

Retro Instruments Powerstrip

Representing something of a departure from the manufacturer's more usual 'homage' products, this channel strip remains decidedly, err, retro in feel but includes the sort of interesting twists that **GEORGE SHILLING** has come to expect.



I'm not sure if the terminology is the same in the US (where this device is made) but in the UK a Powerstrip commonly refers to a mains distribution board with four sockets in a white plastic case (*Or an 80s way of undressing. Ed*). Thankfully, this Powerstrip is rather less ordinary.

Retro Instruments and designer Phil Moore have established themselves as specialists in updated versions of classic designs. The Powerstrip (UK£2550 + VAT) departs from the 'replica' theme more than any previous Retro design, but it still incorporates some familiar signal flow concepts. Those are combined here in a unique fashion that has resulted in a valve-based recording channel with (unsurprisingly) a distinctly vintage flavour.

The physical design is similar to the 2A3 unit previously reviewed (*Resolution* V9.5). This too

is a smart grey 2U box with as much mass mounted on the rear as is fixed inside — the external mains transformer on the back is especially weighty. And valves and audio transformers also protrude from the rear, albeit sheathed in protective caps. At the left end of the rear panel you find the analogue audio connections. Separate XLR inputs are provided for Mic and Line, along with an XLR output. The increasingly common (and very useful) feature of a pass-thru jack for the front panel Instrument input is also provided on the rear, along with a second Hi-Z output that is postprocessing, to enable you to enhance an instrument signal before sending it on to an

amplifier. The IEC Mains socket at the opposite end is accompanied by a voltage switch and a fuseholder — the fuse value must be changed when altering input voltage.

The front panel switchgear is delightfully retro yet wonderfully practical. Large toggle switches are reassuring and the vintage knobs are provided with clear pointers and detailed 100-scale legending for easy recall. The custom vintage Bakelite meter scaling is similarly detailed; the meter is strictly a gain reduction display and as such is scaled with zero at the top. XLR sockets are Neutriks and the Instrument input and outputs are high quality chromed sockets.

A chunky rotary switch selects between the three possible inputs. Large toggles select Phase Reverse and Phantom Power — ideally I'd have liked a red light with the latter. Oddly, there is no Gain knob here; that comes later. Next up is the EQ section. This is similar to the 2A3 EQ and a fairly authentic Pultec replica but this also has the filter seen on the 2A3. This provides

for a subsonic roll-off with a corner frequency of either 40Hz or 90Hz (or off), using a three-position toggle. Above that is another toggle for EQ bypass. We then come to the compressor section. Here, we finally encounter an Input Gain, and indeed this is the preamp gain, even when the compressor is bypassed.

The compressor circuitry is modelled on the EMI RS124, so much is made of its 'Britishness'. Alongside the Input gain is Output Gain; this too is always in circuit. The compressor is enabled with a rotary switch which as well as the Compressor Out position also enables selection of the always popular Sidechain High Pass Filter. This has settings of 90Hz, 250Hz and Off. The other rotary switch selects the Time Constant modes similar to those found on the EMI original, with six positions from Slow to Fast. Beyond

the meter are the Power toggle and a red power light.

The mic input is transformer balanced and fully floating (except when using phantom power). Although the Input and Output knobs are simply scaled from 0 to 100, there is a bountiful 70dB of gain on tap. The mic preamp seems clean and detailed — deliciously crisp, but never clinical. Pulling the Input gain knob up changes the circuitry to give a more coloured sound. Gain is reduced, but the signal is juiced up a bit with a touch of enhancement that makes the sound more rounded and warm. This mode is described by the designer as making the input overload characteristic more ‘relaxed’ like a tube guitar amplifier. There’s certainly a gentle fuzzing of the tone achievable by juggling the Input and Output gains, although (particularly with a Line signal) I’d have liked even more drive available to expand the possibilities! And the difference between the two modes can be very subtle — it’s difficult to compare as the levels are quite different.

The EQ sounds as gorgeous as expected, with supremely clear and musical HF boost. The usual trick of juggling Boost and Atten simultaneously works as well as ever on the low band, and it all sounds properly Pultec-like. For more on that section, you may want to reread the 2A3 review.

The six different compressor Time Constants range from Slow at 1 to Fast at 6 and the slowest setting has a degree of auto attack and recovery. Things are pumpily at the fast end, and it’s not lightning fast, with

a pizzicato double bass still maintaining a good thump at the start of notes, although more than a few dBs of gain reduction on this setting can give you that feeling of your head turning inside out. As you move towards slower modes, the compression gradually becomes almost invisible on settings 3 or 4, although still taming and containing, until the unnaturally slow release of setting 1 makes the gain reduction rather audible again, with the slow attack emphasising the thump, followed by a very slow release.

On vocals, huge gain reductions on settings 3 or 4 sound very natural and not obvious. In a track, the slower settings of 2 or 1 are a bit too slow with most vocals, as the level recovers too slowly after a peak and clarity can get lost. The compressor’s Sidechain HPF was particularly successful when processing a Cajon, allowing the low end bonks to retain plenty of body, while squashing the overall sound pleasantly using the fastest setting. The EQ helps the low end too, with the Subsonic filter at 40Hz taming and tightening things up nicely when boosting at 100Hz. Since writing the Introduction Sheet (there’s no manual) Moore has, by popular demand, subsequently added the facility to connect two units for stereo compression by adding a ‘Couple’ phono socket on the back. This would turn a pair of these into a fantastic bus processor and the Sidechain HPF is undoubtedly extremely useful in that situation.

The instrument input is fat and solid sounding but having the luxury of passing through this subtle

processing on the way to your guitar amp seems a bit like brushing my 5-year old daughter’s hair before school — it can be great, but frequently gets mushed up on arrival!

The Powerstrip is a beautiful looking and sounding processor. The mic preamp has a wonderful openness and detail, while the classy EQ and compressor can only enhance the sound. It’s a joy to use, and without causing too much fuss or hype it makes everything sound gorgeous. ■

PROS Beautifully constructed combination of vintage-style circuitry with some great modern filter options.

CONS Unless rackmounted it is slightly bulky and awkward, with heavy components mounted on the rear; pull switch function not indicated on front panel; no meter backlight.

EXTRAS The 2A3 is a dual-channel programme equaliser similar to the Pultec EQP-1A3



and among other tweaks features a Subsonic Filter that can enhance the whole spectrum. It operates on both channels independently of the channel EQ bypass toggles, but is an integral part of the filter network, between the input transformer and the interstage transformer in the passive filter.

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