favorites when it comes to microphone selection. Ribbons, dynamics, and condensers all sound great.

The idea of a multiple-topology versatile pre amp is not a new one. Over the past decade there have been models with selectable and even blendable tube and solid state paths, models with selectable and even swappable output transformers, and our February 2012 issue we took a look at the Harrison Lineage, which took the approach of putting four completely different mic preamp topologies into one eight-channel box. So what makes the Fox so different or special? Two things: Broad sonic variety and ease of use.

Whether the Fox truly succeeds as its own animal lies in the width of its sonic palette. Most of the above-mentioned units offer the

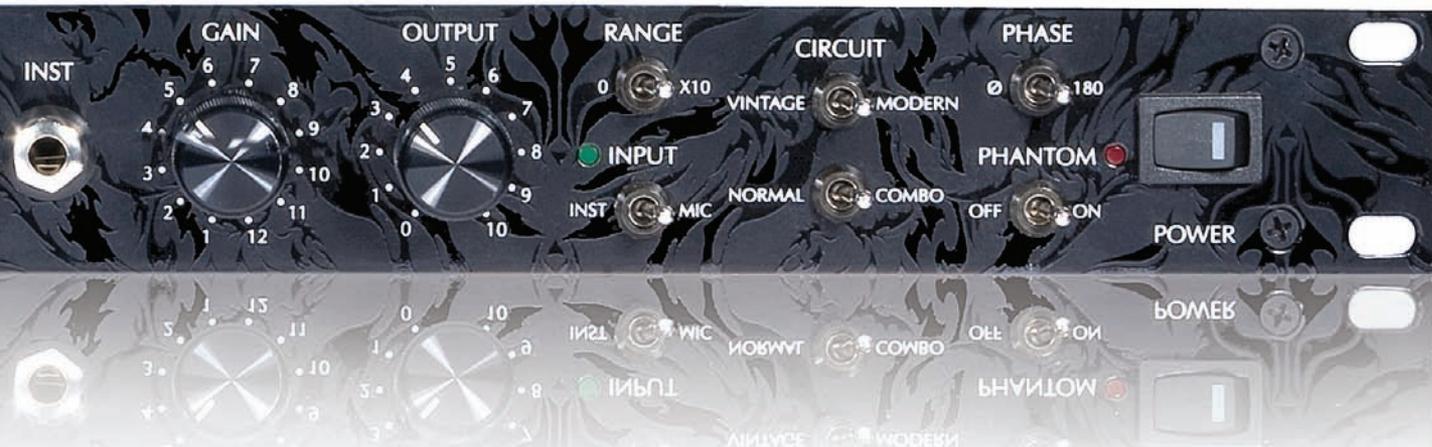
subtle warming and/or grit of tubes or a change in sonic weight gained by choosing among output transformers, but in most cases the preamp in question still retains a signature sound that is slightly finessed.

Even at the end of my Harrison review I commented that, although it was indeed four different channels, they still retained the Harrison sound—which is not a bad thing, but it was not like having a Neve, Millennia and Chandler all in one box.

What makes the Fox so interesting is that it kind of is like having all these types in one box, and there is no internal jumpering, component swapping and or wrenching involved... just a pair of simple switches.

imposing solid-state console pre like a Daking or Focusrite ISA series. Most surprising to me was how close the Vintage mode came to the sound of the Great River, although the Great River was a tad tighter and a hair less thick.

The only sound I could not compare to anything in particular was Modern Combo mode, which had a top end similar to the



this new preamp has a bunch of them

The Fox in use

I put the Fox to work over a few months on such typical fare as vocals, guitars (acoustic and electric), drums and percussion, and also as a front end for my synths, Korg Wavedrums, Fender Jazz bass and a vintage Rhodes 73. It sounded great on all of it, mainly because if the Modern sound is too fast and clean on a source, you have three other choices.

Rather than instrument-specific, it was much easier to become style-specific with the Fox. The Modern setting was perfect for ultra-realistic acoustic-based styles like classical, jazz, folk and world music, while the Vintage setting's much sought-after British vibe was there for all things rock, funk, and everything in between.

You can set up a mic on a source and quickly flip through the combinations to find which tone succeeds on a given instrument, and then you can do final fine-tuning by altering the input-to-output saturation. The only thing to be aware of when doing this is that there can be a few dB difference when changing modes, especially the combo modes, and often it's tempting to choose the loudest one.

Does it really?

I detect a hint of skepticism as you silently ask, "Does it really ape the sound of all these classic preamps in one box?" Well, I was just as skeptical, so I put it up side-by-side with a Chandler TG-2, a Millennia HV-3, and a Great River (known for its take on the classic Neve 1073), and I was truly surprised by the sonic territory the Fox covered.

On the Modern setting the Fox sat comfortably in the same camp as the Millennia, with a similar open honesty, minus a bit of the Millennia's well known hi-end sheen. In Vintage-Combo mode (transformer in/op-amp out) it had forward and slightly aggressive characteristics like the TG-2, while also reminding me of a good non-

Modern Normal mode, but with a tighter, more constrained low end. To give it a name I would call it very 1980s punk-rock sounding.

Now I am not saying the Fox set out to be a direct copy of these above-mentioned preamps, there are nuanced differences in each case, but the Fox achieves the rare feat of delivering on its intentions of offering at least some version of all of these flavors in one box.

Wrap-up

What I like most about Steven Slate's products is their focus on bang-for-the-buck and versatility, not novelty and gimmicks. He now has two solidly-built, boutique-level products that give you a lot of sonic choices without compromise.

As with the Dragon, if you want versatility and quality rolled into one it's hard to go wrong with the FOX. This makes for a perfect first higher-end preamp, whether you are just starting out or are a seasoned pro. I have heard no other preamp that covers this much diversity in one box, and does it without filters or digital trickery. ➤



Price: \$1799.99 • More from: Slate Pro Audio, www.slateproaudio.com