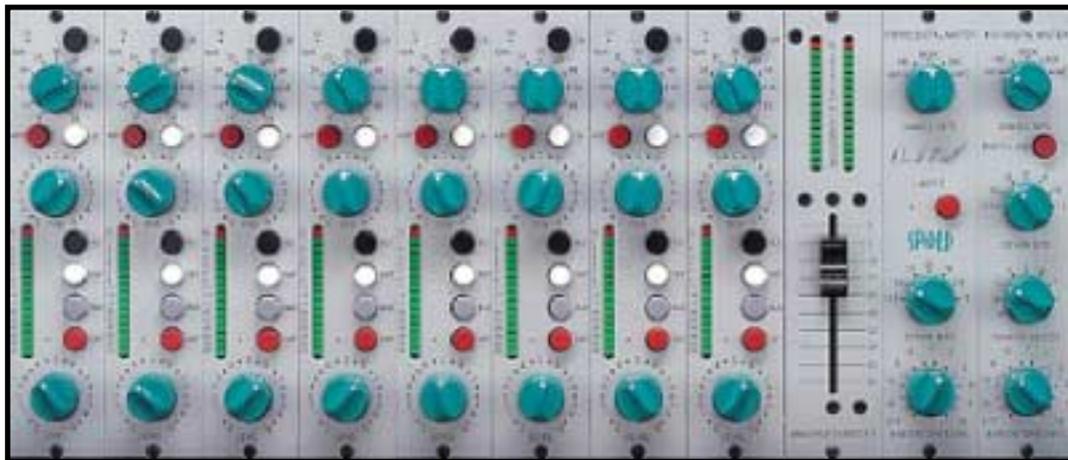


Crane Song Spider

Let's face it, you work in digital most of the time but you spend a lot of your time looking for elegant ways of getting your analogue into the system. Analogue doesn't get much more elegant than a Crane Song and the Spider may be your complete solution.

GEORGE SHILLING



AS IS OFTEN THE CASE with David Hill's Crane Song designs, the Spider is a quirky yet inspired recording solution. It includes eight very high quality input channels arranged in a mixer formation, with individual analogue and digital outputs, signal enhancing processes and a stereo bus section.

The main unit is a 4U and fairly shallow and light, with meshed top and bottom panels allowing a large amount of heat out. A 3-foot long umbilical attaches via D-connectors to a power supply. This unit is attached to the rear of a full-width 2U panel, but despite being very weighty, only occupies half the width of the rack-space. There are two D-connectors on the power supply, and up to three Spiders can have their audio chained together.

On the rear, each individual channel has an XLR mic input, a balanced jack line input, and a TRS insert socket with Pre/Post button, which refers to the individual digital outputs. With an appropriately wired cable, the insert can be used as an analogue output while leaving the insert point normalled.

On the front, working downwards from the top of each channel, you find an Overload LED alongside a switch labelled L/M. This is a little unhelpful, but you soon learn to remember that when switched In, this selects Line as opposed to Mic input. The green

stepped Gain knob selects from 6dB to 66dB of gain in 6dB steps. Below this are Phantom power and phase switches. Below these is a continuously variable Pan knob (no centre detente) that becomes active when the signal is routed to the stereo bus. It has no effect on the individual outputs.

There is a vertical 16-segment LED meter, the topmost segment of which is red (the rest are green) with a peak-hold of a few seconds. Alongside this are four pushbuttons, labelled FLT for Filter (80Hz, 12dB per octave), FAT, which adds a pleasant tube-distortion emulation, Bus, which routes to the stereo bus, and LMT which engages the peak overload protection limiter. A LED indicates when this is coming into play. Finally, at the bottom is a rotary Level fader.

To the right of the individual input modules are a further three modules. The first of these is the Analogue Stereo Master, which simply comprises a pair of meters similar to those on the channels, and a smooth vertically mounted linear master stereo fader. The rear of the stereo section includes insert and aux connectors for chaining multiple Spiders. Next comes the Stereo Digital Master, with selections for sample rates of 44.1, 48, 88.2 and 96kHz, as well as a W/C position, which allows for external Word Clock. Below this is another Limiter button

with LED, for overload protection of the stereo A-D.

Crane Song's special Analogue Dither is provided, and Dither Bits can be selected here, variable between 15 and 24, as well as Off. Below this is an Analogue Tape Emulation knob, with a similar circuit to that found in the HEDD 192. On the rear of this section are an AES XLR out, SPDIF phono and optical outs, and BNCs for Word Clock I-O. The 8-Channel Output section also includes similar sample rate and dither controls, with one knob controlling Analogue Tape emulation for each of the 8 channels, which can be individually selected with a knob.

This section also includes a useful Bus to 7&8 button for conveniently routing the stereo buss to the 8-channel output. The rear of this section depends on the particular configuration purchased — there are three different types mentioned in the manual, AES with four XLR connectors, TDIF with two DB-style connectors, and ADAT with two optical outputs, as on the review model. This meant using a format convertor for interfacing with the TDM system in use, but I was also able to slot it straight into a Digi 001 setup. Full marks for the back panel legending, which is very clearly white-embossed onto a black background in large capital letters.

The mic preamps sound wonderfully crystal clear, responsive and fluid. They react particularly well to percussive transients, with an incredibly open sound. The gain structure on the channels is set so that there is a possible 6dB over and above digital full scale, allowing for the operation of the limiter. This is not designed to be constantly hammered, but works extremely well for catching stray peaks, allowing you to make use of all the bits without worrying about over-cooking things.

It works almost invisibly on short peaks, and you have to push very hard with most types of signal to hear anything nasty. The FAT amplifier enhances the signal like a gentle tube overload, adding mostly second harmonic distortion, with some third harmonic, according to the manual. This is a lovely juicy sound, fairly subtle, but very often enhancing richness of the signal. Meanwhile, the variable Analogue Tape Emulation is a DSP process that adds third and fifth harmonics. This adds a subtle but gorgeous warmth, and can be tailored with the LED-surrounded variable control on a channel-by-channel basis — the settings are stored automatically.

The manual declares: 'if there is any strangeness please let us know.' Well, I've no strangeness to report, just a beautifully designed and stunningly refined sounding piece of kit, and surely one of the best ways of getting signals into your digital recorder. ■

PROS Ultra high quality integrated preamp, mixer and convertor setup.

CONS Generates much heat.



EXTRAS Due to the current dollar rate, pricing of Crane Song products in the UK have taken a similar fall. STC-8 stereo compressor: UK£2550 + VAT. Trakker (pictured) mono compressor: UK£1460 + VAT. HEDD 192 D-A-A-D convertor: UK£2000 + VAT. Flamingo mic pre: UK£1780 + VAT. Ibis EQ: UK£2570 + VAT. Spider: UK£4290 + VAT. Phoenix TDM plug: UK£260 + VAT

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