

# TAPE

# OP

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

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Tony Visconti, Edu Meyer and more...*

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## Classic Audio Products of Illinois

### VP28 two-stage mic/line preamp

This is going to be a short review. Pretty much everyone on the planet knows about Jeff Steiger's Classic Audio Products of Illinois stuff by now; these are DIY kits that began with a renewed version of the vintage API 3232 recording console preamp and then expanded out to include some unique 500-series modules. I've been using a pair of his VC528 ST2+ Missing Link modules on my mix bus for a long time, and I love the tone and functionality of those. The VP28 is a new two-stage preamp that essentially takes the front half of the VP26 preamp [Tape Op #77] and mates it to the back half of the Missing Link. So what does that mean?

I don't know what it means — literally. I'm sure there's some gearslutty audiospew out there if you like reading written descriptions of sound — Google it, I guess. I just know what it gets you — *tone*. This thing has a fantastic tonality to it, lots of different tones, actually. So much so, that I've taken to using this as a line stage on my mix bus. (Sorry, Missing Link!) But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I started with using this as a mic preamp on a tracking session at Echo Mountain in Asheville, NC. That studio has a fantastic complement of great mic preamps, and we used them all. When I ran the guitars through the VP28, the guitarist on the session yelled, "Stop! What's that?? That's the best I've ever heard my guitar sound!" Okay, cool. Guitars through the VP28 — check. They sounded fantastic, and I was happy to use them for the rest of the project.

One of the beautiful things about the VP28 is that all the controls are stepped. I love that. It's a cinch to recall, and the whole thing just feels solid. Plus, the preamp gain section has a notch marked Unity. When the VP28 is in line-mode and set to unity, you essentially have a line amp running through both the input and output transformers as well as both discrete op-amps. Plus, you get the filter section and the stepped output fader with 2 dB boost and 4 dB cut steps. This setup allows you to crank up the input for some transformer saturation and step down the output to compensate, or vice versa — a ton of tonal range for one mic/line amp. Pop the Mic button and you have the same functionality in a mic preamp with 72 dB of total gain — plenty for ribbons. Also included are the mandatory polarity, 48 V phantom power, and 20 dB pad switches, as well as the non-mandatory, but greatly appreciated, signal presence light. (Thank you!)

In my experience, the modules are very closely matched, and I believe if you buy them as a pair, Jeff will ensure that you get parts matched to within 0.03 dB — well within mastering tolerances. All the op-amps are socketed so you can experiment with API 2520; Scott Liebers' Red or Blue Dots; or any other pin-compatible 16 V op-amps out there.

My complaints are scarce. Some people won't want to build these themselves, but there are a few people out there that will build these for you. Some people won't like stepped controls, but these people are wrong. I wish that there were a version that offered 1 dB steps as an option, for line-amp mixing/mastering applications only. I would love to see a switch for cutting the filter frequencies in half, or an option to swap out those values for something lower (like 15 or 20 Hz, again for mixing/mastering purposes). These quibbles aside, the VP28 offers a ton of flexibility and tone for both mic and line applications, and I can say without a doubt that it will always find a place in my rack. (VP28 kit \$274.99 direct; [www.classicapi.com](http://www.classicapi.com))

—F. Reid Shippen <[www.robotlemon.com](http://www.robotlemon.com)>

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## Slate Pro Audio

### Fox QuadTone mic preamp

Over the past few years, Slate Digital plug-ins have become de rigeur tools for music production and mixing in the digital environment. Steven Slate also produces a couple pieces of all-analog hardware, under the Slate Pro Audio moniker, that in my opinion, have not received the attention they deserve.

Recently, I put the Fox QuadTone mic preamp through its paces at my studio. Housed in a 1RU-height chassis with a unique black-on-black tattoo'ed finish, the Fox's functionality as a preamp is also unique. I get the sense that Steven, like many of us, thought to himself, "I would love a preamp where I can select between my favorite vintage tone and my favorite super-clean tone in one unit." With that thought, he designed the two-channel Fox with two separate preamp circuits per channel — Vintage and Modern — with the ability to not only switch between the two circuits, but also combine the input stage of one circuit and the output stage of the other.

Each channel of the Fox sports gain and trim knobs, along with switches for phantom power, polarity, -10 dB pad, Vintage/Modern circuit selection, and Normal/Combo mode selection. Another switch selects the input — either the front-panel 1/4" instrument or the rear XLR mic, and a green LED indicates signal level by varying its intensity. I like the feel of the knurled metal knobs for stepped gain and continuously-variable, passive output attenuation. Riding the output level during a vocal take feels very smooth and controlled. Activating many of the front-panel switches thoughtfully mutes the output for a few seconds to avoid any pops. The Fox's specs are very good, with very low noise measurements and a wide frequency response. The internal power supply is shielded from each of the channel's circuits, and the build quality, componentry, and internal wiring all appear to be first class.

The Fox's Vintage circuit is a faithful reproduction of the vintage Neve 1073 preamp with Slate's custom versions of the original St. Ives transformers. The Modern is a high-resolution transformerless design utilizing Burr-Brown op-amps, comparable sonically to GML. Both circuits provide about 60 dB of gain in 5 dB steps, with a passive output attenuator. The magic of the Fox lies in the Normal/Combo mode switch, which gives you the ability to mix-and-match the input and output sections of each circuit type. That is, you can create a hybrid combo of a Vintage input with a Modern output, or a Modern input with a Vintage output. To put it more simply, the Fox gives you two preamp channels, each capable of four distinct voicings.

