

Universal Audio 2108

Yet another interpretation and combination of UA's winningly appealing processing building blocks, this new unit has shades of 1176LN and 2-610. It sounds good, looks good and owning one will probably do you good.

GEORGE SHILLING



FOLLOWING ON FROM THE 2-610 valve dual input channel unit (*Resolution*, V1.3) comes this all discrete Class A solid state model, inspired by the Universal Audio 1108 line amplifier. This was an early 1960s Puttnam design that later became the basis for the far more famous 1176LN. The philosophy behind this new model is to provide a simple microphone preamplifier that imparts some of the characteristic tone of the 1176LN compressor, with which it shares similar output amplifier circuits and components, including the custom transformer. The input transformer is the same as that of the 2-610, but the 2108 also employs a JFET input stage that permits soft saturation.

The unit itself, like all UA gear, is very solidly constructed. The smart black anodised front panel is clearly engraved with white etched legending. This deep, weighty 1U box does not, however, include the power supply. This is housed in a separate, fairly heavy case (designated the DC-30), and is connected via a 7-pin XLR cable. This substantial box is a non-standard 11-inches long and has an IEC connector next to the XLR, and an illuminating Power switch. Voltage can be changed for 120V but the cover must be removed to do so.

The 2108's main unit also has a standby Power switch, a good old-fashioned metal toggle that can be used for instant signal mute, accompanied by a large blue LED. When this is flicked on there is a four second mute to avoid thumps. The rear of the 2108 employs XLR connectors for microphone inputs and line outputs; there are no line inputs here. However, the front panel includes 'Hi Z' instrument input jacks for each of the two channels.

Coarse level adjustment is made with familiar looking 1176-style Gain knobs, which are stepped in 5dB increments labelled from 30 to 65, with the 'Hi Z' input having its own separate range on the knob with settings of 25, 30 and 35. Two pairs of pushbuttons are provided on each channel. These operate +48V phantom power, alternative impedance selection (Z-In Select), phase reverse and signal LED source select.

None of these are accompanied by any illuminating indicator to illustrate their setting, but their travel is fairly deep. They are similar to pushbuttons on the 1176LN, except that they all latch individually. Like the 2-610, a second Level control acts as a fader for each channel. These undamped pots are legended 0 to

10 - zero cuts the signal - recommended use is with a setting between 7 and 10. At 10 the system gain is as indicated by the Gain selector. The large Signal LED is tri-coloured - with the button in, level is measured at the input to the final stage.

The LED lights green with a low level signal, turning to amber, then red as gentle saturation begins. With Output selected, the signal LED operates similarly, turning red at an output of +12dB. This works extremely well and you can instantly tell what is happening.

In use with a number of different mics and sources the character of this unit becomes apparent. Two different impedance choices are available for the microphone inputs and the Hi-Z jacks. With the microphone input, it is well worth experimenting between the 1kOhm and 4kOhm settings. The sound can vary wildly between the two settings, from clean and open to nasal and boxy, as I found out with one particular vocalist/microphone combination.

Care must be taken here, as there is often a level jump of a few dBs and it does not necessarily follow that the loudest setting sounds the best. The overall character of the unit came across as a rare combination of very clean, in terms of background noise and perceptual detail, but with a definite measure of 1176 sparkle and fizz and a great richness in the mid and high frequencies, especially when driving the input stage into the red. Yet despite that, the brightness never seems exaggerated, hyped or coloured.

The bottom end is solid and stable, this was best

demonstrated by a wonderfully satisfying depth when connecting a bass guitar to the Hi-Z input. Here again there is a choice of impedance, selectable between 58kOhms for active guitars and 2MOhms for passive instruments. I didn't encounter any active guitars while I had the unit, but the 2MOhm setting was definitely the best for recording a Fender bass. It sounded lovely, deep, solid, and rich, and undoubtedly much better than just using a DI box. And the gain ranges should suit all instruments.

Operation is always straightforward, although the pushbuttons would benefit from status indicators or better legending. For example, the signal Input/Output switch does not show which position is In and which is Out at a glance. And the character of this unit isn't suitable for every situation; with one particular singer and dynamic microphone combination, I swapped this for another unit and instantly the sound was much improved. However, on another day I might have swapped the mic and got a good result - most of the time the 2108 behaves beautifully with whatever is thrown at it. It's cheaper than the 2-610 (but lacks that model's EQ section) and I reckon that both models are excellent value. All told, the 2108 is another terrific performer from UA. ■

Contact

UNIVERSAL AUDIO, US:
Tel: SCV, London, UK, +44 208 418 0778
Website: www.uaudio.com

PROS

Sounds terrific; superb build quality; characterful, but not overly coloured; simple to set up.

CONS

Not always great with certain mics/singers; separate power box; weighty; front panel button legending could be more explanatory.

EXTRAS

With the new 6176, UA has combined the 610 tube microphone preamp with the 1176LN compressor in a single channel signal path. The preamp sections maintain the quality and character of the 2-610 while adding high-tension power regulation for (improved bass response) and a front-panel 15dB pad switch.

