

Focusrite Liquid Mix HD

Focusrite has ported the technology used in its FireWire Liquid Mix processor to a TDM plug-in with the same bundled collection of 40 compressor emulations and 20 EQ emulations. **GEORGE SHILLING** mouses around.

Since Focusrite impressed everyone with its remarkable hybrid digital and analogue Liquid Channel microphone preamp (using a clever combination of convolution software and emulation hardware), it has brought its 'Liquid' technology to a popular audience with the compressor and EQ emulating Liquid Mix, a FireWire DSP processor with an attractive controller unit, and the cheaper Liquid Mix 16. Meanwhile, the mic preamp technology continues to inspire further products such as the Liquid Saffire interface and the Liquid4Pre. While Digidesign's AIR department only provided native RTAS plug-ins to bundle with Pro Tools 8, despairing HD owners will be encouraged to find that there are still third party developers who consider TDM processing a useful and viable platform. Focusrite has ported the technology used in the FireWire Liquid Mix processor to a TDM plug-in with the same bundled collection of 40 compressor emulations and 20 EQ emulations.

Installation of the plug-in was simple enough, but does involve up to four separate additional installations of the emulations, one for each different sample rate required. Instantiating the plug-in (there is only one, in mono or multichannel flavours), you are presented with Input metering and Trim at the far left, Output metering and Trim at the far right, with the main left section dedicated to the Compressor and that on the right to the EQ. Further metering labelled Mid shows the signal as it flows from one section to the other. Graphically, the plug-in window seems rather old-fashioned — there is a hotchpotch of fonts and lettering sizes, and EQ Shape selector buttons look rather 'Windows 95'. But there are useful large graphs for both sections along with the large meters, and functionality is not impaired. The fact that there are no separate plug-ins for EQ and Compressor means that there is no DSP saving when only using one section. But the plug-in is no CPU hog and considering the amount of flexibility offered it actually seems rather frugal, with five mono instances available on an Accel chip at 44.1kHz. Latency is an impressive 12 samples.

There are no Pro Tools library presets but the provision instead to load separate Compressor and EQ emulation files, which dictate the controls available for each section and load the convolutions. There is also an in-built Snapshot librarian menu with the possibility to load snapshots of either section or combinations of both, saving always saves both, and you can also rename Snapshots from here. Meanwhile, back at the Emulation drop-down lists, you encounter names such as Acme 1: US Modern Tube 3 and London: Brit Boutique Tube 1 in the list of compressors, while EQs are similarly named, for example Brit Desk 5: Brit Modern Desk 3 and Zebra 2: US Zebra Discrete Desk Copy 2. All completely meaningless. The exception is, of course, models



of Focusrite's own analogue processors, which are correctly named. Of course, for all emulations, all you really want to see is the name of the actual modelled product instead of all this gobbledygook. Hidden away on the Focusrite website (I had to enquire twice to find it) is a not very clear or well-ordered crib sheet. Thankfully an enterprising person has made available (on the internet) a bank of Snapshots named with the modelled units, so loading these will load the appropriate emulation.

The Compressor section includes a useful graph showing the ratio and threshold relationship with input and output levels varying depending on settings and the emulation chosen. It's a useful guide to what's happening, although it could have been even better with a superimposition of the Input and Gain Reduction displays (which are separate here). Emulations are generally successful, although there were one or two that seemed less convincing, like the Fairchild, which seemed rather hard of knee and lacking in warmth. I liked the different SSL models though, these definitely capturing the essence of channel and buss processors. Clicking the Free button releases you from the constraints of the modelled settings to enable fully variable Threshold, Ratio, Attack and Release controls with a wide range on each, while still modelling the sonic foibles of a particular device. Clicking Sidechain Monitor enables the setting of an EQ band in the sidechain, but there is no possibility of an external sidechain input. However, it is possible to reverse the processing chain so the Compressor comes after the EQ.

The EQ section can have up to seven bands with the prospect of full parametric control (depending on the model; there is no 'Free' mode for the EQ). When loading EQ presets you have the choice of loading all bands or just a particular single band, which can be loaded into a particular slot by clicking it first. This enables near-infinite choices of all sorts of hybrid EQ mongrels, although getting heavily into this and keeping track of it will require pen and paper, as the only on-screen clue is the displayed message 'Mixed Equaliser' as opposed to 'Single Equaliser'. Oddly, all EQ bands seem to be disabled

by default when loading emulations, and this briefly baffled me. Separate band-enabled LEDs are set out at the base of each band's controls, with an overall EQ On at the right. To the right of this in the corner is a Bypass that actually links to and toggles the Pro Tools Bypass.

There is a section on the Focusrite website for downloading additions to the emulation library, and although recent additions are minimal (and it's difficult to work out which ones you've already got) there was a particularly good new version of a Chandler EMI EQ which sounded absolutely superb. But there is plenty to be getting on with just using the included settings.

I did find that Liquid Mix HD slowed down the workflow slightly because not only do you have to instantiate the plug-in, but you also then have to decide what type of EQ and/or compressor you want to use, before getting anywhere near actual controls that change the sound.

It's impossible to tell how accurate any particular emulation is without a strict A/B comparative listening session, but during my brief review period I found that settings for gear I am familiar with mostly sounded convincing. Of course, the experience of mousing around a grey knob in a plug-in window is rather removed from cranking bakelite knobs on a Pultec, and on a few emulations there were missing or different controls, such as a threshold knob to adjust an 1176, which just seemed slightly wrong. However, where an original EQ band includes a choice of, say, shelf or bell, these are both available by clicking and selecting.

This application of this technology is unquestionably gobsmacking and wonderful. In the real world of mixing, the workflow is not ideal, but this is truly an extraordinary addition to the sonic arsenal. ■

PROS

A whole world of processors available to the user; downloadable updates.

CONS

No AudioSuite processing; no separate EQ and Compressor plug-ins; uninspired graphics.

EXTRAS

Focusrite has integrated Liquid preamp technology with Saffire PRO audio interfacing. Liquid Saffire 56 is Focusrite's flagship 2U multichannel FireWire audio interface. Two of Liquid Saffire 56's eight preamps use the third generation of Focusrite's Liquid Preamp for a choice of ten different preamp emulations. A harmonics dial allows the user to compensate for variance in vintage originals or to add levels of 2nd, 3rd and 5th harmonic distortion.



Alongside the two Liquid and six Saffire preamps are ten analogue outputs, 16 channels of ADAT I-O, stereo SPDIF or AES I-O, MIDI and two virtual 'loopback' inputs for routing digital audio between software applications.

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