In the studio, I found the Fox to sound fantastic in all of its modes, with noticeable variations in tone and response from each circuit combination. The Vintage circuit, paired with an LA-2A and a large-diaphragm tube mic gave me a classic Al Green kind of feel on a male R&B singer, while on loud rock vocals, the Vintage circuit compressed and saturated possibly a hair more than a Neve preamp, allowing for a wide range of useable tones. The Modern channel sounds fast and open, but it still maintains the size, punch, and presence of drums and vocals. Modern/Combo turned out to be my favorite starting point, giving me the speed and accuracy I like with a bit of the harmonic push and high-frequency damping of the Vintage output transformer. Something about the 1073 circuit gives instruments and vocals a unique kind of space and presence, and the Fox's Vintage circuit provides this sound as well.

Having the variety of preamp color options lends your existing mic collection a whole new palette of sounds, too. Some sources love the transformerless path, while others benefit from the transformer circuit, and those in-between can benefit from one of the combo modes.

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I am a fan of inserting transformer-based gear on individual inserts of my in-the-box mixes, and for this purpose, the *Fox* provides two channels with a wide range of tone and color. Unfortunately, the *Fox* doesn't have line inputs, but that didn't keep me from using the unit to process various mix buses and individual instruments during a mix. Using the mic inputs worked after I trimmed down my insert send level by 20 dB so I didn't overload the *Fox*. The *Fox* then allowed me to dial in various amounts of harmonic color that sounded particularly nice on snare drums, basses, and vocals, and also made full mixes sound wider by adding some midrange energy to the drums and guitars. In a few instances, the *Fox* reminded me of using a great compressor, like a Fairchild, where the processor affects the inner harmonics of the mix, like the tone of the snare and vocals and top of the bass, but seems to leave the rest of the mix alone. The *Fox* is certainly well suited to use as the line amplifier after a passive summing amp, and I hope future revisions of the unit include a line-level input.

Many studios today can be classified as "one-input" studios, since most of the time, only one source (mono or stereo) is recorded at a time. The *Fox* fits in this model very well, with its two channels and wide range of sonic options. Compared with other preamps or even a 500-series rack, you would need as many as eight modules to have all the flavors provided by the two channels of the *Fox* — which amounts to pretty good bang-for-the-buck for the *Fox*. Moreover, A/B'ing preamp flavors in the *Fox* is done simply by flipping switches — no repatching between preamps and making sure phantom power and speakers are off. I hate clichés, but the *Fox* certainly fits the bill as my desert island mic preamp. (\$1799 street; [www.slateproaudio.com](http://www.slateproaudio.com))

—Adam Kagan <[www.TemptressThePlugin.com](http://www.TemptressThePlugin.com)>

## Pedalsync Master Control & MIDI Splitty

These days, I work with more than a few artists who use MIDI-based electro-rigs as part of their sound, including synths, sequencers, samplers, and drum machines. These rigs are fast becoming the norm on stages and in studios. In particular, two acts I work with — Elska and Graph Rabbit — have decided, for various reasons, not to have computers or iPads on stage with them. To find a device that would generate a solid MIDI beat clock as well as easily change tempo seemed simple enough, but it turned out that such a device actually didn't exist. Not even the boutique modular synth community had come up with it. I couldn't believe it wasn't out there.

As I started to look around, I learned a lot about how "electronic musicians" clock their rigs. Many use laptops running a DAW, yet many complain that the MIDI clocks coming out of a DAW interface are unreliable and, interestingly, have enough looseness to actually make the music feel saggy.

To solve these problems, many folks turned back to old MPCs and drum machines simply to generate MIDI clock and change tempo. As one might expect, the older units are well built with better clocks. Early model MPCs are especially coveted for this reason. And so, for a while, Elska started using a Casio RZ-1 drum machine. The Casio met the clock-stability and tempo-change requirements, but it was also huge, cumbersome, and ugly, and it required more setup time. But there the performers were on stage with a solid clock and no computer. Mission accomplished, if inelegantly. But using a massive drum machine from the early '90s for this task in 2013 just didn't seem right to me, and I was totally perplexed that a better solution didn't exist.

On one recording session that turned the studio into a computer-based, saggy-sounding, latency-ridden mess of wires and MIDI confusion, I asked my right-hand-man John Garcia to search again for "The Device." About five minutes later, he came back with a webpage that had a compact pedal with an LED screen that displayed tempo, and — get this — a MIDI out jack! "How the hell didn't I find this?" I asked. "It came out two days ago," John said — not without a slight smile of deserved self-satisfaction. We immediately ordered two.

On top of the *Master Control*, along with the aforementioned LED screen, are four buttons for starting/stopping the clock; incrementing up/down program or tempo changes; and tapping tempo. A knob replicates the up/down buttons but allows for superfast sweeps across the control range. To change tempo, you can either tap it in by hand or foot, or just press the tap button once and then use either the up/down buttons or the knob to select the tempo. You can also then store tempos in 128 program banks, if you prefer to work that way. It is a simple and intuitive interface that all of us started using effortlessly in about ten seconds of trial. Select your tempo or program number and press start. The *Master Control* runs on a 9V power source, so it can easily be powered with a Boss-compatible wall-wart, a 1 Spot, or other 9V power supply.

Our next hurdle was feeding the *Master Control's* single MIDI clock output to multiple devices. The excellent MFB analog drum machines we've started using don't have MIDI Thru or Out jacks for daisy-chaining. Even so, daisy-chaining MIDI clock through multiple devices can introduce latency. Moreover, cable lengths as reasonable as 15 ft can lead to MIDI signal degradation. So we started looking at MIDI splitting devices. The best of them are powered in order to buffer the outputs so that the signals all remain robust and clean. The company MIDI Solutions, for example, offers a

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