



Fink Analog Audio CS2-FA

It's a dual channel strip with a true medley of popular processing blocks.

GEORGE SHILLING puts on his flying goggles and gets some pilot hours in the blue.

Dennis Fink is a design engineer with some pretty impressive credentials. In the 1970s he started working at Urei, designing limiters, equalisers, crossovers, amplifiers and monitors. He later embraced DSP technology at MSD and Crest Audio, and came full circle in the 2000s to help with the rebirth of certain products at the 'new' Universal Audio. Along the way Fink has written a number of AES papers, lectured in DSP maths and hardware, and entered the TEC Hall of Fame for his work on the Urei 813 monitor.

Now he brings his expertise to a product with his own name on the front panel. However, given Fink's history, it is perhaps unsurprising that this box pulls

together some rather familiar concepts.

The CS2-FA (street price around Euro 3400) is a dual-channel strip, with the mic preamp said to be based on a Putnam console design with Pultec-style passive EQ, and a limiter modelled after the 1176 but created with valve circuitry. Despite such a full feature set and extensive use of valves, this all packs into an (admittedly weighty and deep) 2U box. The two channels are arranged side-by-side, each featuring no less than 14 rotary controls and five toggles, plus a further Link toggle, and large Power toggle. A pair of Sifam meters gently illuminate when power is on.

Connectivity is straightforward, with simply two Mic Input XLRs and two Line Output XLRs on the

rear, along with IEC mains, the review model preset for 230V. As might be expected in a unit with 10 valves the case top and sides are thoroughly vented but I didn't experience excessive heat. Internal spec is impressive, with JJ valves, Mogami wiring, Cinemag input and output transformers and Neutrik connectors.

The front panel's sea of controls are not in any way differentiated in colour or style, nor is there much visual help from the panel, which is simply blue. The Quick Start Guide graphically distinguishes the three panel sections, but unfortunately the panel itself does not. Lettering is necessarily small, but with so much crammed in, a lack of visual clues is initially frustrating. However, as with any gear, familiarity with the controls after clocking up some pilot hours certainly helps.

The leftmost part of the channel relates to the mic preamp. This is a valve design, and the stepped Input knob actually works backwards, with full gain at the counter-clockwise position. There are four 10dB spaced steps, followed by Line and finally a DI setting. However, following this are two further level knobs,

Gain and Level and by juggling the three controls it enables you to slightly drive the valves for some pleasant richness if desired. For maximum clarity and detail it sounds best turning up the final Level knob to full and setting the Input and Gain lower. With all three knobs cranked I measured about 60dB gain available and the Limiter section can provide a further 20dB if required (*Pardon? Ed*).

Listening to voice from a U87 through the mic preamp, with EQ and limiter bypassed using their toggle switches, the HF character seems rather dry, with some lower middle and low end warming. The CS2-FA certainly handles sibilance very smoothly, yet the sound is open and detailed. Phantom is activated with a toggle — I always think there should at least be a warning light accompanying this, but none is here, and worse still it is possible to send 48V to the inputs even when Line is selected. And there's no polarity switch. But these are small niggles and you do get a front panel DI input, selected by moving the gain knob past the Line position. A Telecaster certainly sounded vibrant, but I always miss the ability to link through, which you get with a DI box.

Although laid out differently, the next six knobs and two toggles pretty much replicate the switchgear found on a Pultec EQP-1A. Controls operate in a similar way to those on the Pultec and its many replicas, with toggles selecting the three HF attenuation frequencies at 5k, 10k and 20kHz, and also for the low boost and cut, here set at 20, 60 and 120Hz (whereas Pultecs indicate the last at 100Hz, with an additional setting for 30Hz although you wouldn't often miss that). Here the mid boost band can select 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12 or 16kHz using a rotary switch, along with a bandwidth knob.

The sound of this EQ section is very similar to



a Pultec. However, there is one very noticeable difference in that you must turn the knobs further for a similar effect. The ranges seem rather subtler than other Pultecs I have encountered, so if you are after a big boost (or cut) you might not find enough oomph here. It seemed that full boost on the Fink was more like 6 or 7 in old money. But in most situations, this is ample, and it sounds sweet.

Lastly there is the 1176-style limiter, which claims to preserve the FET attenuator character using a two-tube design. This includes similar (if rather miniaturised) controls to an 1176, with separate Input and Output knobs, Attack and Release controls, and a rotary Ratio selector. This also includes the 4, 8 and 12:1 settings as the original, plus three extra settings. 1:1 enables you to use the line amp character without adding any compression, also enabling further gain in the circuitry. An additional new Soft knee setting provides an even subtler alternative to the 4:1 setting, and 'A' setting is the all-buttons in mode. It all sounds remarkably familiar — I always love an 1176, and this certainly fits the bill.

The Attack and Release knobs seem to respond to similar positioning as might be set on an 1176, and the modes all seem to replicate the original, with the added bonus of a satisfying bit of subtle valve

enhancement. The 'All' mode crunches and distorts as well as any 1176, and the new Soft knee mode is super for subtle smoothing when something just needs light tickling. But even in this mode some pumping is possible when the level is pushed and the Attack and Release are set appropriately. Although small, the meter can usefully be toggled to show Input, Output or Gain Reduction and in the last mode it seems to perfectly correspond to what you hear although in Soft mode the compression's relative transparency can lead to surprisingly large needle excursions for less audible effect than expected. The Link toggle usefully enables the two channels' gain reduction detector circuits to be joined together for stereo image retention.

The CS2-FA really shone on vocals especially but every signal could benefit from passing through this unit, and it is flexible enough to handle anything. The Fink sounds great and packs a remarkable amount into a small space, using reassuringly familiar concepts. It seems extremely solidly built, and as long as you've got good enough eyesight to read the legending (or some powerful reading glasses) I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it. ■

PROS Classic designs brought neatly together; sounds great.

CONS Tiny panel legending and no visual distinction between knobs.

Contact

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