



UNIVERSAL AUDIO

LA-610

Universal Audio previously re-issued the legendary 610 preamp and LA-2A compressor, but they're not exactly cheap. The new LA-610 combines both units in a single case at a surprisingly affordable price. **Huw Price** samples a slice of American pie.

LA-610

Manufacturer
Universal Audio

Price **£1,409**

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In the early days of studio recording, mixing desks were custom-made or built by in-house engineers. In Europe, Malcolm Toft was busy making Trident consoles, while Rupert Neve was fulfilling custom orders for top studios.

Meanwhile, over in California, studio owner and recording engineer Bill Putnam had been designing his own Universal Audio-branded recording equipment since the 1950s. Putnam's 610 preamp design was revolutionary because it was modular. Although we take this approach for granted these days, it was quite something back in the 1950s, when sessions could grind to a halt if part of the console stopped working. With a room full of session musicians working on union rates, any equipment failures were catastrophic and expensive. However, faulty modules could be quickly removed and swapped with minimal disruption.

Universal Audio consoles attracted interest and ultimately around 25 were made. Although that might not sound like a huge quantity these days, remember that there were only a handful of top studios in the 1950s and 1960s, so the number of legendary recordings that were made with 610 preamps is astounding – everyone from Frank Sinatra to The Beach Boys (who recorded *Pet Sounds* through one of these babies) and rock acts like The Doors and Van Halen. So, when all these Johnny-come-lately companies talk about re-creating the 'tube warmth' of classic recording gear, they are actually alluding to kit like the 610 preamp and the Universal

Audio LA-2A compressor. Universal Audio eventually became UREI and today Soundcraft owns the name.

Bill Putnam senior died in 1989, but his sons, Bill Jnr and Jim, revived Universal Audio in 1999. Although they started out making slavishly accurate re-creations of LA-2A and 1176 compressors, Universal Audio has also moved into plug-in effects and digital converters. The LA-610 preamp and compressor that we are reviewing this month is resolutely analogue combining, as its name

unchanged, there's the welcome addition of phantom power and phase switching, plus a Hi-Z jack socket on the front panel for instrument input. The shelving EQ section also offers a wider range of options (much like the 6176 and the two-channel 2-610), but the 15dB attenuation pad is unique to the LA-610. At the input stage there is a four-way gain switch offering -10dB to +10dB settings in 5dB increments and this works in conjunction with the Level control on

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implies, a modernised version of the 610 preamp with a modified version of the LA-2A compressor limiter.

Big knobs, big sound

When you read the description 'valve preamp' you should never take it for granted that a valve is handling the amplification duties – even if you can see one glowing away inside. The LA-610 is stuffed full of valves – three 12AX7s, a 6072 and 6AQ5, to be exact. These handle microphone and line pre-amplification duties as well as equalisation and compressor make-up gain.

Looking inside, the American construction standards are superb, with chunky printed circuit board tracings, carefully selected components, ceramic valve bases, mighty transformers and only one microchip in sight. Although the preamp design is essentially

the preamp and Gain on the compression stage. The Gain switch reduces the amount of negative feedback, thereby increasing level and harmonic distortion. The manual suggests setting Level between 7 and 10 as a starting point, then adjusting the Gain switch to achieve a satisfactory signal. In practice you can use your ears to keep things clean or to dial in as much overdrive as you want, using Level like a master volume on a guitar amplifier to control the output signal.

Since the LA-610 is likely to be used with a wide variety of input sources, Universal Audio sensibly chose selectable input impedances. The microphone settings are 500Ω (perfect for low-impedance ribbon microphones and some vintage valve mics) and 2kΩ (for modern microphones). The jack input impedance can be 47kΩ for active

METHOD SPOT Tones to DI for

Those tubes can provide subtle to extreme amounts of valve crunch. The shelving frequencies are well chosen for adding sparkle and cut to guitars and bass or richness to synthesizers, while the compressor can be adjusted for tube rectified-type sag or extreme sustain.



basses and guitars, or 2.2M Ω for passive instruments. Line input is fixed at 13k Ω . Although some might regard the equalisation section as somewhat rudimentary, we'd argue that it's consistent with the minimal aesthetic of the LA-610. All you get are high and low shelving with three frequency options each: 4.5, 7 and 10KHz; and 70, 100 and 200Hz. The boost and cut switches travel between +/-9dB in 1.5dB increments, with a null point in the centre.

