

By Mitch Gallagher, mgallagher@musicplayer.com

Universal Audio 6176 Tube channel strip

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts

Universal Audio has made a big splash with their 1176LN reissue limiters. Likewise, the company has stirred up the preamp world with a reissue of the classic 610 preamp, originally part of the '60s-era console at United Recording in West Hollywood (now Oceanway). Both products have had positive acceptance in the modern recording world, and are in wide use. Now UA has packaged these two vintage units into one package, the 6176, which comprises a single-channel 610 tube mic preamp and an 1176 limiter in one 2-rackspace chassis.

The two "sides" of the 6176 can be used together in a "channel strip" arrangement, where the preamp output feeds the input of the limiter, or the preamp and the limiter can be used entirely independently as separate units. To this end, there are separate inputs and outputs on the back panel for each section. The preamp has both line and mic level XLR inputs, as well as an XLR line level output. Likewise, the 1176 section has an XLR input and an XLR output. The input impedance of the 1176 section can be changed from 15,000 ohms to 600 ohms



using a back-panel Input Loading switch. Depending on the gear you're interfacing to the 1176, you may find that the tone is a bit brighter using the 15k position.

Around front, the faceplate is divided into two sections. The 610 tube preamp controls are on the left; all the controls from the 610 and 2-610 stand-alone preamps are included: a stepped gain control (-10, -5, 0, +5, +10 dB), an impedance/input select control (500 and 2k mic, line, 47k and 2.2m instrument level), a large output level knob, and a two-band EQ. The high EQ can operate at 4.5k, 7k, or 10k Hz with a range of ± 9 dB, while the low EQ can operate at 70, 100, or 200 Hz, with a ± 9 dB boost/cut range. There's no dedicated EQ bypass button, but the EQ boost/cut controls are rotary switches with a "0" position that effectively bypasses the circuit. Rounding out the preamp controls are a polarity switch, a 1/4-inch instrument input, and something not found on the original 610 models, a 15 dB pad switch.

DIGIDESIGN DIGI 002

MANUFACTURER: Universal Audio, P.O. Box 3818, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Tel: 831-466-3737. Web: www.uaudio.com.

SUMMARY: Combining two high-end components in one unit provides great flexibility and power in a convenient, easy-to-use package.

STRENGTHS: Preamp and compressor can be used independently or together. Line, instrument, and mic-level inputs. Two units may interconnect for stereo operation. Includes all the features and sound quality that made the originals so cool. Pad switch for preamp (not included on the original). Input loading switch for compressor.

LIMITATIONS: No 1/4-inch line-level connections.

PRICE: \$2,495

On the right side of the front panel are the controls for the 1176 section. As with the preamp, these duplicate those found on a stand-alone 1176, although the form factor is slightly different. There are knobs for attack and release times, input and output levels, and a seven-position rotary switch (instead of push button switches) for setting the compression ratio. In addition to bypass, this switch offers 4:1, 8:1, 12:1, and 20:1 ratios. There's also a 1:1 setting that passes the signal through the limiter with no gain reduction — for adding "color" without compression, according to the manual — and a final switch position that enables the "all four buttons pushed at once" trick from the original. Above the ratio control is a meter function switch for choosing among preamp level, gain reduction, and compressor output being displayed on the front-panel mechanical VU meter.

In the center of the front panel are the power switch and indicator, 48-volt phantom power switch, and a Join/Split switch for choosing whether the two sections of the 6176 operate together as a chain or as independent units. This last item is convenient; I ended up leaving both the preamp and limiter sections physically wired up all the time, and was able to use them together and separately as the task required by simply flipping the switch.

IN USE

The 6176 is quite easy to use — the front panel is clearly laid out, and all the control choices make sense — but this doesn't prevent the unit from offering a ton of flexibility. Aside from the obvious choice of whether or not you're going to use both the preamp and the limiter on a given track, and whether or not you're going to apply EQ to the high, low, or both bands, you're given other options. One example: the

preamp impedance setting may or may not make a significant difference in the tone of the mic you're working with. With a Soundelux E47, for example, there was a noticeable sonic difference between the two settings; I preferred the 500 ohm setting when tracking my vocals.

But as far as the preamp section is concerned, the most tonal flexibility is provided by the way the gain controls are set up. It works almost like a guitar amp: If you run the Gain setting low (say, -10) and set the Level control high (above 7 or so), you'll get a crystal

clear, transparent tone. But turn up the Gain control to +5 or +10, and turn down the Level control, and the preamp gets fatter, warmer, and almost fuzzy (in a good way). You can spend a lot of hours futzing with the gain controls as you're trying out mics and impedance settings on a sound source; all the results that you get will be good (as far as the sound of the 6176 anyway!). It's up to you to sort through them and choose which settings are best for your recording.

But having this flexibility is great. For fingerpicked acoustic guitar

tracks and other delicate sources, you can dial in a clean, dynamic, round tone, while on crunchy or screaming guitars, you can punch things up with additional fatness and "texture." Similarly on vocals, a clean transparent sound suits certain styles and singers, while cranking things up works wonders to fatten up and round out a nu-metal screamer. Combine this with the ability to quickly drop a full-featured 1176 compressor into your signal path with the flip of a switch, and you've got one extremely powerful, flexible unit.

But that's not all this unit can do. Don't forget that you can use the 1176 section separately from the preamp section. And there's that front-panel hi-Z input that can be used for DI connection of a guitar or bass to the preamp — this sounds every bit as good as using many stand-alone DI boxes, and has the option of switchable impedance. While this made a subtle difference with some of my guitars (a Les Paul and a Strat equipped with active EMG pickups), the difference was startling with my Tele, which is equipped with "standard" single-coil pickups. The difference was even more dramatic with the under-saddle pickup in an acoustic guitar.

JOIN

In the time I've had to use the 6176, I've become quite enamored of it. The unit is tremendously flexible, both functionally and tonally. I never found a source where I couldn't dial up exactly the preamp sound that I wanted. Throwing a top-end compressor into the mix and a flexible DI input makes this one versatile and powerful package.

To sum it up: The preamp sounds awesome, and is extremely flexible tonally. The EQ is useful for shaping your signals. The 1176 limiter section provides sought-after compression and limiting characteristics. The pre and limiter can be used together as a channel strip or as totally independent units. And there's nice extras, such as the DI. With the 6176, Universal Audio has created a box where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and has done it at a reasonable price. All in all, an outstanding package. ■