

FIG. 1: The Neve 88RS plug-in has features galore and keeps the Neve aesthetic intact.



UNIVERSAL AUDIO

Neve 88RS and LA-3A
(Mac/Win)

Two more solid plug-in contenders for the UAD.

By Eli Crews

Universal Audio's UAD DSP host system has garnered a lot of respect in the audio community, becoming a staple in many serious digital audio workstation setups. UA's knack for modeling the most revered analog devices in the world has set it apart in the crowded field of software emulations. Two new plug-ins—the Neve 88RS and the LA-3A—expand the possibilities for UAD system owners in the realm of high-quality digital processing.

Neve 88RS

The 88RS plug-in is based on a channel strip from the highly regarded 88RS, AMS Neve's 21st-century large-format analog console (see Fig. 1). The plug-in version has much of the functionality of its analog predecessor and is split into four basic sections. The Dynamics section has separate expander/gate and compressor/limiter circuits, each with its own switch to put it into the signal path. The 4-band EQ section is next, and then the high and low Cut Filters. The Global section is home

to a polarity-reversal button, a switch for repositioning the EQ to be predynamics, and a button for moving the EQ into the dynamic sidechain for frequency-dependent compression (such as de-essing). A red power switch bypasses the entire effect.

Although I've not used an 88RS desk, I have worked a fair amount on earlier Neve VR-series consoles. The functionality is similar between the two, so I felt right at home with the exquisitely designed 88RS plug-in. It even has the uniquely Neveian quirk of putting some pots upside down, with the center position at six o'clock. I don't have the space here to fully explain all the features, so I'll concentrate on the ones I think set this plug-in apart from your average virtual channel strip.

The expander/gate circuit offers a great amount of control, allowing you to achieve a natural sound quality that most gate plug-ins can't touch. The Hysteresis control, which determines separate dB levels for the opening and closing of the gate, is a major factor in the musicality of the circuit. This control basically eliminates gate chatter, that annoying effect that happens



FIG. 2: The LA-3A is much simpler than the Neve 88RS but gets the job done nicely.

when the signal is hovering right around your threshold, making the gate open and close rapidly. The rest of the controls are standard for a gate. Although there is no continuously variable attack time, a Fast switch reacts to the signal crossing the threshold in 50 microseconds, as opposed to 500 microseconds.

The compressor/limiter circuit is straightforward, although again you have only binary settings for your attack. The attack time is actually program dependent: the Fast switch shifts how quickly the compressor can react to a speedy transient, from 3 milliseconds down to 1 millisecond.

With 20 dB of cut and boost on each band, and widely overlapping frequency ranges, the EQ section has just about everything you would expect from a 4-band equalizer. However, only the two middle bands are fully parametric. The high and low bands are peak-type filters

by default, and each has a Hi-Q switch to decrease the affected bandwidth. A Shelf button on each of the high and low bands allows you to change the shape to a shelving EQ. The two Cut Filters have individual engage switches and sweep from 31.5 Hz to 315 Hz (highpass) and from 18 kHz to 7.5 kHz (lowpass).

In practice, I found the Neve 88RS to be highly versatile and sonically robust. Using it is definitely the closest I've ever felt to manipulating large-format controls in the digital realm. The effectiveness and ease of use of

all the sections make it my new first-reach channel strip for just about everything, from vocals and snare drum to trumpet and accordion. The EQ and dynamics are responsive, flexible, and free of undesirable artifacts, and the ability to use them together as a de-esser is a huge

bonus. Considering how much each strip does, you can run a decent number of instances (13 mono or 9 stereo per UAD system). You can also free up DSP resources by bypassing individual sections of the strip that you aren't using.

LA-3A

The LA-3A plug-in is a faithful replica of its hardware namesake, which itself is the solid-state (FET) version of the tube-based LA-2A optical compressor. In a sense, the LA-3A is a cross between an LA-2A and the original Universal Audio/UREI compressor, the 1176. With only two knobs, two switches, and a VU meter, this plug-in is the model of functional simplicity—the perfect yin to the multifeatured 88RS's yang (see Fig. 2). One knob is for Peak Reduction and the other is for makeup gain. The switches are for changing between limiting and compressing and determining whether the VU meter shows gain reduction or output level. The VU switch also has an off position, which bypasses the effect and frees up DSP.

I used the LA-3A on a myriad of instruments and a number of mixes, and it held its own. A couple of times I opted for the UAD system's LA-2A or 1176LN plug-ins instead, as the sonic flavors are slightly different. For example, on horns and vocals in one song, I liked the LA-2A a little more for its gentler imprint on the sound. I found the LA-3A in this case to be more aggressive sounding, which just didn't work for that particular piece. However, the LA-3A sounded great on another song where I wanted the vocals to be more up front.

On a midtempo rock track, I preferred the LA-3A on the snare drum, because the LA-2A, with its inherently slower attack time, let too much of the transient of the drum through. In a different circumstance where you really need the snare drum to pop, the LA-2A might be preferable, so having both options is certainly nice.

On bass guitar and bass drum, I was surprised to find that I preferred the LA-3A, because the LA-2A has become my standard compressor for low-end instruments. The LA-3A cleared up some muddiness in the low mids but still let the sub energy through nicely.

PRODUCT SUMMARY

UNIVERSAL AUDIO Neve 88RS and LA-3A

UAD plug-ins

Neve 88RS, \$299

LA-3A, \$149

FEATURES	4
EASE OF USE	4
QUALITY OF SOUNDS	5
VALUE	4

RATING PRODUCTS FROM 1 TO 5

PROS: Both plug-ins sound fantastic and are very straightforward to use. Certain features of the Neve 88RS are unique.

CONS: Only work in conjunction with Universal Audio's UAD system. Dedicated DSP hardware causes inevitable latency.

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NEVE 88RS AND LA-3A

Comparing the LA-3A to the 1176LN in all of these circumstances, I heard less difference in character, as long as my attack and release settings on the 1176 were in the middle of their range. Both sound great when slammed, giving you that brilliantly energetic overcompressed sound that is often perfect for drum room mics or backing vocals.

Play Your Card Right

If you already own a UAD system, you'll surely want to pick up these two gems at some point. If you don't already own a UAD system, Universal Audio is definitely making it harder to resist with each top-notch plug-in it releases. The company often offers promotional discounts or package deals for its

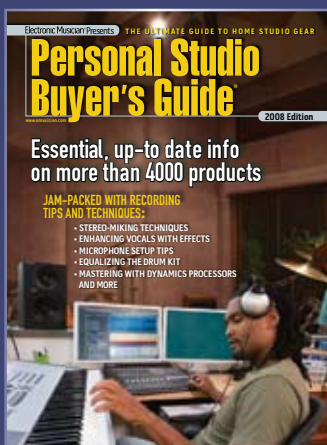
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plug-ins (such as the Nevana suite), so keep your eyes peeled.

The main drawback is that the DSP host adds a hefty amount of latency, which Digidesign Pro Tools LE doesn't automatically compensate for. The extra routing is a little cumbersome, but it's worth it—the UAD plug-ins have helped me elevate my DAW mixing to a higher level. Although I still prefer to use certain outboard pieces while mixing, Universal Audio has taken yet another step toward providing engineers with a fully professional internal mixing environment.

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