

Its getting more difficult to find distinctive factors in analogue processors. LEN DAVIES, however, thinks this one is different.

There are only a few people in this wonderful industry of ours that can claim the experience and track record of Malcolm Toft, (in fact one of my favourite '60s bands The Spectrum named a song after him while he engineered for them in 1969), and that experience has truly come to the fore in his equipment designs, many of which have become legends in their own right. In these days of more DAWs the digital approach to recorded music, more than ever, requires that the source signal is given the best possible chance at quality, so the latest unit from Toft Audio Designs should fit in perfectly. Welcome to the ATC-2.

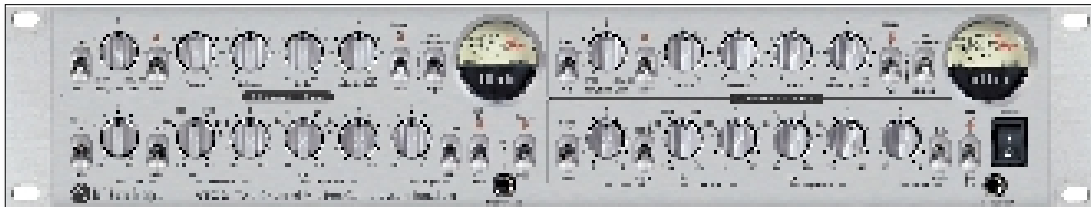
Description

The ATC-2 is a two-channel Mic Pre/Compressor/ Equaliser according to the legend on the front, but is actually a lot more than that, as the compressor is a FET type that helped create the special '60s and '70s sounds but was also notoriously difficult to set up, an obstacle removed in this unit. It's 2U in height, and effectively split down the

don't indicate a level of gain change), and allows 60dB of gain for the mic input and from -16dB to +30dB for the line. A central '0' position gives unity or 0dB and allows cutting or boosting as required. To the right of this is a 48-volt phantom power switch that needs to be switched up to apply it, at which point a red LED illuminates. This may seem a little strange but it actually is a good safety feature as it's all too easy to accidentally knock a switch down, and phantom power isn't always needed and could cause damage.

Now we come to the compressor, and maybe I'm slightly biased because I prefer the sound of these older designs, but this is a dream design and so easy to use. According to the manual it's based on a circuit design used by Trident in the early Eighties and is incredibly effective. It comprises four rotary controls: Attack, Release, Ratio and Make-up Gain, working on a fixed threshold system (assuming that the input section has been set up correctly). A 'compressor in' switch to the right of these again has to be switched up to bring the compressor into

TOFT AUDIO DESIGNS



MIC PRE/COMPRESSOR/EQUALISER

middle with Channel 1 on the left and Channel 2 on the right, both of which sport identical controls and which are capable of being used separately or coupled via a selector switch in the middle.

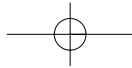
From the moment you lift this unit out of the box, you know you're dealing with quality. It's very solidly made with a wonderful retro feel added by the two circular VUs, and all of the rotary controls and switches feel reassuringly sturdy like they're part of a quality unit.

The rear of the unit is simple in that, apart from the IEC mains socket on the rear left-hand side, it features an XLR mic input, and XLR balanced and 1/4-inch jack unbalanced line input, and an XLR balanced and 1/4-inch jack unbalanced output per channel.

Both channels are identical so I'll describe Channel 1, which is divided into two horizontal rows, the top row being the input settings and compressor and the lower featuring the equaliser section. On the far left of the top section is the 'mic or line' switch, to the right of which is the gain rotary control that has a notched motion (I'm assuming to prevent accidental movement as the notches

circuit, at which point a red LED lights above it. Recommended use of this section is to start with all controls fully anti-clockwise except the make up gain rotary that has a central unity gain 0dB position, and apply the ratio until you hear the effect you're after, at which point you adjust the attack and release times to your taste and make-up the gain to compensate for any lost level. I know I didn't really need to go through that but there are a lot of new guys out there who tend to over-complicate compression, and I just wanted to show how simple it really is.

At the right of the top section is the very tasty circular VU meter that looks rather gothic in its design and adds to its charm in my eyes. To its left is another switch that chooses the meter mode of Output or Gain Reduction depending on what you wish to monitor. While I can understand the idea of treating the two channels as separate entities with the choice of coupling them together for a dual or stereo signal, I must admit that I would have preferred to see both meters in the middle, so it's easy to see at a glance the levels of a stereo signal instead of in the extreme top right of each of the channels. This is purely



subjective and does not in any way detract from the unit as I still feel it's one of the best I've come across.

The equaliser section on the lower half is of a four-band design and features a 50Hz filter switch on the far left followed by a ±15dB rotary control for the low gain and a 60Hz or 120Hz selector to the right of that. The low mid has a range between 100Hz and 1.5kHz with markers up to 1kHz in 200Hz steps, and a ±15dB gain control to the right of it, while the high mid ranges between 1kHz to 15kHz with markers up to 10kHz in 2kHz steps and again a ±15dB gain control to the right of it.

The high frequency is switchable between 8kHz and 12kHz and again features a ±15dB gain control. Finally to the right we have an 'equaliser in' switch, that again has to be switched up to be on, at which point a red LED will illuminate.

The bottom right of the channel features a 1/4-inch jack instrument input, while the stereo couple switch is the last item on Channel 1 and the black power rocker switch is the last item on Channel 2.

The stereo couple function needs a little explanation here as it's not the same as other units where the right channel effectively becomes the slave of the other. In this instance the stereo couple switch links the control voltages of both sections so that when the compression settings are the same on both channels, the channel with the greatest compression will automatically attenuate the other channel as well to avoid image shift problems. When you think of it, particularly with the wide and varied material we deal with on a daily basis, that makes a lot more sense than letting one channel blindly control the other.

In Use

This must be one of the greatest jobs in the world for people in our profession, as I get to play with some

wonderful equipment, and this was no exception. A variety of microphones plugged into the unit produced consistent results in quality, in particular with vocals, as A/B tests of recorded tracks (six in all from both condenser and dynamic mics) made it harder than I would have imagined to spot the difference. Drums sound great through it, and drum overheads really gave me the live sound I love with a bit of experimentation.

It certainly warmed up a digitally bounced mix that I passed through it, controlled the dynamics of my keyboard sounds without squashing them to death, and made my guitar sound more expensive!

Conclusion

It's always easy to say 'why do we need yet another Mic Pre/Compressor/Equalizer?' as I've heard many times, but it's an issue of quality not quantity. There are several names that stand out in this field, and each have their own colour, feel, and personality, which they add to a recording, and without a doubt, once people try the ATC-2 they will quickly realise the quality it will add to their productions, and will no doubt be able to immediately identify specific areas of their work where it will shine while sitting alongside its competitors. Make no mistake about it, this is a unit of true quality that will find a lot of enthusiastic users. □

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INFORMATION

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