

specialreport summertime software

UA's LA-3A and Neve 88RS



Universal Audio's LA-3A

Product information

Neve 88RS Channel Strip: \$299
LA-3A Audio Leveler: \$149

by Geoff Sanoff

Universal Audio's latest additions to its UAD-1 line are the LA-3A compressor and the Neve 88RS channel strip. As someone working frequently on a host-based system (Black Lion modded Digi 002 running Pro Tools LE 7.3.1, quad G5 with 2GB RAM) I have been enjoying the UAD-1 card and its suite of plug-ins for a while now. It's a great way to expand the mixing power of native applications like Pro Tools LE.

Having emulations of the 1176, Fairchild, Neve 33609 and LA-2A compressors, I had to ask myself if I really needed another digitized classic. In short form, the answer to the question is yes, surprisingly so. Of the two, I thought I'd be more interested in the LA-3A, simply because of its familiarity.

So, I tried the LA-3A first—on dirty electric guitar tracks for the power pop rocker, Javier Escovedo. I have to say it brings something quite nice to this task. It controls dynamics effectively, but equally important for me, at least, it also adds something nice tonally. On Javier's dirty electric guitar tracks, it brought out a midrange punch and presence where the 1176 tended to bring out more low-end girth. The attack time on the LA-3A is faster than where I find myself tending to set guitar compressors, and so that may be part of the difference that I am hearing. But even so, I really liked what it added, something I would not have been able to get with EQ alone, and something I don't easily find with other compressor plug-ins that I own.

On the same Escovedo song, I tested the LA-3A on my compressed drum bus.

On this particular song, I had been using [Digidesign's] Smack, which I like on drums, but the LA-3A added a nice sense of depth and warmth that Smack lacked in this application. When properly pushed, the LA-3A pumps well, giving the drums a nice, propulsive energy, maintaining both sonic detail (high-end) but gaining more meat (low-mid weight). It would have been my choice in this application if I did not already own UA's 1176. The LA-3A also sounded quite nice and crunchy on several different close-miked snare tracks.

On the lead male vocal for Russian cult favs, Auktyon, I found the LA-3A to be just the ticket. On other male vocals I tend to prefer the UA Fairchild, but for this task, the LA-3A was the right sound, bringing singer Leonid Fedorov's vocals right to the front and adding a nice presence to them in the process. The beauty of the LA-3A is its simplicity. Like its older brother, the LA-2A, there are only two knobs and a compress/limit switch. In my usage, it either did the trick or it didn't—there aren't endless parameters to tweak or "secret" modes to engage. And when the LA-3A works, it's obvious immediately.

Because of its reasonably fast attack and release times, it catches peaks quickly, and you have to use your ears as much as its meters to tell what its doing. A -3 dB reduction on its meter actually yielded what sounded to me like a fair amount more compression.

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SUMMERTIME SOFTWARE

PSN's look at the latest in software platforms, effects plug-ins and virtual instruments includes a pair of user reviews and a new software product section. Audio engineers and desktop music producers of all kinds will find some exciting new releases this summer or early fall, between the long-awaited Reason 4.0 and upcoming FXpansion BFD2—both currently in beta testing—Waves' new collection of API-modeling plug-ins, new sound libraries from East West and ILIO, and Digidesign's new Structure soft sampler. Check out reviews of Apple's new SoundTrack Pro 2 and Universal Audio's Neve 88RS and LA-3A plug-ins, just released with UAD version 4.7.0, as well as a rundown of some of the new software products either just out, or coming soon to a store near you.

Apple's Soundtrack Pro 2

by Rich Tozzoli

As with every new release from Apple, the word "integration" always finds its way into the workflow. Soundtrack Pro 2 is the company's latest incarnation in the ever-advancing series, bundled as part of the latest Final Cut Studio 2 package.

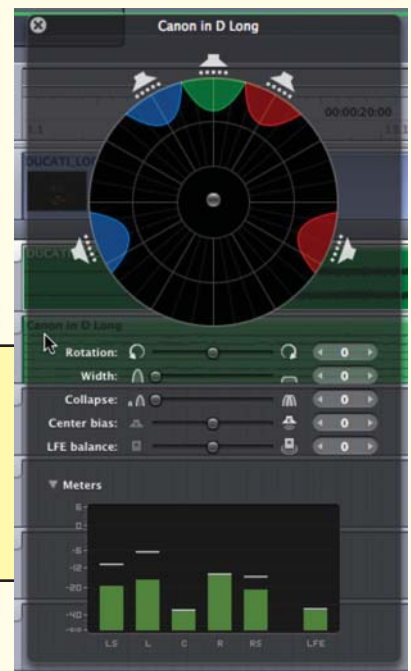
Clearly aimed at the post and video editing markets, SP2 has several useful