Orange squash

The compressor/limiter stage uses the same T4 optical sensor that has always been used in the LA-2A, but the circuit has been modified to minimise production costs. Nevertheless, it remains an all-valve affair and the electro-luminescent light source panel in the T4 offers faster attack times than many other opto compressors are able to achieve.

The Peak Reduction control sets the gain of the sidechain signal that triggers the compression – the higher the gain, the lower the threshold and the greater the amount of compression. The VU meter can display the signal levels of the preamp, compressor and the overall output. A second selector switches between compressor, limiter and bypass. Even with the compressor/limiter section bypassed, the Gain control still sets the output level of the LA-610 and it also enables make-up gain to be adjusted after compression.

Glowing reports

With a small omni-capsule Oktava MC012 condenser on acoustic guitar, the LA-610 was a little subdued compared to an all-valve Altec 1566 copy, but the sound was very smooth and it captured far more room ambience than any of our other mic amps. The LA-610 made the Korg TP-2 and the Drawmer 1960 seem brittle in the high-end, while every other preamp sounded slightly pinched and

RELATED TECHNOLOGY Similar in style...

The optical compressor in the LA-610 isn't quite the same as the one found in the LA-2A, but it is very similar. It uses the same T4 optical cell, so its response is very similar to the original. Unlike the LA-2A, however, the LA-610 doesn't have a sidechain input, nor can you link two units for stereo operation.

Universal Audio has deliberately kept the LA-610 free from unnecessary clutter, as reflected in the rather spartan rear panel. There's nothing lacking about its sound, though.

nasal. A vintage valve Neumann CMV563 with a figure-of-8 capsule sounded wonderful through the LA-610. A Telefunken V72 ran a close second with a more lively and punchier presentation, but the LA-610 had silkier highs, smoother mids and a deeper bass – as well as a bigger sound. We did find that altering the input impedance settings subtly alters the sound. The Neumann, for instance, sounded clearer and more open feeding 500 Ω rather than 2k Ω . With 77dB of gain, the LA-610 had no problems with ribbon microphones and even when pushed, noise levels were lower than some solid-state preamps we have tried.

We connected our fussy low-impedance Reslo ribbon directly to the 500 Ω input and with a 3dB boost at 4.5KHz the results on electric guitar were simply outstanding. The compressor couldn't be easier to use because there are no attack and release controls, and we didn't miss them when we were working with vocals, guitars or even bass. Other compressors offer more tone-mangling potential for drums and loops, but that's not what the LA-610 is all about. The tonal quality of the music remains unchanged and when you are compressing to around -4dB, the LA-610's forgiving nature means that the effect is very transparent.

The real deal

From the outset it is worth emphasising that differences between professional-quality preamps during A/B testing are always far more subtle than the differences between microphones. Vintage-style valve preamps like this one are generally suffused with character, but they won't suit every application. Valve microphones in particular sometimes require cleaner and more clinical preamps,

or things can become too woolly and soft. But if you do crave that chewy valve tone, the LA-610 might not knock you out in the first round, but if you keep on listening it will eventually win on points. Although the LA-610 does not contain an exact copy of an LA-2A compressor, it is based on the original, so let's do the maths. Universal Audio's M-610 preamp costs £1,056 and an LA-2A costs £2,466. So, Universal Audio is throwing in a superb valve compressor with the LA-610 for an extra £352. That's a bargain! **MTM**

SUMMARY

KEY FEATURES

- Microphone input impedance: 500 Ω /2k Ω
- Balanced line input impedance: 20k Ω
- Hi-Z input impedance: 2.2M Ω /47k Ω
- Recommended minimum Load: 600 Ω
- Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz +/- 0.5dB
- Maximum gain: 40dB (line), +77dB (microphone)
- Noise floor: -72dBu 20Hz-20kHz
- Valves: three 12AX7s, one 6072, one 6AQ5

WHY BUY

- Exceptional DI sound
- Vintage-toned tube mic pre
- Variable input impedance
- Transformer balanced input and output
- Control over valve saturation levels
- Transparent and ergonomic compressor/limiter
- Basic equalisation controls

WALK ON BY

- Can't use pre and comp independently
- No external sidechain input
- No possibility of stereo linking
- All XLR connections at the back
- No parametric EQ
- Too refined for certain applications

VERDICT

Forget those phoney retro recording channels with a placebo valve and a bundle of microchips, the LA-610 is the real deal.

