Crookwood Paintpot

It's possible that many readers have never seen this particular interpretation of a dual mic preamp even though the concept has been around for a while. It's now improved and cheaper. JON THORNTON dips his brush.

FORM AND FUNCTION — two words that a surprising number of audio manufacturers seem to forget to put together. In terms of form, Crookwood's Paintpot has been raising eyebrows since its initial release in 1993. It's now in its third revision, and at UK£995 (+ VAT) is now cheaper than previous models. This cost saving has been made by removing some little used features from the outgoing model (tilt EQ, MS decoding and an unbalanced output) and by revising the design to make it less labour intensive to assemble.

Let's deal with the form first — and yes it does look like a bucket of paint, complete with carrying handle *(Paintbucket? I think you mean pot. Ed)*. Manufactured from anodised aluminium, all the analogue I-Os together with the controls are mounted on the top panel. Down one side of the device are the optional digital outputs, external Word clock input and mains power. At first glance, this may seem like a very inefficient use of space for what is, after all, a 2 channel preamplifier — but when you consider that it has been designed from the outset for location or 'spot' recording, it makes more sense. The idea is that you plonk it down next to your microphones or sound source, plug them in and away you go. Source cable lengths are therefore kept to a minimum, and the true balanced analogue output is a high current design, perfectly able of driving long cable runs effectively.

On first unpacking the Paintpot, you'd be forgiven for assuming that there had been some sort of manufacturing error — hold on, where's the legending for the controls? Inscrutable is probably the best way to describe the front panel with two big black rotary encoders and a number of momentary action pushbuttons. Plug it in and turn it on though, and the Paintpot temporarily lights up like a Christmas tree, revealing backlit control legending and a couple of digital numeric displays above each control knob. This excitement is short lived, as after a couple of seconds the unit reverts to a power saving state, which is designed to keep the audio circuits warmed up but puts the rest of the unit to sleep.

Pressing the flashing power button again brings the unit back to life, accompanied by what sounds like dozens of relays switching. This is the first clue as to the integrity of the audio circuitry here — nearly every function is switched by gas filled relays — even the gains, which step through relays in dB steps. Not only does this approach keep audio paths as clean as possible, it also means that every control input on the device itself is 'soft', which in turn means that remote control of the device is easily achieved — more on this later.

A quick tour of the front panel controls reveals a switch that steps through the possible input sources of mic, balanced line, unbalanced line and DI for each of the two channels. Mic and balanced line inputs to each channel are via a single XLR socket, DI and unbalanced line via a TRS jack input. Analogue outputs are on XLR. Gain ranges available for each input level are helpfully indicated on the display above the large control knob, and are +12 to +72 for microphone level, -15 to +24 for balanced line, -6 to +30 for unbalanced line, and +18 to +72 for the DI input. Each channel has the option of a phase reverse switch and a low or high input impedance setting — the values of which alter according to the source type selected. There are some nice touches too, for instance phantom power can't be selected unless the microphone input is chosen, and the last settings are preserved in the unit's memory when power is removed. All that fancy logic switching also allows it to do things like muting outputs as phantom power is turned on or off, or when input sources are switched.

There is no real metering on the Paintpot, with the exception of a peak LED that lights when output levels exceed +20dBu. If you're feeding a device with input metering this isn't really a problem — but if you are trying to set gains at the unit with metering in a different place this can be kind of frustrating. The use of an optional (UK£345) remote control panel solves this problem to some degree. Using standard XLR cables, this can be connected in daisy-chain fashion to multiple Paintpots, and allows control of all parameters — and it's really in conjunction with this remote capability that the Paintpot's form and function really start to come together.

Of course, this would all be academic if it didn't live up to expectations sonically, and it doesn't disappoint in this respect. It sounds very neutral and honest with a range of microphones, but really works to extract the most low frequency information possible from small and large diaphragm capacitor microphones, together with an impressive amount of transient detail without ever sounding grainy or forced. But it's the noise — or lack of it — that really stands out. This is an extremely quiet unit — even when really cranking gains on a distant stereo pair in a location recording. In truth, the impedance switching had little effect on modern capacitor microphones, and a marginal effect on dynamic microphones — but it worked well on the DI input for bass guitar, albeit a very expensive DI solution!

While the form factor of the Paintpot might or might not work for you, it's hard not to like this unit. It may not have the brand cachet of some other high-end preamps that are out there, and it may be a little quirky. But it sounds fantastic, is designed and built in the UK, and above all is very intelligent little box *(You mean pot. Ed)*. It's definitely worth an audition. ■

PROS Quirky design; very quiet, neutral and detailed sound; remote control option; intelligent user interface; easy to use in low light conditions.

CONS Quirky design; lack of any metering on unit itself; digital I-O and remote options really bump up the cost.

EXTRAS As an option (£199) a digital output card may be fitted, which gives AES, SPDIF and optical (TOS-Link) outputs

at sample rates up to 192kHz. This is a Crookwood designed A-DC which always runs at either 192kHz or 176kHz, but sample rate converts its output together with setting appropriate status flags to achieve lower sample rate outputs. Even when using an external clock, this is used simply to synchronise the output of the sample rate conversion — the analogue signal is still sampled by the internal crystal clock, which means that any jitter problems from external clocks are restricted to transmission of data, rather than inducing sampling errors.

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