Product information

Final Cut Studio 2 (includes Soundtrack Pro 2, DVD Studio Pro 4, Final Cut Pro 6, Motion 3, Color and Compressor 3): \$1,299

new features such as a "take" management system, single-window interface combining Timeline and Waveform editing, a unique multi-view video screen for spotting, automatic audio conform processing and a cool Lift & Stamp tool for copying sets of applied effects and/or EQ from one clip to another. But what clearly stands out with this release is the ability to capture, mix and create 5.1 multichannel surround sound content.

Let's first dig a bit deeper into some of the basics. Minimum requirements for Final Cut Studio/SP 2 include a Mac with a 1.25 GHz processor running on at least a PowerPC G4. You'll need 1 GB of RAM, MAC OSX v10.4.9 or later, QuickTime 7.1.6 or later and a display with 1024x768 resolution or higher. Of course, you'll need an audio interface (with good reason to use the Mac's optical outputs), and for surround work, you should have at least six channels of I/O. If you've held



Apple's SP2 Surround Panner window

off picking up that surround monitoring rig until now, this is a great excuse to start shopping for one.

Apple includes several thousand royalty-free sound effects and music tracks—many in surround. With just a quick listen, you can tell the company put quite a bit of care into selecting high-quality clips. There are also more than 50 stereo and surround plug-ins, or you can use your Waves, Sonnox or whatever plug-ins you like that run on the Audio Units platform. To me, that is one thing that separates pro-level software from mediocrity—the ability to use high-quality external software plug-ins.

As mentioned, it's clear that this program was designed with post production

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LA-3A/ Neve 88RS

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So this leads us to the Neve 88RS. When you think plug-in emulations of Neve EQs you think classic, you think '70s and early '80s, but not circa "now." And yet, this plug-in completely won me over. For one thing, the convenience of an all-in-one plug-in speaks for itself.

But more importantly, it sounds great. I found myself trying it on everything. I particularly liked it on drums. On the drum overheads of the Auktyon live recordings, it allowed me to add top end that was not overly brash or harsh. The compressor has more than enough parameters to keep you fiddling for days, and works as what I'd describe as a practical compressor rather than as an effect-y compressor. It doesn't do cool distortion like a Distressor or an 1176, but it does do the job when it comes to actually controlling dynamics. I found it added a pleasant thickness to the

sound of the overheads on this particular kit, giving cymbals a nice washy feel without eating up the whole picture. I liked the sound of the compressor on snare drum overall, especially on a song with a lot of ghost notes. It brought out the details very effectively and cleanly.

On kick drum, and bass DI, there are enough EQ bands to cut and boost where needed, and enough headroom to add substantial bottom end. Again, a subtle amount of compression really helped the live kick drum to be more consistent without losing too much power on the loud passages.

On the same dirty electric that the LA-3A worked so well on, the Neve 88RS was a tad frustrating. It sounded fine, but when doing more or less the same adjustments on other EQs, including the Neve 1073SE, I felt that the 88RS did not sparkle as much as I would have liked. Simply trying to match settings across EQs in order to compare it against others was not that easy. And I needed to use the extra bands to get a sound similar to other EQs with fewer



UA's Neve 88RS

bands. I'm not sure why this would be, but I suspect that the downside of the 88RS's feature richness is the fact that it takes longer to get it to do what you want.

There are enough parameters with the expander/gate to give you reasonably good control of your gating. The fact that you can apply the EQ to side-chain the dynamics section means that in addition to

doing frequency-dependant compression, like de-essing, you can also use it to control the gate, getting it to trigger more precisely. I found these functions to be useful, if a bit visually confusing, not unlike the large format consoles it emulates. It certainly allowed me to have more kick and less of everything else, though on the funk song with a snare that had a lot of ghost notes, I couldn't get it as tight and accurate as I wanted. But I couldn't get anything else to do a better job either.

In contrast to the LA-3A, the 88RS is not a plug-in you just throw on. It takes time to get it set right. But with that caveat, I seriously did not expect to like it so much. It's a great utility plug-

in, sounding good without maxing out the DSP. Both the LA-3A and the Neve 88RS have different audio signatures than the other plug-ins I already own, and in a digital world of infinite parameters and multiple clones, that makes them unique and worthy of attention.

