BombFactory Classic Compressor Plug-Ins

FIELD TEST

by Barry Rudolph

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Bomb Factory Digital's growing family of 12 (so far) plug-ins support Digidesign Pro Tools TDM systems running under 4.x.x and 5.0, AudioSuite processing as well as Real-Time AudioSuite for Pro Tools 5.0 LE. Bomb Factory's software offers easy-to-use, real-time processing with graphical interfaces that emulate the original analog units' front panels.

Recent additions to this series include the Voce Spin, a simulation of the Leslie speaker along with a simulation of the Chorus/Vibrato knob on the Hammond organ; the SansAmp PSA-1 amplifier simulator with 49 SansAmp presets (a virtual simulation of a simulation!); and Bob Moog's Moogerfooger Lowpass Filter and Ring Modulator. To get a feel for how these perform in the studio, I chose the company's Classic Compressors suite featuring emulations of the UREI LA-2A Leveling Amplifier and 1176 Peak Limiter.

I installed the CD-ROM software into two different Macs: a G3 running Pro Tools 4.3.2 and a 9600 running PT 5.0. Although I eventually also upgraded the G3 to V. 5.0, there were no surprises: The plug-ins ran just fine on all of the systems. DSP Allocator indicated that both compressors in the suite use 33% of a DSP chip on the Mix Farm card for each instantiation, and they'd also work with the older PCI DSP Farm cards. When opened in a session, both the LA-2 and 1176 come up ready to go, in a factory preset compression mode with unity make-up gain and no level jump.

OPERATION AND USE

Both the LA-2 and 1176 plug-ins appeared on my monitor as beautifully rendered front panels with accurate coloring and control knob layouts. Users adjust the front panel controls by

clicking on the numbers surrounding the knobs, rather than selecting the knob and moving the cursor up and down the screen. There is no provision to "type" in knob values as Bomb Factory seems to encourage analog-style tweaking rather than computer keyboard entry. Besides, neither the real LA-2 nor the 1176 has calibrated dB settings on its front panel anyway. The big, lighted VU meters respond quickly and realistically for exact adjustment, and there doesn't seem to be any latency delay between what you do and what you hear.

Although "improving" a classic product such as an LA-2 is considered akin to audio heresy in most circles, Bomb Factory added a side-chain input to these old originals. With sidechaining, you can set up a de-esser or specific frequency-dependent compressor. If you use AudioSuite processing to process a recording permanently, you have to select Sidechain input to the track you want to process.

This sidechain feature let me use the LA-2 as a look-ahead compressor by copying the track I wanted to process and slipping it ahead of the original by 100 ms (or whatever attack time setting you want to use). By pointing this advanced track to the sidechain input of the plug-in on the original track, you can achieve zero attack-time compression--an impossible process in the analog world. All the standard PT features are included with these vintage-style plug-ins. You can automate all the controls as well as the bypass button. You can store, copy and paste settings from one plug-in instantiation to another, and you can chain an LA-2 into an 1176 to combine a slower compressor with a faster one.

AN LA-2 ON ALL CHANNELS?

The original LA-2 compressor used an electro-optical attenuator followed by a tube make-up gain amplifier. BF carefully analyzed all its characteristics and sound and modeled the plug-in to sound and behave the same way--flaws and quirks included. All the same switches and knobs of the original units are there; even the normally rear panel-mounted Comp/Limit switch is positioned on the front panel. When the Comp/Limit switch is switched to Comp, the plug-in has a maximum compression ratio of 3:1. In Limit mode, the plug-in behaves like a broadcast limiter (the LA-2's original purpose) with a higher threshold and ratio. Interestingly, the Output Meter is calibrated to -18 dBfs when reading 0 dB. I used the LA-2 in the same way I would use a real LA-2: for vocals and bass. I got the same easygoing compression with the same personalities of the vintage unit. The LA-2 is the epitome of a simple and forgiving compressor with just two knobs to adjust: Gain (make-up gain) and Compression. The BF plug-in works in the same manner and, provided you have enough DSP Farm cards, you could have a separate LA-2 on each channel.

1176 IN THE HOUSE

For the 1176 plug-in, I chose a couple of baritone guitar tracks to process just as I might do with the pair of real 1176LNs I have. I A/B'd the sound and operation of the virtual 1176 and the real one, and I found that the 1176 plug-in adjusts and reacts the same way as the real one. You can get the same kind of squash and character as the real one to the degree permitted by the Pro Tools digital environment. As I would expect, the plug-in is more accurate and stable with repeatable performance and less noise than the 30-year-old vintage units. I do

sense a greater dynamic range with my real 1176s when used with live microphones because it is all analog without any analog-to-digital conversion in the way. I used both digital sound sources already recorded in PT or I processed sounds at the time I recorded them in. The 1176 plug-in works the same in either mode, as the sound source is always digital. And just like on the original, all of the old 1176 tricks can be used on the plug-in, such as pushing all the ratio buttons at once to get the same wacky operation with the "pegged" VU meter.

Both the LA-2 and 1176 compressors in the Bomb Factory's Classic Compressors suite represent the company's motto of "Digital Done Right" in their operation, feel, look and superb sound. Retailing for $599, the suite has some useful digital tools for Pro Tools users who like the sound of vintage gear but not the high price.

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