Universal Audio
www.uaudio.com

Apple Soundtrack

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in mind. Recording ADR to picture with the new Multitake Editor is a simple process. Simply click the Cycle button on the toolbar, highlight the region to be recorded, arm your track, and press the space bar.

The cursor will continually record until you stop, placing the takes "under" each other. Thoughtfully, the audio segment is lettered with the words "Composite" at the bottom of the waveform, reminding you there are multiple passes.

From there, you can click on the audio region and select the Multitake Editor tab in the timeline. Each take will be stacked atop each other, with a track labeled "Comp" above the rest. The Blade Tool can be used to chop up sections and clicking with the Selection Tool highlights the part for a master take. Another nice touch

is the ability to Command/Option/Drag a file to slip it in the timeline for easy lip-matching to picture. Once you've decided on the proper parts, clicking on the arrows atop each section will create user-selectable cross-fades. Of course, SP2 is not just for post (though it's certainly the focus); this function could easily be used for vocal comps or guitar solos.

SP2 has some nice multichannel touches built in. Just Control-Click on a stereo panner to open a dialog box up, allowing you to quickly select a Surround Panner. A small multichannel panner will then appear in both the Edit and Mix window. Double-clicking the panner will open a larger semi-transparent Panning window with Rotation, Width, Collapse, Center bias (a type of divergence) and LFE balance sliders. Another nice touch is that each window has a Meters section showing LS, L, C, R, RS and LFE level (laid out for visual appeal)—and can be opened or closed as needed.

A small but huge feature of SP2 is the ability to directly output 5.1 Dolby Digital files. After doing a cool cinematic/orchestral project, I just pressed Command-E (Export), chose Dolby Digital Professional (AC-3) File from the File Type drop menu, selected my various preferences for Data Rate, Preprocessing, etc, and exported. Within a few minutes, I had a neat, clean single AC-3 file on my desktop. That really is amazing, and more DAW software companies need to take a close look at this feature.

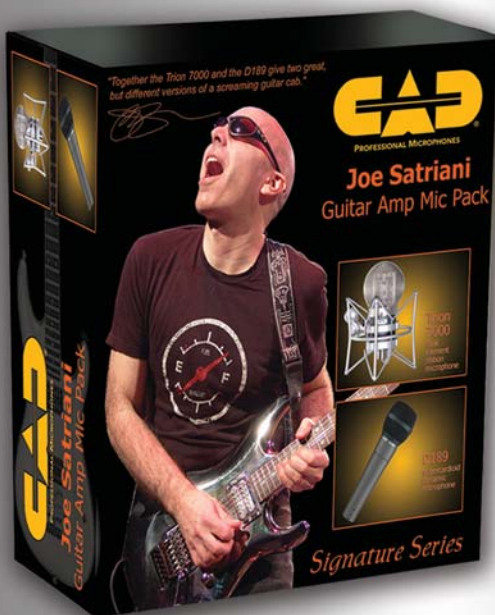
SP2 uses the SMPTE/ITU standard for routing output channels, which is 1 (Left), 2 (Right), 3 (Center), 4 (LFE), 5 Left Surround (Ls) and 6 Right Surround (Rs). If you don't have enough outputs for surround, SP2 can automatically downmix stereo fol-

lowing the Dolby guidelines of attenuating the Ls and Rs by 3 dB and mixing the C into the L/R channels down 3 dB, while dropping the LFE. Of course, you could just do a "Save As" and create your own stereo downmix (usually preferred!). As for surround plug-ins, there are several included—such as Surround Compressor, Multichannel Gain, Delay Designer and the excellent Space Designer.

One of the things that I liked best about SP2 was its overall flexibility. You can record six audio sources into a single 5.1 channel for easy surround capture. You can export your mixes as a WAV, MP3, AAC, AC-3, AIFF or a QuickTime movie. It can also directly export to Motion, Logic or Waveburner—as well as opening your project as a Final Cut Pro Sequence. You can "Lift" EQ and processing effects from one clip and "Stamp" it onto another (which works amazingly well). I also like the fact that it's super easy to send a conform list from Final Cut to Soundtrack Pro, and the changes will be merged—a massive time-saver. Last but not least, you can import and export AAF files, or OMF (we know what a pain in the @\$% that can be).

As is to be expected from Apple, SP2 is a definitive step up from its predecessor. Sure, its not all things to all people, but no software app really is. I can only hope that more professionals start to use the built-in multichannel sound capabilities, because as we know—content is king. The simple fact that Apple continues to make programs such as Soundtrack Pro 2 more powerful and easier to use keeps me coming back for more. Check out the demos online at apple.com and take a look for yourself.

Apple
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